

Psychosocial Characteristics of Batterers: A Study of 234 Men Charged with Domestic Violence Offenses

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This paper analyzes the characteristics of 234 women abusers who came in contact with the Marion county prosecutor's office and municipal court in Indianapolis during the period from July 1984 to April 1985. The study examines the relationship between battering and such variables as age, race, alcohol, and/or drug abuse, the assailant's relationship to the battered women, criminal history, and employment status. A profile of the psychosocial characteristics of batterers and the implications for assessment and court-mandated treatment are also presented.

KEY WORDS: abusers; batterers; battery; court-ordered treatment; domestic violence.

INTRODUCTION

The family violence literature has increased tremendously in the past decade. Several common characteristics of violent families have been identified in the research literature. First and foremost, several studies have documented that abusive patterns and violence are often learned in childhood. Males brought up in abusive homes are more likely to become abusive than those reared in nonabusive homes (Kempe *et al.*, 1962; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981; Sonkin and Durphy, 1982; Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; Straus, 1979). The beatings observed and experienced during childhood provide the early socialization which leads abusers, as adults, to reenact violent behavior

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against their mates and, sometimes, against their children. Several researchers have found that a high percentage of batterers grew up in homes where they observed violence between their parents or were themselves beaten. Two studies found a rate of approximately 70% (Ganley, 1981; Frank and Houghton, 1982) and a third study showed a rate of almost 65% (Sonkin and Durphy, 1982) of batterers who were reared in an abusive home. The highest frequency — 81% — was found by Roy (1982). Roy's findings (unlike the other studies which were based on information provided by the batterer) were based on statements made by the victim and/or her parents.

The second factor which has emerged in the literature is that family violence occurs in all socioeconomic groups (Davidson, 1978; Grambs, 1977; Straus *et al.*, 1980). However, researchers whose samples were drawn from hospital emergency rooms and criminal justice agencies have indicated that woman abuse appears to occur more frequently in the lower socioeconomic class (Lockhart, 1984; Straus *et al.*, 1980; Walker, 1984).

The third factor is that violent couples are subjected to more intense stressful life events, such as unemployment and financial difficulties, than are non-violent couples (Prescott and Letko, 1977; Straus *et al.*, 1980).

The final factor identified in the sociological and psychological studies is the frequency of chemical abuse among violent men (Carlson, 1977; Coleman, 1980; Eisenberg and Micklow, 1977; Fagan *et al.*, 1983; Powers and Kutash, 1978; Walker, 1979). Some studies have reported a very strong association between alcohol use and battering, while others have found a more moderate, though still considerable, association between the two. There is general agreement in the empirical literature that alcohol abuse is more prevalent among batterers than is drug abuse. It is also clear that the great majority of batterings are alcohol and/or drug related.

The percentage of batterers who are under the influence of alcohol when they assault their partner ranges from 48% (Gelles, 1972) to 87% (Appleton, 1980), with most of the research indicating a 60 to 70% rate of alcohol abuse and a 13 to 20% rate of drug abuse. A limitation of these studies is that they did not report on the incidence of combined drug and alcohol abuse.

The high number of batterers who are under the influence of alcohol when they assault their partner can best be put in perspective when it is compared with data on the prevalence of alcoholism among the general population. The recent NIMH epidemiological catchment area study of more than 9000 adults included data on alcohol abuse in the general population for the cities of New Haven, Baltimore, and St. Louis. Among men, in those three cities, the average alcohol abuse and/or dependence prevalence rate was 9.3% (Myers *et al.*, 1984).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to start to build a data base on characteristics of batterers who have had charges filed against them. These data will be useful in developing a profile for use by prosecutors and judges in making judicial decisions. With the new probable cause law in Indiana and elsewhere, there has been an upsurge in the number of men who are going to court for assaulting their mates.

