

# **Civil Protection Orders and Subsequent Intimate Partner Violence and Injury**

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Every year, more than 1.5 million women in the United States experience intimate partner violence. The use of civil protection orders, which prohibit individuals who have committed acts of intimate partner violence from further contact with a victim is one approach to preventing subsequent violence against women (Finn and Colson 1990). Although several studies have described subsequent intimate partner violence against women who had obtained protection orders, these studies have generally been limited by lack of comparison to victims who did not seek such orders, as well as by methodological issues of small sample size and limited assessment of exposure and further abuse (Harrell and Smith 1996; Chaudhuri and Daly 1992; Keilitz et al. 1998; Horton, Simonidis, and Simonidis 1987; Klein 1996; Grau, Fagan, and Wexler 1985; Isaac et al. 1994; Carlson, Harris, and Holden 1999). Consequently, the effectiveness of protection orders in preventing future violence is unclear.

## Availability and Characteristics of Civil Protection Orders

All States have enacted statutes authorizing civil protection orders to provide victims immediate relief from abusive partners as an alternative or adjunct to criminal prosecution (Finn and Colson 1990; Harrell and Smith 1996; Keilitz 1994; Finn 1989). Many statutes have been revised to be more specific and provide comprehensive enforcement procedures for courts and police to follow (Finn and Colson 1990; Keilitz 1994; Finn 1989). Provisions of an order may specify the following: no further abuse, no contact whatsoever, eviction or exclusion from the shared residence, requirements that costs for alternate housing be borne by abuser, assignment of temporary custody of minor children to victim, allowance or denial of visitation of minor children by abuser, temporary child or spousal support, use of specified property, monetary compensation, no disposition of property, and counseling. Most States allow granting a temporary (ex parte) order without the named abuser being present. These temporary orders usually last 2 weeks and allow time for the abuser to be served with the order before the hearing for a permanent order. Approximately 60 percent of women who file a temporary order eventually file a permanent order (Harrell, Smith, and Newmark 1993). If an order is violated, the petitioner must call the police to initiate the enforcement process. The responding officer identifies the appropriate action based on his or her understanding of the law and the violation. The penalties for the violation may be civil or criminal contempt or misdemeanor or felony charges.

## Study Hypothesis

The purpose of this cohort study, “Protection of Women: Health and Justice Outcomes,” was twofold: to compare victims of intimate partner violence who obtained protection orders with those who did not to determine characteristics that might alert clinicians and others to a woman’s readiness to obtain such an order and to assess the association between obtaining a protection order and the risk of subsequent intimate partner violence and injury. The study was funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Justice as part of the Interagency Consortium on Violence Against Women and Family Violence Research. Study findings have been published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (Holt et al. 2003).

## Research Design and Rationale

The study population consisted of women residents of Seattle ages 18 years and older who were abused or threatened by male intimate partners. Researchers selected women from two groups: women who reported the incident to the Seattle Police Department and women who obtained intimate partner violence-related civil protection orders in King County, Washington, Superior Court from October 15, 1997, through December 31, 1998 (Wolf et al. 2000). The protection-order group ( $n = 477$ ) included the 214 women who obtained temporary or permanent protection orders during the study period (but who did not have prior permanent protection orders during the previous year) and who had a previous police-reported intimate partner violence incident and 263 women randomly selected from the 583 women who obtained protection orders but did not have a previous police-reported incident. The non-protection-order group ( $n = 506$ ) was a random sample of the 2,590 women who contacted the police because of intimate partner violence during the 15-month study period but who had not had a protection order related to the index incident or in the previous year. The index incident for the study was the incident that led to filing a protection order (protection-order group) or the incident that was reported to the Seattle Police Department (non-protection-order group).

Of the 983 women referred for recruitment to the study, 241 were found to be ineligible, leaving 742 eligible subjects. Structured telephone interviews were conducted with consenting women at baseline (about 1 month after the index incident) and at 4.8 months and at 9.4 months after the index incident. The instruments used included a modified Conflict Tactics Scale, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression scale, the Short Form Health Survey, the Normal-Eyeopener-Tolerance (NET) alcohol screen (adapted for relevance to women), substance abuse screening questions, and subscales of the Social Adjustment Scale.

