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## Domestic Violence Cuts Employment Gains by Women on Welfare

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — A woman on welfare who experiences domestic violence loses 137 work hours per year, or \$705 of minimum wage earnings — significantly affecting her financial wellbeing, a new study by the University of Michigan shows.

“Domestic violence wipes out a substantial portion of the employment gains women might otherwise have experienced as a result of an improving economy and welfare reform,” said Richard Tolman, a professor at the U-M School of Social Work and study’s co-author, along with Hui Chen Wang of the University of Mississippi.

The research, which studies the link between diminished work hours and domestic violence victims within the welfare system, appears in the September issue of *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

Previous research has demonstrated that domestic violence is higher among women on welfare than among non-recipients. Some battered women depend on the welfare system to provide economic support to leave an abusive partner. If they fail to work or participate in mandatory training programs, a result of changes in welfare laws, women may lose welfare benefits, Tolman said.

Adverse physical and mental health outcomes related to abuse — such as stress, physical problems like back pain or headaches, or depression — can create problems in the workplace for battered women.

The researchers calculated the number of hours work per year for nearly 600 women, ages 18 to 54, who were on welfare in 1997. The women were interviewed three times beginning in fall 1997, and again in 1998 and 1999. These individuals were asked whether they experienced various forms of abuse, including being hit with a fist or object, beaten, choked, threatened with a weapon or forced into sexual activity against their will. Information was also gathered on their mental and physical health.

Other factors significantly affecting women’s work were health problems, number of children younger than 6 years and transportation problems (lack of a car or driver’s license). The 137 hours lost at work from domestic violence was nearly 11 percent of the annual work hours of the average woman in the 3-year sample (1,248 hours).

The findings also indicate domestic violence was associated with various forms of material deprivation, such as food insufficiency and utility shut-offs, as well as increased welfare dependence.

Women experiencing domestic violence are also more likely to experience subjective hardship. That is, they are more concerned about their current and future ability to manage the amount of family income they expect to receive. As economic activity decreases, they become more likely to need supplemental income.

“Diminished earning could also make women more vulnerable to staying in an abusive relationship, if their partner provides economic or other types of support, such as child care,” Tolman said.

Abused women may also need to seek emergency leave to protect their safety, either by seeking shelter or pursuing legal action. However, in jobs where such leaves are not available, taking time off to protect herself or her family could result in job loss or lost wages. Tolman noted that for some women “fear of job loss or other discrimination may keep them from disclosing their status to employers or others.” This could diminish their options for safety in the workplace.

For more information on Tolman, visit: <http://www.ssw.umich.edu/faculty/profile-rtolman.html>

American Journal of Community Psychology at <http://www.springeronline.com/sgw/cda/frontpage/0,11855,5-10126-70-35746787-0,00.html>

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