In order to obtain data on a large sample of urban batterers, the author has conducted an exploratory study of 234 men who had charges filed against them at the Marion county prosecutor's office in Indianapolis. Marion county, which is comprised mainly of the city of Indianapolis, has a population of 756,000. This study includes all cases which were closed during the period July 1984 thru April 1985. Information was sought regarding age, race, marital status, alcohol and drug abuse, employment status, criminal history, and severity of the abuse. Secondary data were obtained from three sources: the files of the Domestic Abuse Unit of the Marion county prosecutor's office, motor vehicle records, and the Computerized Criminal Histories (CCH).

There is a limitation to the data gathered from the files of the prosecutor's office because the intake forms were completed by the victim rather than the abuser. It may be argued, however, that the abuser may tend to distort the truth on some questions, such as whether he abuses alcohol or drugs, while the victim may tend to be more straightforward when reporting her perceptions.

A second limitation is that this study may represent only a small percentage of the total number of batterers in the community. The Louis Harris and Associates' study (1979) of women in Kentucky showed that only 4% of those who had been physically abused brought the case to court. The current study may also underrepresent the number of batterers who have severely injured their partner because those women may fear that the batterer would kill them if they pressed charges.

FINDINGS

Age

As shown in Table I, of the 223 batterers whose age was known, almost three-quarters were young, between the ages of 18 and 34. An additional

Table I. Age

Age Category	Frequency	Percentage
18-19	9	4.0
20-24	45	20.2
25-29	61	27.4
30-34	52	23.3
35-39	25	11.2
40-44	7	3.1
45-49	15	6.7
50 and over	9	4.0
No data available	11	
Total	234	100.0

11% were aged 35 to 39. Only 10% were in the 40 to 49 age group, with the remaining 4% aged 50 or older. The batterers had a mean age of 30.2. It is not known why there is such a high frequency of younger batterers who are coming into contact with the court for woman abuse.

One factor contributing to the low number of reported battering cases among the 40 and over group may be that there is a group of battered women who have resigned themselves to the abuse and who do not contact the police when their partner becomes violent. Another possible explanation for the disparity in ages may relate to the fact that drug abuse (either by itself or in combination with alcohol) was highly correlated with the more severe beatings. Drug abuse is considerably more prevalent among the under-40 population than it is among those who are approaching middle-age. It may be that drug use is resulting in more violence among men who are presently in their 20s and 30s.

Race

As shown in Table II, 126 or 53.9% of the batterers were white, 104 or 44.4% were black, and one was Hispanic. Data on race were not available for the remaining three men.

Table II. Race

Race	Number	Percentage
White	126	54.5
Black	104	45.0
Hispanic	1	.4
Unknown	3	
Total	234	

Table III. Victim's Relationship to the Batterer

Type of Relationship	Number	Percentage
Cohabiting	111	48.0
Divorced or separated	63	27.3
Married	44	19.0
Former paramour	11	4.8
Current boyfriend	2	0.8
Total	231	
Unknown	3	

Victim's Relationship to the Batterer

The analysis of the data on the relationship between the batterer and the victim yielded some surprising results. The most frequently cited relationship was cohabitation, with close to one half (111 or 48%) of the couples living together. The second highest frequency (27.3% or 63) was among divorced or separated couples. The number of married women who filed charges was surprisingly low. Only slightly less than one in five (44 or 19%) of the victims were married to the batterer at the time of the attack for which charges were filed. There were also a few cases of battering on the part of a former paramour (11 or 4.8%), and two cases in which an abused woman filed charges against a current boyfriend.

Table III shows that more than twice the number of women in a cohabiting relationship filed charges against the batterer than did women in a marital relationship. The reason for the high percentage of reported abuse by men in cohabiting relationships is not known. One possible explanation is that married victims may be more dependent (economically and/or emotionally) on their husbands, and they may be more fearful that reporting the abuser to the police could endanger them further.

Another possible explanation is related to the large percentage of batterers (close to 75%) who are under the age of 35. It is recognized that battering episodes usually begin when a man is young. It has become more common in the past decade for couples, particularly in their 20s, to live together, postponing or eliminating the marriage ceremony which would have been expected a generation ago. Also, some of the individuals were previously married and divorced, and had chosen to cohabit with their new partner instead of marrying again.

