



Domestic violence-related deaths



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ABSTRACT

An article in the *NIJ Journal* (Websdale, 2003) notes that domestic violence can provoke suicide. The *2003 Massachusetts Domestic Violence Homicide Report* (Lauby *et al*, 2006) notes that suicide can be attributed to domestic violence incidents. *Utah Domestic Violence Related Deaths 2006* (Utah Domestic Violence Council, 2006) notes that the majority of domestic violence-related suicides are not covered in their report. The report *Domestic Violence Fatalities (2005)* (Utah Department of Health, 2006) notes that there were 44 suicides and 21 homicide domestic violence-related deaths in Utah in 2005. Using data from the *Surveillance for Violent Deaths – National Violent Death Reporting System, 16 States, 2005* (Karch *et al*, 2008), it is possible to extrapolate that as many as 7,832 male and 1,958 domestic violence-related suicides occur annually in the US. When domestic violence-related suicides are combined with domestic violence homicides, the total numbers of domestic violence-related deaths are higher for males than females. This paper recommends that to understand the broad scope and tragic impact of domestic violence, further research is needed concerning domestic violence-related suicide.

KEY WORDS

National Violent Death Reporting System; domestic violence-related suicide; feminist ideological perceptions; intimate partner problems (IPProb); domestic violence victimisation.

Introduction

In the introduction to the *2003 Massachusetts Domestic Violence Homicide Report* (MDVHR), the authors write:

‘The human toll from domestic violence is grossly underestimated ... Domestic violence homicides represent just the tip of the iceberg regarding mortality and morbidity resulting from domestic violence. Suicides that can be attributed to domestic violence deaths that result from life-long battering also need to be examined. Within the category of homicide, alone, it is difficult to claim with any certainty that we were able to identify all domestic violence homicide incidents.’ (Lauby *et al*, 2006, p4)

It has become obvious that when the primary focus is on domestic violence homicides (the rarest form of domestic violence) or injurious

physical assaults, our ability to completely identify the broad scope and tragic impact of domestic violence victimisation is severely limited. The majority of the nationally recognised domestic violence organisations and researchers in the US concur that the issue of domestic violence is far more complex and multifaceted than previously thought, *and that the human toll of its victimisation against men has been grossly underestimated.*

The context of feminist ideology

The *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women* (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a, piii) notes: *‘The data show that violence is more widespread and injurious to women’s **and men’s health** than previously thought’* (emphasis added).

Tjaden and Thoennes also note that *‘the majority of contemporary research about violence*

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against women is in the context of feminist ideology' (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a, p1).

The core belief of *feminist ideology*, as expressed by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) on its website (www.ncadv.org/aboutus.php) is:

'The NCADV believes violence against women and children results from the use of force or threat to achieve and maintain control over others in intimate relationships, and from societal abuse of power and domination in the forms of sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism, able-bodyism, ageism and other oppressions.'

The NCADV is often recognised as the national voice in the US for domestic violence organisations. While the NCADV does not specifically claim that all of the above is 'caused by men', it does so implicitly by acknowledging only women and children as domestic violence victims, and ignoring men as victims.

Hence the implication to the reader may be that men, who are not recognised as victims, must be the 'cause'. On its website (www.ncadv.org), wherever and whenever the NCADV finds it is impossible to ignore male victimisation, it minimises or marginalises it. The website makes it clear that the mission and concern of the NCADV is only for the safety of 'women and children'.

The NCADV, it appears, may also act as the voice for the majority of our federal and local policy-makers. H.Res.590 (House Resolution 590, 110th Congress, 2009) is a resolution that purports to raise awareness of domestic violence in the US, and of its devastating effects on families and communities. The assumption should be that the 110th Congress is concerned about raising awareness of all victims. Apparently, the 110th Congress does not consider that men can be domestic violence victims. If you read House Resolution 590, you will discover the 110th Congress ignores male victimisation. Where the resolution does mention men, they are only presented as offenders. It is difficult to grasp how the 110th Congress intends to raise awareness about domestic violence when its members display an absolute and utter ignorance about the victimisation of men.

This deep-seated inherent ideological bias (see also www.theduluthmodel.org), that females are the primary victims and males the primary

offenders, may be the reason that the media, interveners, public policy makers and the general public have yet to become aware of the negative consequences of domestic violence against males (Fiebert, 2009). The US Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) (1994), is not supportive of the exploration of men's domestic violence victimisation. In fact, VAWA research funding and programmes often demand that male victimisation be ignored. It is argued by many researchers (see the Respecting Accuracy in Domestic Abuse Reporting (RADAR) website at www.mediaradar.org) that the VAWA has caused many feminists to replicate the very behaviour they railed against in the last century. The VAWA has created biased stereotyping and the VAWA has become the nexus of the exclusion of an entire group of people simply because of their gender.

