OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The Problem

Violence in intimate relationships poses a serious problem to the lives, the health, and the emotional well being of individuals and families. Although both men and women engage in physical violence against their intimate partners, women are significantly more likely to be seriously harmed than men (Brush, 1990; Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996). For some women, home is not a haven of emotional security and physical safety but a place instead where they are physically abused by the men who supposedly love them. National surveys show rates of severe husband-to-wife violence to be approximately 35 per 1,000 couples (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Analyses of the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households found that 4.9 percent of men report inflicting physical violence on their spouses or cohabitors in the preceding year (Brush 1990). Women face a greater risk of assault and injury in their own homes by members of their own families than they do at the hands of strangers on the street (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

The consequences of intimate violence are significant for victims, their families, and the community at large. Besides physical harm, many victims suffer severe emotional affects, increased anxiety, loss of self-esteem, depression, feelings of worthlessness, increased risk of suicide, sleeping disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse (Umberson, Anderson, Glick, & Shapiro, 1998; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Gelles & Harrop, 1989; Gleason, 1993; Orava, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996; Pagelow, 1984; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Families may suffer economically when victims lose time from work and financial resources must be allocated to medical or psychiatric

treatment (Ratner, 1998). Because the family is a major transmitter of subcultural values, children who witness violence in the home may be harmed emotionally and developmentally in ways that have long lasting effects. Witnessing violence in the home, moreover, increases the risk that children will engage in abusive behavior in their own relationships later in life (Steinmetz & Straus, 1974). Finally, the community at large experiences increased costs because battered women require the services of community-sponsored shelters as well as criminal justice and mental health systems.

Although the problem of violence against women has been a subject of research for several decades, important questions remain unanswered. In particular, little is known about the influence of economic distress and community context on intimate violence. This project was designed to investigate these important issues.

Research Questions

In this report, we concentrate of four specific research questions:

- How do measures of community context correlate with the prevalence, frequency, severity, and duration of intimate violence?
- To what extent do different forms of economic distress influence the use of violence by men against women in intimate relationships?
- Does economic distress influence intimate violence independently of community context and household characteristics or does it interact with these factors to produce varying risk levels for women located in different types of areas and households?
- Are the effects of community context and economic distress on intimate violence more pronounced for minority women, or do they operate independently of race and other demographic characteristics?

How We Addressed the Research Questions

To begin to answer these questions, we merged data drawn from Waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), a nationally representative sample of American households, with census tract level data from the 1990 U. S. Census. From the NSFH, we abstracted data on conflict and violence among couples in the NSFH, as well as data on their economic resources and well being, the composition of the household in which the couple lived, and a large number of socio-demographic characteristics of the sample respondents. From the 1990 Census, we abstracted tract level data on the characteristics of the census tracts in which the NSFH respondents lived. These data reflected the aggregate social, demographic, and economic characteristics of the tracts. Merging the census tract data with the NSFH survey data enabled us to investigate contextual variation in and correlates of domestic violence.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Although all of our research questions involved several parts and required detailed analyses to answer, the major findings from our study can be quickly summarized.

- Violence against women is more prevalent and more severe in socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.
- The relationship between community context and intimate violence is not entirely the result of compositional differences in neighborhood populations but rather represents a contextual effect.
- At the individual level, both objective and subjective forms of economic distress increase the risk of violence against women.
- Individual level economic distress and community level economic disadvantage combine to increase the risk of violence against women dramatically.

- Compared to white couples, the rate of intimate violence against women is higher among African-American couples, but this difference results in large measure from their location in disadvantaged neighborhoods and higher levels of economic distress.

Neighborhood Disadvantage and Violence Against Women

Although violence against women in intimate relationships can happen anywhere, our analyses indicate that it is more prevalent and severe in disadvantaged neighborhoods. We created an index of concentrated disadvantage based on census tract data. The index was defined by the percent of single parents, percent non-white, percent unemployed, percent of families on public assistance and percent below the poverty line in a census tract. Each couple received the index score for the census tract in which they were located. Based on their index scores, the couples were divided into two groups: the 30 percent who resided in the most disadvantaged census tracts versus the remaining 70 percent of couples who resided in more advantaged tracts. We then calculated the rates of intimate violence against women for the two groups. As shown in Figure 1, in Wave 1 of the NSFH, the rate of intimate violence against women in neighborhoods with high levels of disadvantage was 9.5 percent compared to 6.6 percent in more advantaged neighborhoods. A similar pattern is observed in Wave 2 (see Figure 2), in which women in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to experience intimate violence as women in more advantaged neighborhoods (8.7 percent versus 4.3 percent, respectively). We also examined the severity of violence against women and found that women in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to experience repeat victimizations or to be injured by their partners than women who lived in less disadvantaged areas. For example, in Wave 2, the rate of severe violence was 2.4 percent