Employment Status

As shown in Table IV, the unemployment rate among batterers was quite high—47.4%. This figure is almost seven times the current rate of

Table IV. Employment Status

	Number	Percent
Employed	120	51.3
Unemployed	111	47.4

unemployment nationwide (which is approximately 7%). For the most part, the batterers who were employed were working in blue collar positions, such as construction worker, maintenance worker, gas station mechanic, or security guard. Only a very small percentage of batterers worked in white collar positions. However, this finding should not be interpreted to mean that professional men do not engage in woman battering. What the data reveal is that the female partners of men who work in professional jobs are not likely to call the police to have the abuser arrested for his violent acts.

Alcohol and Drug Use

Sixty percent (140) of the battered women indicated that the abuser was under the influence of alcohol during the battering incident for which charges were filed (see Table V). While both black and white abusers have alcohol problems, the data indicate that white abusers (61.9%) are more likely than their black counterparts (38.1%) to have an alcohol problem (see Table VI).

Close to one third (75 or 32.3%) of the abusers used drugs (see Table VII). The drug used most frequently was marijuana, with several men using cocaine and amphetamines (usually speed). Also mentioned, but to a lesser extent, were heroine, quaaludes, and barbiturates (downers). Many of those

Table V. Alcohol Problem

	Number	Percentage
Yes	140	60
No	93	40
Total	233	
Unknown	1	

Table VI. Alcohol and Race

Race	Alcohol Problem		No Alcohol Problem	
Black	53	38.1%	51	56%
White	86	61.9%	40	44%

Table VII. Drug Problem

	Number	Percentage
Yes	75	32.3
No	157	67.7
Total	232	
Unknown	2	

who took marijuana used it in combination with other drugs, most commonly cocaine or speed.

According to the battered women, one batterer in five (21.8%) used both alcohol and drugs. The total percentage of batterers who were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs – 70.5% (164) – is consistent with many of the earlier studies. The finding that nearly one third of the men used drugs is somewhat higher than previous studies. This may be attributed to the following.

1. These data were collected in 1984 and 1985 and may reflect a recent increase in drug abuse among the target population.

2. It may be that drug abuse is increasing among those batterers who were already alcohol-dependent.

3. Of those batterers who relied on drugs, two thirds had a drinking problem as well (see Table VIII). Earlier studies have generally not been specific in providing figures for abusers of more than one substance, i.e., those who have a combined drug and alcohol problem. Thus, the lower drug abuse figures in earlier studies could, in part, be the result of imprecise data collection in some studies.

Criminal History

As shown in Table IX almost 40% (91 or 38.9%) of the batterers had no previous criminal history, with slightly more than 60% (143 or 61.1%) having a history of prior felony or misdemeanor offenses. Many of the men had been convicted of more than one offense. The 143 batterers with a

Table VIII. Dual Problem: Drug and Alcohol

	Number	Percentage
Yes	51	21.8
No	181	77.4
Total	232	
Unknown	2	

Table IX. Criminal History

	Number	Percentage
No criminal history	91	38.9
Criminal history	143	61.1
Total	234	100.0

criminal record were responsible for a total of 227 offenses, or an average of 1.6 offenses per abuser. It should be noted, however, that three-quarters (174 or 76.6%) of the offenses were of the least serious nature, commonly classified as misdemeanor or petty offenses. For example, 29 men had been convicted of public intoxication and 16 for disorderly conduct.

Only 33 (14.1%) of the men had prior convictions for major felony offenses [rape, robbery, criminal assault, theft, and burglary (see Table IX-A)]. But these 33 offenders were responsible for 53 felonies. This small group of

