

The Decline of Intimate Partner Homicide

Final report submitted to NIJ, Analysis of Unexamined Issues in the Intimate Partner Homicide Decline: Race, Quality of Victim Services, Offender Accountability, and System Accountability, William Wells and William DeLeon-Granados, grant number 00-WT-VX-0012, available from NCJRS (NCJ 196666).

Intimate partner homicide rates have been declining since 1976, and researchers have been studying the phenomenon since then to determine what factors are responsible. Two researchers, William Wells at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale and William DeLeon-Granados, then a professor at Indiana University–Bloomington and now a principal with The Criminology and Public Policy Consultancy in San Rafael, California, conducted a study looking at several topics they felt had not been sufficiently examined. (See “The Study,” page 34, for more information about the methodology.)

The report discusses numerous issues playing roles in the decline, including the effects of shelters, gender differences, and racial differences. This is the first study to offer

substantive analysis of Hispanic victims in both urban and rural settings.

The key findings were:

Shelters

- In urban counties, federally funded domestic violence shelter-based organizations were associated with declines in Hispanic female victimization but not in African American or white female victimization. The researchers hypothesize that shelters do not affect rates for white urban females because these women tend to have other resources for help (such as attorneys, legal services, friends, and counselors) and tend not to use shelters, therefore deriving no protective benefit from them. African American women, the researchers suggest, use shelters but may find the protection afforded by them insufficient, since they are often higher risk victims.
- In urban counties, although shelters were not associated with a decline in African American female victimization, the presence of shelters for women did contribute

THE STUDY

The study covered a 13-year period, from 1987 to 2000, and included 58 California counties. The researchers chose California for three reasons: it allowed them to have standardized data for a diverse population, including data from both urban and rural areas; it provided numerous examples of shelter and criminal justice responses; and it experienced a much larger decline in female victimization rates than the average State.

In an effort to better understand any intimate partner homicide rate variations based on ethnicity, gender, place, race, and time, the researchers looked at these characteristics in arrest, conviction, and incarceration records for each county's domestic violence offenses. Victim services were gauged by the rate of federally funded shelters found in each county per 100,000 women, by race.

The homicide data were given to the researchers by the State of California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, which included information such as the relationship between victim and offender, county where the homicide took place, weapon used, and victims' and offenders' age, race, and gender. In addition, California provided data on the criminal justice system's response and on the available shelter services.

to a decrease in African American male victimization. This finding, according to the researchers, supports the belief that different motivations drive female-perpetrated and male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide and indicates that female perpetrators tend to resort to homicide as a last resort when they feel they have no other escape from an abusive relationship.

Criminal Justice Interventions

- There was no statistically significant relationship between any criminal justice system response and victimization for either gender or for any racial or ethnic group, a finding that greatly surprised the researchers.
- Where law enforcement intervention increased in domestic abuse situations, women experienced dramatically larger percentage increases in arrest, prosecution, and conviction than men. For example, over the study, arrests for domestic violence of male suspects increased a total of 37 percent while arrests of females increased 446 percent. Convictions for an offense following a domestic violence-related arrest grew

by 131 percent for males, but by 1,207 percent for females between 1987 and 1999.

The researchers conclude that more work is needed to explore the complex relationships among gender, ethnicity, and intimate partner homicide. More analysis of shelter-based services is also warranted, the researchers assert, and they suggest that policymakers facing limited resources may want to direct them toward shelter-based organizations rather than focusing solely on criminal justice system responses.

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For more information

- Contact William Wells, Assistant Professor, Department of Administration of Justice, Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency, and Corrections, Southern Illinois University–Carbondale, Mailcode 4504, Carbondale, IL 62901, 618-453-6362, wwells@siu.edu.
- Contact William DeLeon-Granados, The Criminology and Public Policy Consultancy, 2375 Las Gallinas Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94903, 415-302-0243, billgranados@yahoo.com.