for women living in advantaged neighborhoods versus 5.8 percent for women in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Thus, the likelihood that a married or cohabiting woman will be the victim of intimate violence by her partner is significantly higher for women living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

Economic Distress and Intimate Violence

At the individual level economic distress is also related to the likelihood of intimate violence against women. Economic distress refers to the objective and subjective aspects of income and employment (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1988). Objective conditions such as being unemployed or having insufficient income to meet the needs of one's family indicate economic distress. In addition, subjective feelings of anxiety or worry about money also represent a form of economic distress. In this report, we concentrate on three indicators of economic distress. Two objective indicators of distress are the household income to needs ratio and the number of periods of male unemployment between Waves 1 and 2 of the NSFH. We created an indicator of subjective economic distress by combining answers to questions that asked the respondents whether they worried about money and how satisfied they were with their financial situation.

All three indicators of economic distress are related to intimate violence in the expected direction. Table 1 shows the relationship of household income, which captures the couple's level of income sufficiency, to the likelihood of intimate violence. In both Waves, women who lived in households that had high incomes had lower levels of intimate violence than their counterparts who were less well off financially. The pattern of results is very consistent. As the ratio of household income to needs goes up the likelihood of violence goes down. Another indicator of economic distress that is strongly

related to intimate violence is male job instability. As Table 2 shows, women whose partners experienced two or more periods of unemployment between waves of the NSFH were nearly three times as likely to be victimized as women whose partners had stable employment (12.3 percent versus 4.7 percent, respectively). Finally, our index of subjective financial strain also was strongly related to intimate violence. The rate of violence among wave 2 couples that scored high on the index was 9.5 percent compared to less than three percent among couples that scored low (see Table 3). Overall, women in relationships undergoing economic distress are considerably more likely to be victimized by their male partners than other women.

The Compounding Effects of Economic Distress and Concentrated Disadvantage

Because of their restricted access to financial resources, couples undergoing economic distress are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods than are financially well off couples. The link between individual economic distress and community level economic disadvantage raises the possibility that these two conditions may combine or interact in important ways to influence the risk of intimate violence against women. To help clarify this issue, we examined whether the effect of economic distress on intimate violence is stronger in disadvantaged or advantaged neighborhoods or unaffected by neighborhood conditions. Regarding subjective financial strain and employment instability, the results indicate that residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood enhances their effects on the risk of intimate violence. For example, in Wave 2, the rate of intimate violence among couples with high levels of subjective strain residing in advantaged neighborhoods is 7.3 percent, but for couples residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods it is 13.8 percent (see Table 4). Similarly, the rate of intimate violence is highest for

women in disadvantaged neighborhoods who live with men who experienced high levels of job instability, and it is lowest for women partnered with men with stable employment in advantaged neighborhoods (see Table 5). These results suggest that individual level economic distress and neighborhood level economic disadvantage combine to heighten victimization risks for women in intimate relationships.

Minorities and Intimate Violence against Women

For over two decades, researchers have observed marked variation in rates of intimate violence against women among certain ethnic and racial minorities. Surveys of the general population show higher rates of intimate violence for African-Americans compared to whites (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Gaquin, 1977-1978; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Greenfeld et al., 1998; Stets, 1991). We found similar results in our study. In wave 2, for example, the rate of intimate violence against women for African-American couples is 9.9 percent versus 4.9 percent for white couples, for a base rate difference of 5 percent.[1] However, African-Americans are more likely to experience economic distress and more likely to live in disadvantaged areas than whites. Thus, the correlation of race and intimate violence may be confounded with important differences in the economic experiences and ecological contexts of African-Americans and whites (Sampson, 1993).