The VAWA and feminist ideological research, by their very nature, create an implicit bias against men that fosters subjective, not objective, research. In the report *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence*, Tjaden & Thoennes (2000b) conclude:

'These findings [from the National Violence Against Women Survey] support the theory that violence perpetrated against women by intimates is often part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control.' (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b, piv)

However, examination of the Tjaden & Thoennes report reveals that they present no empirical evidence-based data that supports their conclusion. A thorough examination of the literature reveals that ideological researchers often reach subjective rather than objective conclusions, despite empirical data (in this particular instance, their own empirical evidence-based data) to the contrary (Straus & Scott, 2007). This lack of objectivity does not appear unique to Tjaden & Thoennes and may be due to firmly held feminist ideological beliefs that create a sympathetic and empathic bonding between the researchers and their subjects (Macionis, 1997).

The complexities of domestic violence

The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) website (www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm) notes:

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'Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound someone.'

Clearly, all the nationally recognised domestic violence agencies understand that domestic violence cannot be measured only through lethality or injurious physical assaults. In fact, most organisations recognise that psychological abuse can produce emotional victimisation that is far more damaging and longer lasting than a physical assault. The OVW website defines emotional abuse as: *'undermining an individual's sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem. This may include, but is not limited to constant criticism, diminishing one's abilities, name-calling, or damaging one's relationship with his or her children'* (emphasis added).

It is clear here that the OVW understands 'domestic violence' should not be limited to physical assaults. Furthermore, the data documents that far more people die from suicide than homicide (Karch *et al*, 2008). The majority of suicides involve male victims. Is it possible that domestic violence research, free of feminist ideology, will demonstrate that emotional abuse and suicides account for far more domestic violence-related deaths than homicides?

This question returns us to the MDVHR report, which reveals that in Utah the majority of the state's 65 domestic violence deaths in 2005 were suicides that did not occur in the context of a homicide (Lauby *et al*, 2006, p8). Domestic violence-related death by suicide is a road not travelled by many researchers. Most domestic violence suicides are explored only in the context of a homicide that is then followed by a suicide.

The National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website (www.cdc.gov) notes that the CDC is committed to preventing the violent deaths of children, women and men in the United States. It also notes that its prevention goal has been and continues to be *'hindered by fragmented and incomplete data collection'*

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008a). The National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) is researching, without any apparent gender bias or specific organisational agenda, the toll that violent death takes on individuals, families, and communities in the United States. The NVDRS section of the CDC website (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs) documents that violent deaths, including homicides and suicides, cost the United States more than \$52 billion in medical care and lost productivity every year. The 2008 CDC report *Surveillance for Violent Deaths – National Violent Death Reporting System, 16 States, 2005* (Karch *et al*, 2008) provides revealing data collected by the NVDRS. The report documents that approximately 30% of suicides are precipitated by intimate partner problems.

The NVDRS collects data about the violent deaths of all victims regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation. The NVDRS data is less fragmented and more complete than any previous data collection of violent deaths. This broad scope of data allows the NVDRS to explore the full scope and depth of the tragic impact these domestic violence-related deaths have on both females and males. While approximately twice as many females as males attempt suicide, the rate of completed suicide in the *Surveillance for Violent Deaths* report (Karch *et al*, 2008) is nearly four times greater for males than females. Studies report that many people who commit suicide suffer multiple risk factors, such as clinical depression, mental health disorders and a number of difficult and life altering stressors (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). The CDC website section on *Intimate Partner Violence Prevention Scientific Information: Risk and Protective Factors* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008a) documents that some of these same risk factors may contribute to the multiple causes of many domestic violence homicides.

In the *Surveillance for Violent Deaths* report (Karch *et al*, 2008), Table 9 reports that intimate partner problems (IPProb) precipitated 2,031 of the male and 439 of the female suicides. An IPProb is defined in the *National Violent Death Reporting System Coding Manual* as a problem with a current or former intimate partner that appears to have contributed to the suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008b, pp7–26; pp7–28). Some of the IPProbs are: divorce, break-up, argument (verbal abuse),

jealousy, conflict (perhaps physical and verbal) or discord (perhaps psychological or emotional).

In 2005, 32,637 suicides were reported (American Association of Suicidology, 2009). The *Surveillance for Violent Deaths* report (Karch *et al*, 2008) states that 30% of the suicides reported were IPProb related. Hence, it is possible that approximately 7,832 male and 1,958 female suicides were precipitated by intimate partner problems. These intimate partner suicides far exceed the number of intimate partner homicides. When this author presented the above data online, some readers responded that they wondered if many of these intimate partner problem deaths did not demonstrate a direct or indirect association with domestic *violence*. That question needed to be explored further.

