

**McNeely, R. L. & Robinson-Simpson, G. (1988, November/December).  
"The truth about domestic violence: A falsely framed issue". *Social  
Work*.**

**OVERVIEW**

**A POPULAR MISCONCEPTION**

The authors of this article offer empirical evidence from studies that contradicts the current focus on family violence as primarily a "masculine form of assaultive behavior." They suggest that such a conclusion has come from reports and research conducted among unrepresentative victims, especially women receiving shelter and therapy. Images from the media and warnings from feminists have strengthened the myth that men are the prime aggressors, according to these authors.

**STUDIES**

Steinmetz (1977) studied 57 families and found that 93% of these families used verbal aggression, and 60% used physical aggression. Thirty-nine percent of husbands and 37% of wives had thrown objects, 20% of both husbands and wives had struck their spouses with their hands, and 10% of both had hit their spouses with a hard object. He concluded that "women were as likely as men to select and initiate physical violence to resolve marital conflicts and that men and women had similar intentions while using physical violence, although men were somewhat more likely to cause greater injury...Steinmetz pointed out that an equal number of wives and husbands kill their spouses...and that women are more likely than men to physically abuse their children (62% more often)."

In 1979, Nisonoff and Bitman conducted a telephone survey of separated and divorced subjects, with these findings:

- \* 15.5% Of the men and 11.3% of the women reported hitting a spouse.
- \* 18.6% Of the men and only 12.7% of the women reported being struck by a spouse.

A 1974 study by Gelles of families with no record of abuse produced data expected to be representative of the general population:

- \* 2.5% Of wives had been victimized during their marriage.
- \* 12.5% Of husbands had been victimized in the marriage.
- \* 7.5% Of wives had been victimized as often as once every two months, while 2.5% of husbands had been so victimized.

The Straus and Gelles study of 1986 showed:

- \* Severe violence against wives dropped 26.6% from 1975 to 1985.
- \* Similar violence to husbands slightly increased in that time.

This drop in wife abuse is assumed to have been the result of media attention and public education focusing on husbands as aggressors.

**VIOLENCE INDEX**

Straus has developed an ascending continuum, the Conflict Tactics Scale, of eight levels of violent domestic acts:

- \* Throwing things at spouse.
- \* Pushing, shoving, or grabbing.
- \* Slapping.
- \* Kicking, biting, or hitting with fist.
- \* Hitting or trying to hit with hard or sharp object.
- \* Beating up.
- \* Threatening with knife or gun.
- \* Using a knife or gun.

His study found:

- \* In a given year, men are responsible for average of 2.5 assaults.
- \* Women are responsible for an average of 3.0 assaults.
- \* Women perpetrate slightly more acts of severe violence (4-8). "However, men were slightly more likely actually to use a gun or knife, and men beat up women more often than women beat up men."

### **A RACIST MISCONCEPTION**

Another misconception is that black men are more violent toward women than white men. A 1980 study reported wife abuse to be 400% more prevalent among black than white couples. "However, in the one study published thus far that was designed to examine the convergence of race and class in explaining domestic violence rates, Lockhart (1985) found virtually no difference between the races."

### **IMPLICATIONS**

1. After discussing the consequences of such misconceptions, the authors suggest positive approaches to the problem of family violence. "Most estimates...are that 60% of all American families experience spouse abuse. When child abuse is considered also, forecasts have envisioned family violence as a nearly universal phenomenon."

2. The authors believe a problem of this magnitude cannot be solved by psychotherapy. Because "its causes are rooted in society's reverence for violence, as evidenced in movies, advertisements, popular music, and...a high rate of firearm ownership...it is not just a 'family affair.'" The authors suggest stricter gun control and "mitigation of the scope of violence portrayed in the mass media, even in the absence of empirical evidence of a relationship between media violence and household violence."

3. Since a strong relationship exists between early victimization and adult violent behavior, "harsh discipline must be defined as physical abuse and merit official investigation."

4. Since domestic violence increases when families are removed from kin, it is suggested that government and corporate policies encouraging geographic mobility need to be restudied.

5. The authors suggest that individuals and organizations should promote efforts that reduce inequities in our society.

6. The information in this article is an important consideration for students and a corrective for professionals. It urges realism and a holistic approach to the issue of family violence.

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