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When Violence Hits Home: How Economics and Neighborhood Play a Role

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This Research in Brief is based on the authors' final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, *Economic Distress, Community Context and Intimate Violence: An Application and Extension of Social Disorganization Theory* (NCJ 193434) by Michael L. Benson and Greer Litton Fox. The final report is available electronically from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service Web site at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/193434.pdf>.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Does intimate partner violence occur more in disadvantaged neighborhoods? Are couples facing job instability or other economic distress more susceptible to intimate violence? Is the combination of individual money problems and living in a tough neighborhood a catalyst for higher levels of violence? An NIJ-sponsored study summarized in this Research in Brief answers yes to all three questions. By examining data from the U.S. Census and from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), researchers explored the dynamics among household economics, neighborhood economics, and levels of intimate partner violence.

What did the researchers find?

Intimate violence is more prevalent and more severe in disadvantaged neighborhoods. It occurs more in households facing economic distress. When the economically distressed household is located in a disadvantaged neighborhood,

the prevalence of intimate violence jumps dramatically: women living in these circumstances are most at risk. Because a higher percentage of African-Americans live in disadvantaged neighborhoods and face economic distress, they experience higher rates of intimate violence compared with whites. When comparing African-Americans and whites of similar income levels, the levels of intimate violence are similar.

What were the study's limitations?

The amount of data on minorities other than Hispanics and African-Americans was relatively small, limiting further analysis of other subgroups.

Who should read this study?

Victim service providers, researchers, State and local housing policymakers, law enforcement planners.

by Michael L. Benson and Greer Litton Fox

When Violence Hits Home: How Economics and Neighborhood Play a Role



Past research has explored how personality factors and the dynamics of an intimate relationship can lead to violence against women. An NIJ study takes a broader look at the factors at play in intimate violence. The study reveals that the incidence of violence in the home is exacerbated by economic factors apart from the characteristics of the individuals involved. Researchers found that economic problems or distresses such as losing one's job and specific circumstances such as the length of a relationship interact with the kind of community in which people live to influence the offenders and victims of intimate violence.

The study sheds light on the connections between intimate violence and personal and economic well-being and on how the type of neighborhood in which women live may influence them to stay in or leave abusive relationships. Understanding the links between these factors should help policymakers and practitioners

create more targeted prevention and intervention programs and better anticipate when demand for these programs might grow. The findings suggest that service providers who help victims of violence should give priority to women in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and address their economic circumstances.

The study found that—

- Violence against women in intimate relationships occurred more often and was more severe in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Women living in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to be the victims of intimate violence compared with women in more advantaged neighborhoods.
- For the individuals involved, both objective (being unemployed or not making enough money to meet family needs) and subjective (worrying about finances) forms of economic distress

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increase the risk of intimate violence against women.

- Women who live in economically disadvantaged communities and are struggling with money in their own relationships suffer the greatest risk of intimate violence.
- African-Americans and whites with the same economic characteristics have similar rates of intimate violence, but African-Americans have a higher overall rate of intimate violence due in part to higher levels of economic distress and location in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The study also showed that even when measures of subjective and objective economic distress were taken into account, women living in disadvantaged neighborhoods still have higher rates of intimate violence. This may be because of the existence of many of the same social problems that increase the risk of street crime in disadvantaged neighborhoods; for example, a lower degree of social capital to respond to criminal behavior that, when longstanding, leads to a greater tolerance for deviant behavior among people living in those neighborhoods.

Effects of economic distress

■ **Male job instability.**

Women whose male partners experienced two or more periods of unemployment over the 5-year study were almost three times as likely to be victims of intimate violence as were women whose partners were in stable jobs.

- **Income levels.** Women living in households with high incomes experienced less violence at the hands of their intimate partners than did women whose households were less financially secure. The results showed a very consistent pattern: As the ratio of household income to needs goes up, the likelihood of violence goes down.

- **Financial strain.** Couples who reported extensive financial strain had a rate of violence more than three times that of couples with low levels of financial strain.

■ **Severity of violence.**

Women in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to be victimized repeatedly or to be injured by their domestic partners than were women who lived in

THE INVESTIGATION

To conduct the study, the researchers merged data from two sources: the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which is a nationally representative sample of U.S. households, and the 1990 U.S. Census.

The researchers analyzed self-reported data from the NSFH on conflict and violence among couples. They also analyzed data on the economic resources and well-being of the couples, the composition of their households, and a number of the couples' sociodemographic characteristics. The researchers abstracted tract-level data from the census on various characteristics, such as poverty, unemployment, and residential mobility, for the census tracts in which the NSFH respondents lived. By merging the census and NSFH data, the researchers were able to study both the variation in the context in which intimate violence occurs and those factors closely associated with intimate violence. They were able to track the experiences of women in intimate relationships over time and to examine the individual and joint effects of these individual- and neighborhood-level factors.

