Severity of Violence Against Women by Intimate Partners and Associated Use of Alcohol and/or Illicit Drugs by the Perpetrator

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One hundred eighty abused women presenting for protective orders or to file assault charges were interviewed. The Severity of Violence Against Women Scale measured threats of abuse and actual physical violence. A questionnaire measured stalking. Additionally, the women were asked if the perpetrator was drunk daily and/or used illicit drugs. Perpetrators were divided into four groups: no alcohol or drug use (33%); alcohol only (19%); drugs only (18%); and alcohol and drugs (30%). Using multivariate analysis and controlling for demographic variables, physical abuse was significantly \( p = .005 \) higher for women with perpetrators who used drugs only \( (x = 60.4) \) compared with perpetrators who used alcohol only \( (x = 47.7) \). Stalking was significantly \( p = .001 \) higher for perpetrators who used alcohol and drugs \( (x = 8.2) \) compared with perpetrators who did not use alcohol or drugs \( (x = 5.6) \). To enable abused women to promote their safety, an understanding of the association between substance use and specific types of intimate partner violence is required.

**Severity of Violence Against Women by Intimate Partners and Associated Use of Alcohol and/or Illicit Drugs by the Perpetrator**

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The prevalence of intimate partner violence has reached epidemic proportions in America. The latest available figures from the National Crime Vic-

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timization Survey reveal that more than 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend occur in America each year, and about 85% of the victims are women (Greenfield et al., 1998). In 1996, violence by an intimate accounted for 21% of violent crime against women, compared with 2% against men. On average, each year from 1992 to 1996, 8 of every 1,000 women were physically and/or sexually assaulted by a current or former intimate partner. Although less likely than men to experience violent crime overall, women are 8 times more likely than men to be assaulted by an intimate (Greenfield et al., 1998).

Stalking is frequently associated with intimate partner violence. Stalking, as defined in the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), includes repeated (i.e., two or more) occasions of visual or physical proximity, nonconsensual communication, or verbal, written, or implied threats that would cause a reasonable person fear. Using this definition, 81% of the women in the NVAW Survey who were stalked by a current or former husband or cohabiting partner were also physically assaulted by the same partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). This confirms other studies that report that stalkers are more likely to be violent if they have had an intimate relationship with the victim (F. L. Coleman, 1997; Meloy, 1998). When stalking occurs in conjunction with intimate partner violence, it is likely to end in severe violence and/or possible murder (De Becker, 1997; Perez, 1993).

The latest available figures document 1,800 murders committed by intimate partners in 1996, with three in every four victims being female. In the two decades from 1976 to 1996, 29.7% of female victims were murdered by husbands, ex-husbands, or nonmarital partners, compared with 5.9% of male victims. During the same time period, murders by intimates accounted for 30% of all murders of women and 6% of all murders of men (Greenfield et al., 1998). Among murder victims for every age group, women are much more likely than men to have been murdered by an intimate (Cooper & Eaves, 1996).

Substance Use and Intimate Partner Violence

Substance use, especially of alcohol, is cited frequently as a major contributing factor to intimate partner violence (Fagan, Barnett, & Patton, 1988; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Ptacek, 1998). In the 1985 Family Violence

Authors’ Note: The authors wish to thank the officers, attorneys, and staff of the Family Violence Unit of the Houston Police Department, and the Family Criminal Law Division of the Harris County District Attorney’s Office for their unflagging support and assistance in the collection of data for this study.
Survey, Kantor and Straus (1989) found that spouse drunkenness and drug use were among the five most important variables distinguishing abused from nonabused women. Specific to the time of the assault, Roberts (1988) found that 70% of abusers were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, with 32% using only drugs, 17% using only alcohol, and 22% using both. In a more recent study, Brookoff (1997) reported even higher drug and alcohol usage. Ninety-two percent of perpetrators had used illicit drugs or alcohol during the day of the assault and 45% had been intoxicated daily for the past month. D. H. Coleman and Straus (1983) reported rates of violence almost 15 times higher for husbands who were “often” versus “never” drunk in the previous year. The relationship of alcohol to intimate partner violence against women remains significant in studies after statistically controlling for sociodemographic variables, hostility, and marital satisfaction (Leonard, 1993; Leonard & Blane, 1992). Men’s drinking patterns, especially binge drinking, are associated with marital violence across all ethnic groups and social classes (Kanton, 1993).