To investigate these issues, we calculated rates of intimate violence against women for African-Americans and whites controlling separately for community disadvantage and economic distress. The results showed that the higher rate of intimate

[1] The NSFH contains detailed measures of race and ethnicity. However, except for African-Americans, the number of cases in individual race and ethnic groups is relatively small, making it difficult to conduct multivariate analyses by race or ethnicity. Hence, in this report we concentrate solely on African-Americans and whites. Analyses that include Hispanics are presented in the full report.

violence for African-Americans is accounted for in part by their higher levels of economic distress and location in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, we found that the relationship between race and intimate violence is not significant in disadvantaged communities (see Table 6). In disadvantaged communities the difference in the base rate of intimate violence for African Americans and whites is reduced almost in half from 5 percent down to 2.7 percent. Similarly, as shown in Table 7, the rate of intimate violence among high income African-Americans is virtually identical to that of high-income whites (4.1 percent to 3.1 percent, respectively). However, we note that rate of intimate violence is notably higher for African-Americans with low and moderate incomes than for comparable whites.

We also examined the relationship between race and intimate violence controlling for income and community context simultaneously. The results are mixed but in a number of cases the difference between African-Americans and whites in intimate violence is substantially reduced (see Table 8). Having a high income seems to be particularly valuable for African-Americans in regard to reducing the rate of intimate violence. In both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods, African-Americans with high incomes have rates of intimate violence that are similar to or less than those for whites. In general, when African-Americans are compared to whites that are similar in income and ecological context the difference in rate of intimate violence is reduced or eliminated. The pattern of these results and other multivariate analyses that we conducted suggest that the high rate of intimate violence often observed among African Americans is confounded with the ecological contexts in which they are located.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Few doubt that social change and economic distress can have pathological consequences on communities, intimate couples, and individuals. Further, the impact of change and distress certainly varies with the community context in which it takes place. To develop effective prevention and intervention strategies, policy makers need to know how changes that produce distress influence violence against women and whether the causes of violence differ among racial and ethnic subgroups. With respect to intimate violence, however, little has been known about the impact that change and distress can have on victimization risks or on how these risks may differ among subgroups. Little has been known about the connections between intimate violence and personal and community economic well-being or about the ways in which community context may influence the reasons why women stay in abusive relationships or why they leave them. This project was designed to shed light on these issues and to help articulate the relationship between community context, demographic characteristics, economic distress, and intimate violence. We believe this knowledge will enable policy-makers to target intervention and prevention programs more effectively and to anticipate more accurately when the demand for such programs is likely to increase because of social change.

Although our analyses do not allow us to make specific recommendations to policy makers and service providers, nonetheless we can suggest in more general terms some strategies for policy, services and research that grow out of this project. Intimate violence is not solely a matter of individual psychopathology or inadequate interpersonal skills, and responses to intimate violence should not be based solely on these individual level causes. We would be wise to broaden our thinking beyond individual level causes

of intimate violence to include a larger spectrum of potential areas for strategic intervention and change.

In this study, intimate violence was strongly linked to the economic well being of individual couples and to the community contexts in which couples were found. This suggests that economic practices and jobs policies may be important conditional influences on the risks of intimate violence to women. We note that job stability rather than employment per se was an important risk factor for violence against women in this study. Giving preference to economic practices and job policies that balance transitory labor supply/demand ratios by preserving job security for workers rather than by widespread layoffs and periodic rehires exemplifies a policy initiative that takes into account the role of job stability in the risk of violence against women. For service providers, an implication of the findings from this study is to be vigilant about changes in local jobs markets in terms of their potential to cause short-term increases in the numbers of victims of intimate violence.

Our findings about the central importance of community context to the risk of intimate violence shifts focus to the social dynamics of spatial location in violence against women. The continuation of already strongly entrenched patterns of residential segregation by race and ethnicity has been exacerbated by an increasing spatial concentration of affluence and extreme poverty (Massey, 1996). These current demographic trends in residential location patterns suggest that increasing numbers of women in the US population will be exposed to the contextual effects we identified in our study. In that housing policies, mortgage and lending policies, and insurance regulations are all relevant in shaping the spatial dynamics of residential patterning, it is not

inappropriate to suggest that all might be seen as potential strategic targets for altering the risks of violence against women. For service providers, the implications of our findings about community context and economic distress are two fold. If the goal is to target services where the risk of violence is greatest, then priority for services should be given to women in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Second, given the cumulation of risk from community context and individual economic distress, services to women in the most disadvantaged areas must address their straitened economic circumstances. For many women who seek to exit an abusive relationship, their correlative needs for immediate cash assistance to replace the economic contributions of their male partners become paramount. Failure to address their economic needs may render any other services merely palliative.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We conclude with some recommendations for future research on violence against women. Our project implies that future research on violence against women will be most valuable when the study design