Table IX-A. Prior Offenses for Batters with a Criminal History^a

Offense	Number	Percentage
Felony Offenses		
Violent crimes against person (22)		
Attempted Murder	2	0.9
Armed Robbery	11	4.8
Criminal Assault	7	3.1
Total	22	9.7
Property crimes (31)		
Theft (larceny)	18	7.9
Burglary	13	5.7
Total	31	13.6
Total Felony Offenses	53	23.3
Misdemeanor Offenses		
Moderately serious offenses (94)		
Battery	27	11.9
Criminal Trespass	13	5.7
Criminal Recklessness	9	4.0
Driving While Intoxicated (DWI)	29	12.8
Resisting and/or Fleeing from a Law Enforcement Officer	16	7.0
Total	94	41.4
Petty Offenses (80)		
Public Intoxication or Possession of Marijuana or Cocaine	64	28.2
Disorderly Conduct	16	7.0
Total	80	35.2
Total Misdemeanor Offenses	174	76.6
Total Offenses	227	99.9

^aThere was a total of 227 offenses committed by 143 men, or an average of 1.58 offenses per offender.

lawbreakers, with a history of antisocial behavior and conviction of major offenses, is very likely to ignore a judicial disposition which mandates that they attend a six-month batterers' treatment program. For the subgroup, a more specialized type of treatment may need to be developed, such as an intensive treatment model in a residential setting.

Severity of Charges

Three fourths (178) of the men were charged with Battery. In the state of Indiana, Battery is a misdemeanor. There are two main classes of Battery, labeled A or B, depending upon the nature of the attack against the victim. In Indiana, Class B Battery, the lesser of the charges, refers to an act in which a person "knowingly or intentionally touches another person in a rude, insolent or angry manner," such as slapping, pushing, kicking, or hitting. Class A Battery, the more serious charge, is defined in the Indiana Criminal Code as an attack resulting "in bodily injury to any other person," for example, broken bones, or cuts and bruises over the eye.

In this study, there is an almost equal distribution of men charged with Battery A and Battery B: 83 men (35.5%) were charged with Battery A; 85 men (36.3%) were charged with Battery B. Ten men (43.3%) had a charge of Battery on their case record without the designation of A or B. Since the severity of their battering is unknown, those 10 men were not included in the analysis which compared men charged with Class A Battery with those who had a Class B Battery charge (see Table X).

The rest of the men were charged with less serious offenses. The largest category of non-Battery charges was Criminal Mischief (19 or 8.1%), which is defined as "recklessly, knowingly or intentionally damaging property of another person without his consent." The others were charged with various offenses including Disorder Conduct (6), Criminal Trespass (4), Criminal

Table X. Severity of Charges

Offense	Number	Percentage
Battery A	83	35.5
Battery B	85	36.3
Battery (type unknown)	10	4.3
Criminal mischief	19	8.1
Disorderly conduct	6	2.6
Criminal trespass	4	1.7
Other (including harassment, breaking and entering, criminal recklessness)	6	2.6
Charges unknown	21	8.9
Total	234	100.0

Recklessness (2), and Harassment (2). The case records of the remaining 21 men did not specify the offense for which they were charged.

Judicial Disposition

What were the judicial outcomes for the men who had been arrested for violence against their partner or ex-partner? In slightly more than 60% of the cases (142), the charges were dropped or the case was dismissed. The second largest category was a 30-day, 90-day or 180-day suspended sentence; 44 men (18.8%) received this disposition. Eight percent (19) of the men were fined. Three men who had a court hearing were judged to be not guilty. Only 3.9% of the batterers were incarcerated for beating their partner; their sentences ranged from one to 29 days in jail.

Delayed Disposition

Generally, when batterers appear before the court, they are represented by a public defender. The batterer is frequently advised to plead guilty, and he then receives a suspended sentence. However, there is a small number of men who have the funds to hire a personal defense attorney who then prepares a case in which he portrays his client in the best possible light, e.g., the attorney minimizes the assault, characterizes it as an accident, and/or accuses the woman of having been physically combative and equally at fault. If, after hearing the defense attorney's eloquent plea, the judge has doubts about what actually took place, he may make a delayed disposition which puts the case on hold for one year. At the end of that period, if the man has not had any

Table XI. Judicial Disposition

Type Disposition	Frequency	Percentage
Charges dropped	142	61.2
180-day suspended sentence	27	11.6
90-day suspended sentence	11	4.7
30-day suspended sentence	6	2.5
1-29 days in jail	9	3.9
Fine	19	8.2
Not guilty	3	1.3
Delayed disposition	15	6.5
Total	232	
Unknown	2	

additional arrests for battering his mate, the judge dismisses the case. Fifteen men obtained a delayed disposition (see Table XI).