Because the NSFH data include cases from a relatively limited number of households representing racial and ethnic subgroups other than African-Americans and Hispanics, the study's discussion of minorities and intimate violence is limited to those groups.

more advantaged neighborhoods. For instance, about 2 percent of women in advantaged neighborhoods experienced severe violence, while 6 percent of women in disadvantaged neighborhoods were the victims of severe violence.

economic disadvantage increases a woman's risk of intimate violence. Comparing levels of intimate violence among couples experiencing individual economic distress in both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods, researchers found much higher rates of violence among couples in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The rate of intimate violence among financially distressed couples in advantaged neighborhoods is roughly half that of similarly

A volatile mix

Researchers sought to determine whether the combination of individual economic distress and a community's

distressed couples in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The highest rates of intimate violence are found among women who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods with men who have had high levels of job instability. In comparison, the rate of intimate violence is lowest among women whose intimate partners have stable employment and live in advantaged neighborhoods. These findings show that individual economic distress and an economically disadvantaged neighborhood work in tandem to increase a woman's risk for violence in an intimate relationship.

Socioeconomics, race, and violence

The study found that the rate of intimate violence against women in African-American couples is about twice that for white couples. To find out why, the study looked at the relationship among economic distress, living in a disadvantaged community, and race and ethnicity. The study found that African-Americans are more likely than whites to suffer from economic distress and to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The study also found that the individual economic status of African-Americans and Hispanics

often does not match the economic status of the neighborhoods in which they live. For instance, 36 percent of African-American couples may be considered economically disadvantaged, but more than twice as many African-Americans (77 percent) live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Similar patterns are found for Hispanics. By contrast, white couples are much more likely to reside in neighborhoods that mirror their economic status.

To investigate this pattern further, researchers calculated the rates of intimate violence against women among African-Americans and whites while controlling separately for community disadvantage and economic distress. They found that higher rates of intimate violence among African-Americans could be accounted for by their higher levels of economic distress and their greater likelihood of living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. What's more, the rate of violence between intimate partners is virtually identical among African-Americans and whites with high incomes. However, African-Americans with low and moderate incomes do appear to have a significantly higher rate of intimate violence than whites do in those same income categories.

The study also explored the relationship between race and intimate violence by controlling for income and type of community at the same time. Results were mixed, but, in a number of cases, the difference in intimate violence between African-Americans and whites was reduced substantially. The study found that in both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods, African-Americans with high incomes have rates of intimate violence that are close to or less than those for whites. Generally, when African-Americans are compared to whites with similar incomes and neighborhood economic status, the difference in the rate of intimate violence diminishes or is eliminated.

Implications for practice

For policymakers developing effective prevention and intervention strategies, this study provides important insights into how social changes that cause economic distress influence violence against women in different racial and socioeconomic groups. The stress that accompanies losing a job and seeing personal income shrink can result in severe consequences for

individuals, intimate couples, and the communities in which they live.

This study suggests to policymakers and intimate violence service providers that violence against domestic partners does not occur solely because of an offender's psychological makeup or the inability to resolve conflicts constructively in a relationship. Therefore, strategies to address intimate violence should target a broad array of potential areas for intervention and change. At the same time, law enforcement officials could use this information to deal more effectively with intimate violence in the community. Because intimate violence is more likely to occur in disadvantaged neighborhoods, this study suggests that law enforcement officials give increased attention to these neighborhoods and consider employing strategies to prevent and detect intimate partner crimes in vulnerable neighborhoods.

This study found a strong link between intimate violence and the economic well-being of couples and the communities in which they live. This means that economic practices and employment policies may play an important part in women's risk of suffering

from intimate violence. It is noteworthy that, in this study, job instability and not employment status itself was a major risk factor for violence against women. The researchers suggest that when policymakers consider the problem of transitory labor demand, they could help address women's risk of intimate partner violence by giving preference to policies and practices that provide job stability rather than those that promote periodic layoffs and rehiring. The researchers also suggest that service providers may want to monitor changes in the local job force because cutbacks could potentially increase the level of intimate violence.

The study also found that the type of community in which women lived played a contributing role in their risk for intimate violence. Women experiencing economic difficulties who live in disadvantaged

neighborhoods will continue to experience a greater risk for intimate violence. In light of these findings about how neighborhood types and economic distress increase the risk for intimate violence, service providers may want to consider how they develop interventions. To provide services where women at the greatest risk of intimate violence need them most, service providers could target women who live in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Because economic distress has been shown to increase the risk of violence, service providers might choose to address the economic resources of these women and specifically, their need for cash assistance. Based on the findings of this study, financial assistance to women in poverty may lessen their risk of violence.

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