- is couple-based, including both partners as respondents;
- includes a sampling design that focuses on couples drawn randomly from areal sampling units that represent socioeconomically the most disadvantaged neighborhoods;
- relies upon rich measures of a broad range of potential causes, contexts, and consequences of intimate violence;

- relies upon rich measures of a range of types and circumstances of intimate violence;
- relies upon a multi-method design for data collection;
- is a multi-wave design, revisiting couples at least three times over the course of the project, with time intervals between waves of no more than twelve months duration;
- includes the collection of contextual information on the neighborhood so that a more finely drawn picture may be drawn of the social dynamics through which neighborhood contexts affect the risk of intimate violence against women.

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Figure 1. Rate of Intimate Violence against Women by Level of Neighborhood Disadvantage – Wave 1

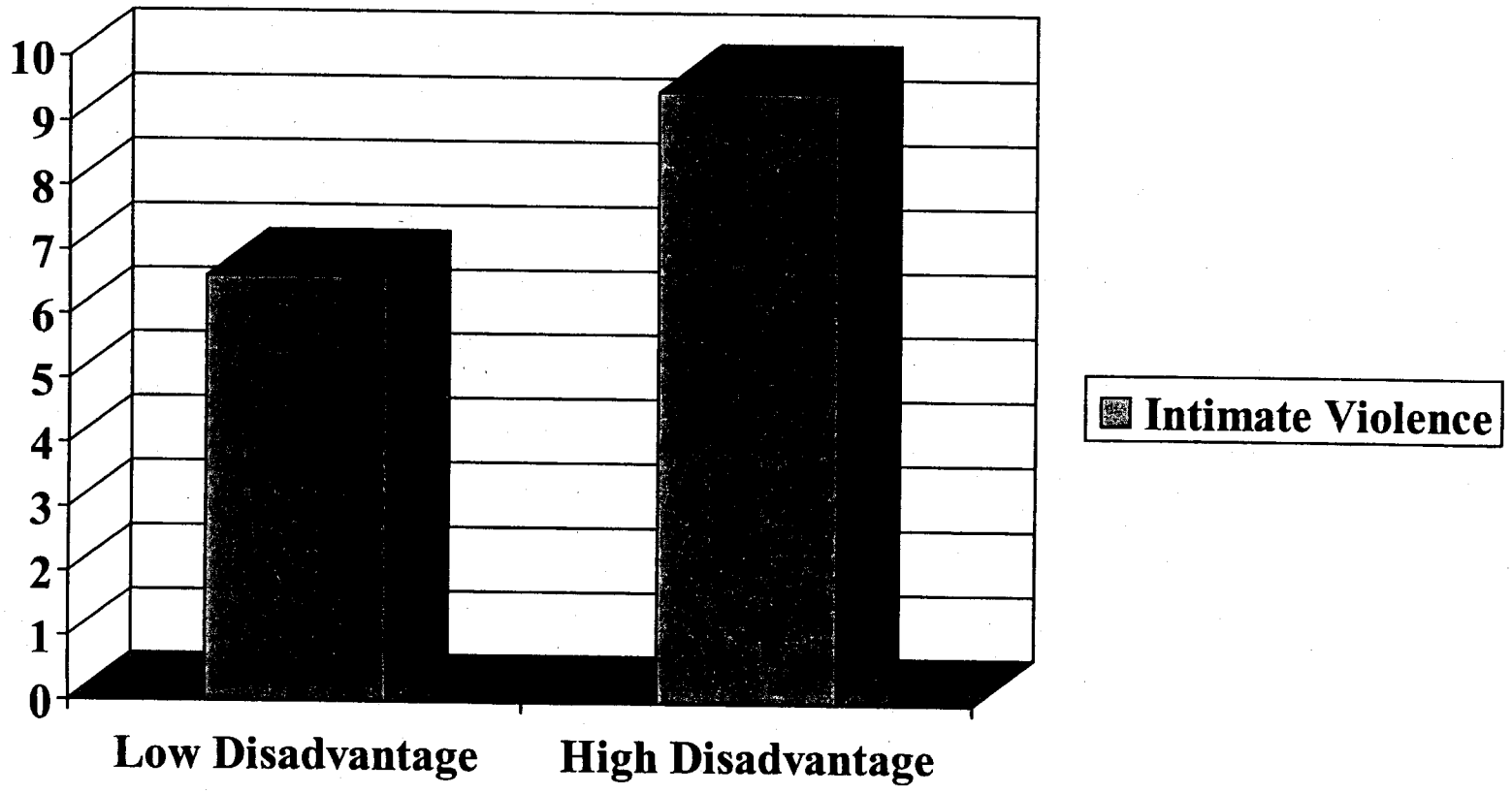

Figure 2. Rate of Intimate Violence against Women by Level of Neighborhood Disadvantage – Wave 2