There did not seem to be any relationship between the severity of abuse and the type of disposition. Some batterers charged with committing more severe violence (Battery A) received a suspended sentence which was the same disposition that men charged with less severe beatings received.

Referrals to Counseling Programs

More than half of them (135 or 57.9%) were *not* referred to any type of batterers' counseling program. Of the 98 men for whom the court did recommend counseling, the largest group (42 or 18%) was referred to the Family Services Agency, followed closely by 39 (16.7%) who were advised to obtain counseling at the Salvation Army Family Service Division. Several referrals (13 or 5.6%) were also made to the National Training Laboratory's Weekend Education Program. The agency which received the fewest number of court referrals was the community mental health center (4 or 1.7%).

CONCLUSION

From the findings there has emerged a profile of the most common characteristics of the batterer who was prosecuted:

1. He is young, between the ages of 20 and 34.
2. Frequently, he and his partner are in a cohabiting, rather than a marital, relationship.
3. He is either unemployed or is working in a blue collar job.
4. He is likely to be an excessive drinker and/or drug abuser who has either been convicted of public order disturbances (such as public intoxication and disorderly conduct) or has been convicted of possession of illegal drugs.

Social workers and psychologists who treat male alcohol and drug abusers should be aware that a considerable number of them may be woman batterers as well. At intake, nonjudgmental probing may reveal the existence of a history of violence directed toward his mate. Appropriate treatment plans should then be initiated keeping in mind the importance of treating the client for both problems and making referrals, when necessary, to clinicians skilled in counseling the batterer.

This study found that the overwhelming majority of batterers (who had charges filed against them for battery) did not have a history of convictions for major felony offenses. However, many of the men did have a history of misdemeanor and petty offenses, and alcohol-related problems.

With the Indiana probable cause law, which became effective on September 1, 1985, larger numbers of batterers will come to the attention of court officials. This law had previously been passed in many other states. It has already resulted in increased numbers of batterers appearing in municipal and criminal court in those states. The functions of the court include: protecting the battered victim; assuring the protection of the legal rights of all parties; settling disputes; mandating punishment in the form of fines or incarceration; and mandating group counseling or other services.

In the majority of cases studied, the charges against the batterer were dropped and he was not required to complete a counseling program which would have helped him learn nonviolent ways of coping with anger and stress. Underlying the successful intervention with abusive males is the need for court-mandated treatment. The success of a batterers' counseling program can be directly tied to a court order mandating counseling (Roberts, 1984).

Recommendations

The findings of this study provide a profile of the abusive mate as one who might well benefit from court-mandated intervention for both chemical dependency and violence against his partner. Counseling programs do now exist — albeit on a small scale. If large numbers of referrals were to be made, the programs would have difficulty accomodating a large influx of clients. There is presently a twofold need for: (1) increased funds to staff and develop additional batterers counseling programs; and (2) intensified efforts from social workers and court personnel to identify batterers who could learn non-violent coping mechanisms through mandatory counseling (systematically monitored and enforced by court orders).

There is a long-standing debate between those who insist that the social work profession should work only with voluntary clients and those who argue that there are certain client groups (those who would never attend counseling voluntarily) which, if ordered into treatment, can succeed in changing their violent behavior pattern (Edleson, 1984; Edleson *et al.*, 1985). Because of the denial and resistance exhibited by men who batter women, batterers are a difficult group to engage in treatment. However, I believe that substantial numbers of abusers — and their families — can benefit from court-ordered counseling. It is, therefore, important to educate social workers on the importance of working with this population. Equally important is the need to educate judges on the potential benefits of counseling for batterers.

Based on this exploratory study, there is a pressing need for further research to determine the impact of court-ordered counseling on reducing the recidivism rate of batterers.

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