Greenfield et al. (1998) used incident-level police data gathered in nine states to describe substance use and seriousness of the offense. The report found evidence of the perpetrator drinking in 28% of aggravated intimate assaults and 26% of simple intimate assaults, compared with 13% of intimidation against an intimate. Additionally, Greenfield et al. (1998) reported that more than half of prison inmates convicted of a violent crime against an intimate were drinking or using drugs at the time of the offense, with 31% drinking only, 4% using drugs only, and 20% using both substances. There is ample evidence that intoxication is common in femicide (i.e., the murder of women). In the Greenfield et al. (1998) study, about 40% of murder offenders reported that they had been drinking at the time of the offense, and of these, 90% had a blood alcohol level of .05 or higher. However, because most abusers are not arrested, imprisoned, or murder the woman, the generalizability of the involvement of substance use in violence against women remains unclear.

The Panel on Research on Violence Against Women, established by the National Research Council, recommended research on the different forms of intimate partner violence, noting that most surveys have focused exclusively on physical assault or rape. Additionally, research on the scope of perpetrator behaviors and their intersection with different forms of violence against women is also called for in the panel’s report (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). The study reported here extends the knowledge about substance use and intimate partner violence by describing the frequency and severity of several types of intimate partner violence against women and the associated use of alcohol and illicit drugs by the perpetrator.
METHODS

This descriptive study was conducted in two separate urban criminal justice units, each serving a population of 1.7 million. The first location was a special family violence unit (FVU) located in a central police department. The second location was a district attorney’s (DA) office that specializes in family violence. All persons presenting to both locations are routinely provided with individual counseling and community referral information. The FVU additionally provides police investigative and reporting procedures. The DA’s office assists abused women in filing protective orders. Following approval by the agency and institutional review board for human subjects and completion of informed consent procedures, a combined consecutive sample of 180 women attempting to file charges or protective orders and meeting study criteria were interviewed. Ninety women were interviewed over a 30-day period at the FVU, and 90 women were interviewed over a 21-day period at the DA’s office. To be included in the study, women (a) had intent to file charges of assault, stalking, or harassment or file a protective order against an intimate partner; (b) were 18 years of age or older; and (c) spoke English.

A total of 180 women signed informed consent forms and were interviewed by a registered nurse in a private office after meeting with the counselors, police officers, and/or social workers. Eleven women refused to participate. The primary reason given for refusal was time restriction and/or pain from injury resulting from the violence. Three questionnaires were administered. For each questionnaire, the woman was asked to answer “for the last 3 months.” A calendar was used to designate the 3-month time period.

Instruments

Severity of Violence Against Women Scale. The Severity of Violence Against Women Scale (SVAWS) is a 46-item questionnaire designed to measure two major dimensions: behaviors that threaten physical violence and actual physical violence (Marshall, 1992). Examples of behaviors that threaten physical violence are threats to destroy property, hurt the woman, or commit suicide. Examples of behaviors that represent actual physical violence are kicking, choking, burning, and beating up. Included are nine factors or subscales that have been demonstrated valid through factor analytic techniques: symbolic violence and mild, moderate, and serious threats (threats of violence dimension), and mild, minor, moderate, serious, and sexual violence (actual violence dimension).
For each behavior, the woman responds using a 4-point scale to indicate how often the behavior occurred (1 = never, 2 = once, 3 = few times (2 to 3 times), 4 = many times (4 or more times)). Scores can range from 19 to 76 for the threats dimension and from 27 to 108 for the actual violence dimension. Initial internal consistency reliability estimates ranged from .92 to .96 for a sample of 707 college female students and from .89 to .96 for a scale of 208 community women. Subsequent reliability for abused women was reported as .89 for the threats dimension and .91 for the actual violence dimension (Wiist & McFarlane, 1998). For the present study, reliability (coefficient alpha) was .91 for the threats of violence dimension and .93 for the actual violence dimension.