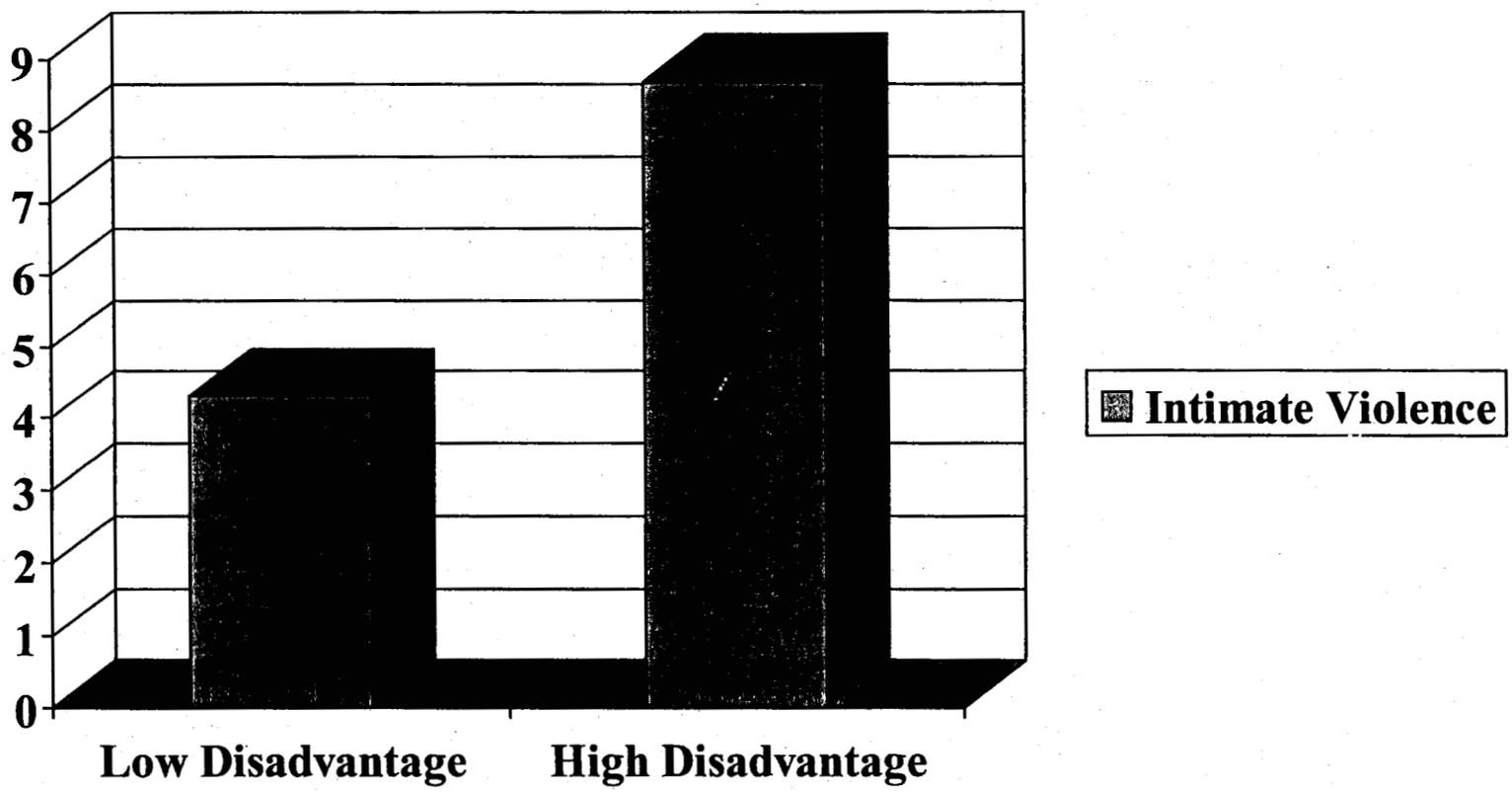

Table 1. Percentage of Couples with Intimate Violence Against Women by Household Income, Waves 1 and 2.

	Household Income		
Sample	Low	Medium	High
Wave 1 Couples[1]	11.9 % (540)	8.2 % (3,595)	5.7 % (1,767)
Wave 2 Couples[2]	8.2 % (340)	6.7 % (3,673)	3.2 % (2,077)

[1] $\chi^2 = 24.4, p < .01$
[2] $\chi^2 = 35.0, p < .01$

Table 2. Percentage of Couples with Intimate Violence Against Women by Number of Periods of Unemployment, Wave 2.

	Periods of Male Unemployment		
Sample	None	One	Two or More
Wave 2 Couples[1]	4.7% (4,320)	7.5% (932)	12.3% (310)

[1] $\chi^2 = 39.6, p < .01$

Table 3. Percentage of Couples with Intimate Violence Against Women by Subjective Financial Strain, Wave 2.

	Subjective Financial Strain	
Sample	Low	High
Wave 2 Couples[1]	2.7% (2,602)	9.5% (2,350)

[1] $\chi^2 = 104.0, p < .01$

Table 4. Effects of Subjective Financial Strain and Neighborhood Type on Intimate Violence Against Women, Wave 2

Subjective Financial Strain	Violence Rate by Neighborhood Type	
	Advantaged[1]	Disadvantaged[2]
Low	2.3%	3.8%
High	7.3%	13.8%

[1] Advantaged Neighborhoods $\chi^2 = 49.2$, $p < .000$
[2] Disadvantaged Neighborhoods $\chi^2 = 39.5$, $p < .000$

Table 5. Effects of Periods of Unemployment and Neighborhood Type on Intimate Violence Against Women, Wave 2

Number of Periods Of Unemployment	Violence Rate by Neighborhood Type	
	Advantaged[1]	Disadvantaged[2]
