

IN US, BIG STRIDES IN REDUCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The rate of partner-to-partner violence dropped 64 percent between 1994 and 2010, a Justice Department report has found. The trend, almost unnoticed, stems from a broad shift in attitude toward domestic violence.

By Whitney Eulich, *Staff writer* / February 13, 2013

A bruised cheek. A broken bone. Verbal battering. A window shattered in an effort to intimidate. The rate of such violence or abuse between husband and wife – or any two intimate partners – has been on the wane in America, falling by a stunning 64 percent between 1994 and 2010.

That finding, from a recent report by the US Department of Justice on intimate partner violence (IPV), parallels the overall drop in violent crime during that period. Many in the field cite a broad shift in attitudes that began in the 1980s and '90s, crediting public awareness campaigns, national legislation protecting victims, and subsequent training of police and prosecutors to recognize intimate partner violence as a crime, rather than as a private matter.

“There has been an enormous shift in public awareness about domestic violence – the message [to victims] being you are not alone and you can report what is happening to you to law enforcement,” says law professor Suzanne Goldberg, director of Columbia University's Center for Gender and Sexuality Law. The message to perpetrators, meanwhile, is that violence against an intimate partner “is not a badge of manhood,” she adds.

But even as they celebrate the progress, most analysts warn that more needs to be done to prevent such abuse, which encompasses recurring verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual mistreatment between partners of all ages and sexual orientations. Not enough analysis has been done to know the precise cause of the decrease, says Janet Lauritsen, professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Moreover, IPV rates have been stabilizing since 2001, a sign that it's not time to rest easy.

A breakout law?

When Joan Meier, professor of clinical law at George Washington University, looks at the data, she can't help but notice a certain time stamp: 1994. That's the year the United States passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), legislation that is now up for renewal in Congress.

“I'm willing to speculate [that] VAWA had a direct impact" on reducing intimate partner violence, says Ms. Meier, who also directs the university's Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project. “Because of VAWA it became more widely understood that this violence is a crime and is unacceptable.”

VAWA funds police IPV sensitivity trainings, as well as legal services such as issuing restraining orders and representing victims. Perhaps more important, some say, VAWA provided momentum for states to adopt mandatory arrest laws governing cases in which police suspect domestic violence, based upon evidence and probable cause. These laws now exist in 22 states and the District of Columbia.

Others, though, are not so sure about mandatory arrest laws. They say the laws may cause victims of intimate partner violence to be reluctant to report the abuse, perhaps because the victim or the abuser is in the US illegally or because they do not want to see their partner go to jail, despite the risks at home.

There's also mounting evidence that the risk of domestic violence is reduced in communities where per-capita levels of police and social services are relatively high, whether or not those places have mandatory arrest laws, according to a November 2012 study in the journal *Criminology*. As cities and states confront budget pressures amid a lackluster economy, cuts to police departments and social services could result in more IPV victims, some say.

Unseen progress

What some perceive as a constant drumbeat of progress on domestic violence is not so apparent, however, to those working up close and personal to help victims.

"When you're in the trenches, you don't necessarily see this difference" first hand, says George Washington University's Meier, who describes the decline in intimate partner violence as surprising but "fantastic news."

At the shelter Casa Myrna, in Boston, Toni Jones agrees. "What I see again and again is not enough space for women and children fleeing violence," says Ms. Jones, program services manager at the emergency shelter for single women and families who face immediate threats of danger. Demand for emergency shelter often outstrips the 10 beds available, she says. Casa Myrna tries to link women in need, sometimes from neighboring states, with open beds across Massachusetts.

It's normal for those working directly with victims to see something slightly different from what statistics reveal, says Shannan Catalano, who wrote the Justice Department report.

"[T]he local level doesn't necessarily reflect what we see at the national level," she says. For example, if a shelter's 100 beds are always full, there is no visible decrease in victimization. But "the number is declining," says Ms. Catalano. "It's just not dipping below the number of beds available."

The report, moreover, takes into account IPV incidents not reported to police – cases shelter workers may not be aware of. Between 2006 and 2010, nearly 46 percent of cases of intimate partner violence were not reported, it found. Of those unreported cases, most victims did not seek help because they feared retaliation or didn't want the offenders to get in trouble.

The Justice Department report uses data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which is conducted via in-person interviews, twice a year, over as many as three years. Because the survey is done by household, the data do not include individuals who are homeless or who live in mental institutions or military barracks. The survey has been ongoing since 1973.

An undercount?

The Justice Department report may undercount victims of intimate partner violence, primarily because its data do not include the homeless, says Callie Rennison, a victimologist and associate professor at the University of Colorado Denver. Independent research, discussed at a Dart Center workshop on Intimate Partner Violence in 2011, suggests that in American cities between 20 and 40 percent of homeless parents reported having left their home because of violent disputes.

This doesn't delegitimize the view of progress, says Ms. Rennison, "but what we're seeing could be a consistent underestimate of how many people have been victims of domestic violence.... We still have a lot of work to do."

Whitney Eulich attended a 2011 Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma's reporting workshop on intimate partner violence. A version of this article first appeared on the Dart Center website.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2013/0213/In-US-big-strides-in-reducing-domestic-violence?nav=87-frontpage-entryNineItem>