Stalking Victimization Survey. The Stalking Victimization Survey (SVS) is a 17-item survey used to document the frequency and type of stalking by the intimate partner perpetrator. The stalking survey consisted of seven items developed by Tjaden & Thoennes (1998) as part of the Violence and Threats of Violence against Women in America Survey (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). Examples of these items include being followed or spied on, being sent unsolicited letters or written correspondence, or finding the perpetrator standing outside the victim’s home, school, or workplace. Content validity was established by a panel of experts. Ten items were added from the Sheridan (1998) HARASS instrument to form the 17-item survey used in the present study. Examples of items added include threats by the abuser to harm the children or commit suicide if the woman left the relationship, leaving scary notes on her car, or threatening her family. In this study, reliability (coefficient alpha) was .82 for the set of 17 questions.

Substance Use. Finally, two questions were asked about substance use. The two questions were taken from the Danger Assessment Scale (DAS) (Campbell, 1986). The DAS is a 15-item questionnaire designed to assist women in determining their potential risk for femicide in battering relationships. Each item has been associated with murder in situations involving intimate partner abuse (Campbell, 1995). Each question is answered yes or no. The two questions asked were as follows: “During the past 3 months, has [name of perpetrator] used drugs (e.g., "uppers" or amphetamines, speed, angel dust, cocaine, crack, street drugs, heroin, or mixtures)?” “During the past 3 months, has [name of perpetrator] been drunk every day or almost every day (in terms of quantity of alcohol)?”
RESULTS

Among the 180 abused women interviewed, 47% were African American, 28% Latino/Hispanic, 22% White, and 3% other, primarily Asian/Pacific Islander. The women ranged in age from 18 to 59 with a mean age of 31 years ($SD = 8.56$). Exactly 54% of the women were in current relationships with the abuser (i.e., spouse/boyfriend), and 77% of the women had children living with them. Some 67% of the women were employed, and 71% had obtained at least a high school education. Most women (84%) reported an annual family income below $30,000.

Demographics of age, highest grade completed, ethnicity, and annual income were collected for the perpetrators. Perpetrator characteristics were very similar to those of the women. The perpetrators varied in age from 19 to 63 with a mean age of 34 years ($SD = 9.36$). The majority of the perpetrators were African American (52%); 26% were Latino/Hispanic, 20% White, 1% Asian, and 2% other. Two thirds (67%) of the perpetrators had attained a high school or better education, and most (57%) were employed when their partner reported to the criminal justice system. The most frequently noted illicit substance used was crack cocaine (16%), followed by marijuana (10%) and a combination of marijuana and cocaine (10%). Six percent reported that their abusers used a mixture of substances.

SVAWS and Perpetrator Use of Substances

For analysis of SVAWS and associated perpetrator substance use, four groups were formed: no alcohol or drug use (33%), alcohol only (19%), drugs only (18%), and alcohol and drug use (30%). Differences in threats of abuse and physical abuse scores by perpetrator group were investigated with a one-factor multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). No significant multivariate effects emerged, $F(3, 175) = 2.486, p = .062$. To control for perpetrator demographics of age, ethnicity, income, and education (i.e., highest grade completed), a one-factor multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was completed. The results were significant by perpetrator group, $F(6, 316) = 2.523, p = .021$. Further investigation showed a significant difference among groups for actual physical abuse, $F(3, 158) = 2.975, p = .033$, but not for threats of abuse. Using pairwise comparisons and a shared alpha (.05/6 = .0083) to investigate which groups were different, results showed a significant difference ($p = .005$) for drugs only (mean score = 60.4) compared with alcohol only (mean score = 47.7). No other group differences
Table 1: Adjusted<sup>a</sup> Means and Standard Deviations for Actual Physical Abuse and Threat of Abuse by Perpetrator’s Alcohol and Drug Use (four groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual physical abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>18.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol only</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>17.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs only</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>17.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drugs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>18.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats of abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>13.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol only</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>13.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs only</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drugs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Due to missing demographic values, sample size is 171.

were significant. These results indicate that abused women reporting that the perpetrator used drugs only experienced significantly higher levels of physical abuse compared with women reporting that the perpetrator used alcohol only. Adjusted means and standard deviations appear in Table 1.