Low (1 or none)	4.0%	8.2%
High (2 or more)	10.6%	15.6%

[1] Advantaged Neighborhoods $\chi^2 = 19.5$, $p < .000$
[2] Disadvantaged Neighborhoods $\chi^2 = 7.0$, $p = .008$

Table 6. Intimate Violence against Women by Race as a Function of the Level of Community Disadvantage.

	Violence Rate by Race	
Community Disadvantage	African-American	White
Low[1]	7.6 % (145)	4.2 % (3,984)
High[2]	10.4 % (538)	7.7 % (996)

[1] Advantaged communities $\chi^2 = 3.987$, $p = .046$

[2] Disadvantaged communities $\chi^2 = 3.164$, $p = .075$

Table 7. Intimate Violence against Women by Race as a Function of Household Income.

	Violence Rate by Race	
Household Income	African-American	White
Low [1]	11.1 % (81)	6.1 % (198)
Medium [2]	11.6 % (449)	5.9 % (2,903)
High [3]	4.1 % (147)	3.1 % (1,852)

[1] Low income $\chi^2 = 2.107$, $p = .147$

[2] Medium income $\chi^2 = 20.611$, $p = .000$

[3] High income $\chi^2 = .450$, $p = .502$

Table 8. Intimate Violence against Women by Race as a Function of Household Income and Level of Community Disadvantage.

	Low Community Disadvantage	
	Violence Rate by Race	
Household Income	African-American	White
Low	9.1 % (11)	9.7 % (113)
Medium	9.6 % (75)	4.8 % (2,243)
High	4.1 % (49)	2.8 % (1,598)

	High Community Disadvantage	
	Violence Rate by Race	
Household Income	African-American	White
Low	10.1 % (69)	1.2 % (83)
Medium	12.1 % (365)	9.5 % (653)
High	4.1 % (97)	5.3 % (245)