Chi-square and t-tests were used to assess the significance of demographic and other differences between the protection-order and non-protection-order groups. Logistic regression was used in multivariate modeling to determine independent significant variables associated with obtaining a protection order. Logistic regression also was used to calculate odds ratios that estimated the self-reported risk of being contacted by the abuser (unwelcome calls, unwelcome visits, verbal threats, or weapon threats); experiencing psychological, sexual, or physical abuse or injury; and receiving medical care after abuse. Women who obtained protection orders after the index incident were compared with those who did not. These risk estimates were calculated separately for the time between baseline and the first followup interview and the time between the first and second followup interviews. In one subanalysis, estimates of risk were calculated separately for those women who had protection orders at both followup interviews and those who had never had protection orders.

## Findings

Of the 742 women eligible for the study, 448 (60.4 percent) were enrolled; 124 (16.7 percent) refused to participate, 62 (8.4 percent) agreed to participate but did not complete interviews, and 108 (14.6 percent) could not be contacted (Wolf et al. 2000). Participants and nonparticipants were found to be similar in age, marital status, proportion having a child with the abuser, type of offense reported to the police, and proportion injured in the intimate partner violence incident

that led to the filing of a protection order or a police report (index incident). Participants were more likely than nonparticipants to have obtained protection orders (56.5 percent versus 41.8 percent) and less likely to be living with the abuser at the time of the index incident (26.7 percent versus 36.4 percent) (Wolf et al. 2000).

In multivariate analyses of interview data, the abusers of the women who sought protection orders were found to be significantly older than the abusers of the non-protection-order group. Additionally, women who sought protection orders were significantly more likely than those who did not to be employed, married, pregnant, and severely depressed. They also were more likely to report that they or their families had been threatened with violence by the abuser, that family members or friends were abused on the index date, or that they had been forced to have sexual intercourse with the abuser in the previous year (Wolf et al. 2000). Living with the abuser and being injured during the index incident were associated with a decreased likelihood of seeking a protection order.

Researchers found that women who had protection orders at baseline were significantly less likely than those who did not to be contacted by the abuser, to experience injury or weapons threats, and to receive abuse-related medical care between the first and second followup interviews. Stronger decreases in intimate partner violence risk were seen among women with protection orders at baseline and both followup interviews; these were significant for contact by the abuser, weapon threats, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, injury, and abuse-related medical care between the first and second followup interviews.

## **Implications for Researchers**

Identifying a representative cohort of women who were exposed to intimate partner violence can be a challenge. To improve the generalizability of the study, a population-based approach was used to identify all women in Seattle with police- or court-reported intimate partner violence. Because all the cohort members were identified through the criminal justice system, however, it is not known how they would compare with women who, although victims of intimate partner violence, never report incidents to the police or the courts. Future studies of the relationship between protection orders and intimate partner violence could include cases with unreported violence, but the difficulties in identifying those women in an unbiased manner are considerable and may involve extensive telephone screening of the general population.

Another methodological challenge in interview-based studies of intimate partner violence is difficulty in locating the identified potential participants, who may have moved or changed telephone numbers to increase their safety and, to a lesser extent, difficulty in maintaining contact with participants over time. In this population-based study, only 60.4 percent of the intended cohort were interviewed, which may have introduced bias in the results if the women interviewed differed substantially from those who did not participate. The similarities between participants and nonparticipants in demographic and violence-related characteristics are reassuring, but low participation rates remain an issue in the research community.

When possible, future research on intimate partner violence should attempt to quantify the extent of bias introduced by this level of nonparticipation, using objective outcome assessments (such

as police reports) in addition to self-reported information from participant interviews. Participants' self-reports of intimate partner violence recurrence were included in the study because most criminal justice authorities believe that self-reported data on victimization are at least as valid as data from official reports (Greenfeld et al. 1998; Bachman and Taylor 1994; Bachman and Saltzman 1995). Supplementing these data with criminal justice data, however, may allay concerns about nonresponse bias.

A final challenge in any observational study of protection orders and subsequent intimate partner violence is the interpretation of study results. Women who obtained protection orders, especially those who maintained the orders over time, were found to have substantially reduced risks of future violence perpetrated by the initial abuser. Although the study adjusted for all variables associated with both the likelihood of obtaining an order and risk of intimate partner violence, it is possible that unmeasured characteristics of women who obtain protection orders were responsible for the observed effect, rather than the orders themselves. This concern may be addressed in future research by collecting more extensive information about participants' attitudes and beliefs.

## Implications for Practitioners

This study provides a more complete picture of how intimate partner violence victims who seek protection orders differ from those who do not, and this information may be used to help practitioners in contact with abused women to determine a woman's readiness to obtain such an order. Additionally, results indicate that protection orders are associated with a decreased risk of subsequent intimate partner violence, and practitioners may be reassured that recommending this intervention to abused women who are considering it is likely to be beneficial.

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