Analyses were rerun for perpetrators grouped as nonusers versus users of alcohol and/or drugs. Using a one-factor MANOVA, differences in SVAWS among the nonusers and users perpetrator groups yielded a significant multivariate effect, $F(2, 176) = 3.739, p = .026$. Further analysis showed the significant difference, $F(1, 177) = 5.552, p = .020$, for threats of abuse between nonusers (mean score = 44.15) and users (mean score = 49.31). Differences in actual physical abuse were not significant between users and non-users. Adjusting for perpetrator demographics, a MANCOVA indicated a multivariate significant effect $F(2, 160) = 3.045, p = .050$. Further investigation showed that threats of abuse were significantly higher $F(1, 161) = 4.272, p = .040$ for users (mean score = 49.0) compared with nonusers (mean score = 44.2). Adjusted means and standard deviations appear in Table 2.

**SVS and Substance Use by the Perpetrator**

Differences in stalking and the four perpetrator groups were investigated through the use of a one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA), which revealed a significant group difference, $F(3, 175) = 4.039, p = .008$. Pairwise comparisons (alpha = .0083) showed a significant difference between the perpetrator groups of no substance use and alcohol and/or drug use ($p = .003$).
Table 2: Adjusted\(^a\) Means and Standard Deviations for Actual Physical Abuse and Threat of Abuse by Perpetrator’s Alcohol and Drug Use (two groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual physical abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and/or drugs</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>18.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats of abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>13.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and/or drugs</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>13.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Due to missing demographic values, sample size is 171.

Table 3: Adjusted\(^a\) Means and Standard Deviations for Stalking by Perpetrator’s Alcohol and Drug Use (four groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stalking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol only</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs only</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drugs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Due to missing demographic values, sample size is 171.

To further examine differences in stalking among perpetrator groups while controlling for the perpetrator demographics of age, ethnicity, income, and education, a one-factor analysis of covariance was completed. Results yielded a significant effect, \( F(3, 175) = 4.642, p = .004 \). Pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference (\( p = .001 \)) between no substance use (mean score = 5.6) and alcohol and drugs (mean score = 8.2). These results indicate that women experienced more stalking when the abuser used both alcohol and drugs compared with nonusers; these results remained the same with and without controlling for perpetrator demographics. Adjusted means and standard deviations appear in Table 3.

Analyses were rerun for perpetrators grouped as nonusers versus users of alcohol and/or drugs, and differences in stalking scores were explored through an ANOVA. Differences were significant, \( F(3, 175) = 12.201, p = .001 \). After adjusting for demographics, results remained significant, \( F(1, 161) = 13.952, p < .001 \), with users exhibiting more stalking (mean score = 7.9) than nonusers (mean score = 5.7). Adjusted means and standard deviations appear in Table 4.
Table 4: Adjusted\(^a\) Means and Standard Deviations for Stalking by Perpetrator’s Alcohol and Drug Use (two groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stalking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and/or drugs</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Due to missing demographic values, sample size is 171.

A Model to Predict Perpetrator’s Substance Use

To obtain a measure associated with the risk of increased threats of abuse, physical abuse, and stalking, logistic regression was used. Perpetrators were divided into users and nonusers of substances. The four groups were not investigated due to the previous small number of group differences. Actual abuse, not significantly different when the perpetrators were divided into users and nonusers, was also excluded. Threats of violence did not yield a significant logistic regression model exhibiting good fit. However, a model predicting perpetrator group based on stalking with adjustment for demographics exhibited good fit ($\chi^2 = 14.7, df = 8, p = .065$) and an $R$ square of .224. The resulting odds ratio for stalking was 1.20, meaning that the odds of using substances versus not using substances increased by 20% for each additional stalking behavior reported by the woman.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Among this sample of 180 abused women, substance use was significantly associated with more violence against women. Specifically, more physical abuse was reported by women reporting perpetrator use of illicit drugs compared with perpetrator daily drunkenness. Both stalking and threats of abuse were significantly higher for women reporting perpetrator use of alcohol and/or drugs compared with nonusers. A risk model for stalking yielded a 20% increase in the odds of perpetrator use of alcohol and/or drugs for each stalking behavior reported.

