

Domestic violence: Not always one sided

Mention of domestic violence immediately brings to mind an intimidating male batterer. But a 2007 article shows that the problem — also called intimate partner violence — is often more complicated and may involve both women and men as perpetrators.

Nearly 11,000 men and women, a representative sample of the American population ages 18 to 28, participated in a national survey. They were asked the following questions about their most important recent sexual or romantic relationship:

1. How often in the past year have you threatened your partner with violence, pushed him or her, or thrown something at him or her that could hurt, and how often has your partner done that to you?
2. How often in the past year have you hit, slapped, or kicked your partner, and how often has your partner done that to you?
3. If there has been any violence in your relationship, how often has either partner suffered an injury, such as a sprain, bruise, or cut?

Almost 25% of the people surveyed — 28% of women and 19% of men — said there was some violence in their relationship. Women admitted perpetrating more violence (25% versus 11%) as well as being victimized more by violence (19% versus 16%) than men did. According to both men and women, 50% of this violence was reciprocal, that is, involved both parties, and in those cases the woman was more likely to have been the first to strike.

Violence was more frequent when both partners were involved, and so was injury — to either partner. In these relationships, men were more likely than women to inflict injury (29% versus 19%).

When the violence was one-sided, both women and men said that women were the perpetrators about 70% of the time. Men were more likely to be injured in reciprocally violent relationships (25%) than were women when the violence was one-sided (20%).

That means both men and women agreed that men were not more responsible than women for intimate partner violence. The findings cannot be explained by men's being ashamed to admit hitting women, because women agreed with men on this point.

The authors say they have no intention of minimizing the very real problem of serious domestic violence — the classic male batterer. The survey did not cover the use of knives, guns, choking, or burning, and it was not concerned with the kind of situation that can drive a woman to seek shelter outside the home. The view of the authors is that most intimate partner violence should not be equated with severe battering. Domestic disputes that turn physical because of retaliation and escalation do not have the same causes or the same consequences as male battering. Couples counseling is generally regarded as ineffective for batterers, but if the violence is moderate and the injuries are minor, both partners are involved, and they want to stay together, it makes sense for a therapist to work with both of them.

Whitaker DJ, et al. "Differences in Frequency of Violence and Reported Injury between Relationships with Reciprocal and Nonreciprocal Intimate Partner Violence," *American Journal of Public Health* (May 2007): Vol. 97, No. 5, pp. 941–47.