



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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# Partner Violence Among Young Adults

*Summary of a Presentation by Terrie E. Moffitt, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin*

In an ongoing longitudinal study of young adults in Dunedin, New Zealand, more women than men reported that they had committed acts of violence against their partners. As part of a multidisciplinary long-term study of all individuals born in the city in 1972, researchers, with support from the National Institute of Justice, have begun to explore issues of partner violence. They are measuring the prevalence of both perpetration and victimization, comparing these rates between men and women, and identifying the characteristics of young men and women involved in violent relationships.

Unlike other studies that have examined violence among married couples or college students, the New Zealand study is among the first to also obtain data on cohabiting individuals as well as dating couples who may or may not have gone to college. This is significant because, among males, the mean age for first marriage in the United States is 29, and in New Zealand it is 30—well past the ages when partner violence begins. Initial data based on interviews with the 1,000 cohort members at age 21 reveals that:

- 18.6 percent of the young women reported perpetrating severe physical violence against a partner, compared to 5.7 percent of the young men.
- 12.7 percent of the women and 21.2 percent of the men reported being the victims of severe physical violence by a partner.
- The factors associated with perpetrating partner violence, especially for men, include unemployment, lower levels of education, symptoms of alcohol dependence, use of several illicit drugs, and lack of support resources.

## The longitudinal study

The sample for this study consists of all babies born between April 1, 1972, and March 31, 1973, in Dunedin,

a New Zealand city of 120,000. At the time of the first followup at age 3, 91 percent of the eligible population—1,037 babies—participated. The sample has been studied for more than 20 years as part of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, a long-term study of the cohort's health, development, and behavior.

Researchers have collected the data at 2- to 3-year intervals, not only from the cohort but also from teachers, parents, and peers, and from school, police, and court records. At each interval the subjects undergo physical examinations and psychological tests and participate in a series of interviews.

A strong emphasis on confidentiality has engendered trust and led participants to continue to give frank reports. In the most recent round of interviews, in 1993 and 1994, the researchers invited participants (now totaling 961) to bring their partners, who were also interviewed.

## Preliminary findings

A total of 625 members of the sample were dating, 223 were cohabiting, 27 were married, and 80 had had no relationship in the previous year. Researchers found that:

- Three times more women than men (18.6 percent and 5.7 percent respectively) said they kicked, bit, hit with a fist, or hit with an object. When less severe forms of violence are included—such as throwing something, pushing, grabbing, shoving, and slapping—the rates were 37 percent for the women and 22 percent for the men.
- Men and women involved in severe partner violence had fewer years of education (with the difference stronger for men, 50 percent of whom completed ninth grade, compared to 90 percent for the entire sample).

- Male perpetrators had been unemployed an average of at least 20 months compared to 6 months for the rest of the males in the sample. Male perpetrators also reported fewer resources for social support than the rest of the sample. They lacked emotional support, companionship, and assistance in finding jobs or a place to stay.
- Males who were violent also reported more symptoms of alcohol dependence and drug abuse; 72 percent said they used two or more different drugs in the previous year, compared to 15 percent of the full sample of males. The data were nearly identical for alcohol use.
- About 50 percent of the male perpetrators of partner violence had also assaulted others in the past year, compared to 20 percent of the entire male sample.
- Although researchers did not assess posttraumatic stress disorder, they found that women victims exhibited symptoms that were virtually identical to those of generalized anxiety disorder, panic, and phobias. Male victims, however, did not exhibit much fear or anxiety.

## Relevance of the study

New Zealand and the United States have both similarities and differences. New Zealanders are primarily of Scotch, Irish, and Dutch ancestry, with a 10-percent Maori and 4-percent Polynesian population. Like the United States, New Zealand is primarily urban and suburban, has similarly high self-reported assault victimization rates and is experiencing rising crime problems. It has a high homicide rate (but not as high as that of the United States) despite a history of effective gun control. New Zealand's levels of mental illness, depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse are similar to those of the United States (except for suicide, which is higher).

New Zealand, however, has an unemployment rate twice that of the United States. Only 20 percent of New Zealanders go to college, and more than half of the graduates leave for jobs overseas.

## Possible explanations for some study findings

The preliminary findings of this study do not conflict with those of U.S. epidemiological studies, which survey broad populations, as opposed to clinical studies of domestic violence in which samples are likely to be drawn from shelters or the courts. An explanation for these counter-intuitive findings showing women to be more violent than

their partners may be found in rational-choice theory. Women in the study brought partners to the research site who tended to be older (ages 20 to 55) and stronger. For them, it was not an irrational choice to hit when they were angry because they knew they probably would not injure their partners or get arrested. Men, on the other hand, brought women who were younger (ages 14 to 22) and weaker. If they hit these women, they were likely to injure them and be arrested. Under a rational-choice model, men would have good reason to control their anger. The researchers suggest that high unemployment, lack of emotional support, substance abuse, and other characteristics that were stronger for the young men who committed violence against their partners might be factors that made it difficult for them to control their anger. The characteristics distinguishing women who did violence from those who did not are less clear and could justify a future gender-specific study.

## Other steps

The researchers have subsequently studied the developmental antecedents of partner violence to determine if they could have predicted who would become involved in partner violence. They plan to expand their data collection to include sample members' calls for help, interactions with the police, contact with shelters, and visits to hospitals, doctors, and dentists.

Findings have been published as Magdol, L., T.E. Moffitt, A. Casi, and D. Newman. "Gender Differences in Partner Violence in a Birth Cohort of 21-Year-Olds." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65, no.1 (1997):68–78.

Terrie Moffitt, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin. As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Professor Moffitt discussed this study (which is in part supported by NIJ grant number 94-IJ-CX-0041) with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, "Partner Violence Among Young Adults," is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Ask for NCJ 154277. Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

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