These results agree with and differ from previous reports and present new information on the association of stalking and substance use. Although substance use, especially of alcohol, is consistently cited as a major correlate of intimate partner violence (Greenfield et al., 1998; Kantor & Straus, 1989; Leonard & Roberts, 1996), this study documented significantly higher levels of physical assault among women reporting perpetrator use of illicit drugs.
only compared with daily drunkenness only. Perhaps our finding of an association between illicit drug use and severity of violence is connected to perpetrator illegal behavior. Berk, Berk, Loseke, and Rauma (1983) measured intimate partner assault and found that whether the man was drinking at the time of the incident made no difference in the seriousness of the woman’s injury. However, the number of previous arrests of the male partner for alcohol abuse was related to the severity of the woman’s abuse. Perhaps the association of criminal behavior (i.e., illicit drug use) and increased severity of abuse measured in this study may be indicative of a more violent perpetrator.

Interesting is the fact that daily drunkenness only and use of illicit drugs only occurred in almost the exact same proportions among these perpetrators, as did no use versus combined substance usage. These findings certainly do not point to a profile of substance use for these perpetrators and are consistent with the lack of one typology of perpetrator substance use and intimate partner violence. Experts tend to agree that although batterers in treatment have more personality and alcohol problems than nonbatterers, abusers as a group do not substantially differ from the general population of men (Gondolf, 1998; Hamberger & Hastings, 1991).

Of great clinical importance is the finding that stalking was significantly associated with either daily drunkenness and/or illicit drugs, and each stalking behavior reported yielded a 20% greater odds of perpetrator use of substances. Although Zona, Palarea, and Lane (1998) reported that the most frequent addictive drugs among stalkers are alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines, no research reports were identified on the association of extent of stalking and substance use. What is clearly documented is the strong association between stalking and intimate partner assault (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Knowing that the odds of illicit drug use or daily drunkenness increase with each additional incident of stalking behavior can assist women and clinicians in assessing danger and maximizing safety. If a woman does not report physical assault but does report stalking behaviors, this information can be used to determine increased odds of perpetrator use of illicit drugs and/or daily alcohol. This information can be coupled with data on the high probability for co-occurrence of substance use and physical assault.

This study has limitations due to its use of an urban agency sample of primarily English-speaking, heterosexual women. Further research is needed with larger, more representative samples of abused women that include non–English-speaking women, as well as with persons, both male and female, who have been victimized but choose not to use the criminal justice system to file assault charges or secure a protective order. Furthermore, the temporal sequencing of the substance use and occurrence of violence needs to be documented.
Clearly, the association between substance use and threats of abuse, physical assault, and stalking require additional studies if women’s safety and well-being are to be maximized. Defining these associations will relieve existing restrictions on case finding, intervention, and prevention strategies.

REFERENCES


Pam Willson is a postdoctoral research associate at Texas Woman’s University in Houston. She received her M.S.N. from the University of Texas at Arlington, specializing as a family nurse practitioner. Her dissertation work was in the area of risk factors for intimate partner violence. She is currently involved in several research studies with abused women who access the criminal justice system.

Judith McFarlane is currently the Parry Chair in Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at Texas Woman’s University, College of Nursing, in Houston. She conducts research on the health effects of violence against women and the effectiveness of interventions to prevent further violence. Her research findings have been presented to congressional committees, included in the national health objectives, and used by health clinicians in the United States and abroad to set standards of care for abused women. To prevent abuse during pregnancy, Dr. McFarlane directed a national educational program that was chronicled in an award-winning video (Crime Against the Future), introduced by the
U.S. Surgeon General, and excerpted on national news networks. She has authored or coauthored more than 50 publications on the topic.

Ann Malecha is currently an assistant professor of nursing at Texas Woman’s University, where she earned her doctorate. She received her M.S.N. from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Her research program is involved with preventing violence against women. She is currently involved in several research studies with abused women who access the criminal justice system.

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Nina Fredland is currently an assistant professor of nursing at Texas Woman’s University. Her research program is involved with preventing violence against women and children. She is currently involved in several research studies with abused women who access the criminal justice system.