However, it is important to remember that the Office on Violence Against Women website page headed 'About Domestic Violence' (www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm) acknowledges that the 'violence' in 'contemporary domestic violence' can include: '*constant criticism, diminishing one's abilities, name-calling, or damaging one's relationships with **his** or **her** children*' (emphasis added). There is general agreement that females and males are equally capable of exhibiting this form of violence (Fiebert, 2009; Kimmel, 2002; Straus, 1998). The NVDRS data appears to suggest that the 'conflict' and 'discord' found in the 'forced leaving' of intimate relationships (Frankel, 2009) may be far more lethally dangerous for men than for women.

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This again brings us to the MDVHR (Lauby *et al*, 2006), which in turn directs us to the Utah Department of Health (2006) study, *Domestic Violence Fatalities (2005)*, which reported that there were 65 domestic violence-related deaths in 2005. The UDH notes there were 44 suicides and 21 homicides. Six of the suicides were males who killed themselves after committing a homicide. The homicide victims were 10 males and 11 females. The suicide victims were 42 males and two females. This data is documented by the UDH Violence and Injury Prevention Program (VIPP). VIPP gets its information from the Utah Violent Death Reporting System (UTVDRS), which is a part of the NVDRS.

In the following year (2006) the Utah Domestic Violence Council (UDVC) did not report the majority of suicides. This is because the UDVC only reports domestic violence-related deaths that appear in public sources such as newspapers and the electronic media. The UDVC does acknowledge and report that the suicides that occur in the context and circumstances of domestic violence incidents are domestic violence-related deaths (Utah Domestic Violence Council, 2006).

The Utah Department of Health (2006) report *Domestic Violence Fatalities (2005)* defines the issue of domestic violence as follows:

'Domestic violence (DV) is defined as a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence. This includes violence between family members, roommates, and current or former partners. For this report, a suicide is considered domestic violence related if one of the circumstances surrounding the suicide involved violence or the threat of violence between intimate partners, family members, or roommates.'
(Utah Department of Health, 2006, p1)

Personal email correspondence with researchers at the Utah Department of Health, Violence and Injury Prevention Program (VIPP) reveals that the reason for the apparent dramatic differences in the number of domestic violence-related deaths as documented by the UDH and the UDVC are twofold: one is the definitions they use and the other is their source of information. The data by VIPP comes from the Utah Violent Deaths Reporting System (UTVDRS), which includes medical examiner and police reports. The UTVDRS data is a lengthy process that can take up to 18 months to complete. The UDVC reports only public media information at the end of each year. The VIPP researchers did clarify that suicides defined as domestic-*violence* related fatalities are reported for incidents only when there is actual violence or the threat of violence surrounding the incident. These domestic violence-related deaths do not include incidents where there was only a verbal argument or a separation.

The front page of *Utah Domestic Violence Related Deaths 2006* states: '*These troubling statistics document, in summary form, the*

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broad scope and tragic impact of domestic violence in Utah' (Utah Domestic Violence Council, 2006). What should be apparent to the UDVC is that exploring domestic violence-related deaths only in summary form provides a very limited examination of the problem. The authors of the MDVHR are correct to note in their introduction: *'The domestic violence homicides and suicides that are reported in the public print and electronic media represent just the tip of the iceberg regarding mortality and morbidity resulting from domestic violence'* (Lauby *et al*, p4). They are right. And the NVDRS may reveal more of that iceberg as more states join the effort. Each year the *Boston Globe's* 'In Memoriam' column reports the number of homicides resulting from domestic violence. In 2005, it reported that there were 14 of these domestic violence-related deaths in Massachusetts, eight women and six men, and asked how these deaths could have been prevented (*Boston Globe*, 2005).

A very stark demonstration of the validity of the MDVHR claim concerning suicides, is the fact that in 2005 the NVDRS documents that there were 14 female and 75 male intimate partner precipitated suicides in Massachusetts. The number of female suicides alone matches the total number of 2005 Massachusetts domestic violence homicides. If we continue to ignore these intimate partner precipitated deaths as domestic violence-related we will continue, as the MDVHR notes, to grossly underestimate the human tragedy suffered from domestic violence (Lauby *et al*, 2006).

The 2005 In Memoriam column (*Boston Globe*, 2005) also noted that Jane Doe (the lead agency for Massachusetts domestic violence interveners) and Harvard Law School fellow Diane Rosenfeld will issue annual reports and analyse long-term trends concerning domestic violence. It would be enlightening if Jane Doe and Rosenfeld also worked with the Massachusetts NVDRS members and included the intimate partner precipitated suicides from the NVDRS in their annual report. NVDRS data documents that approximately one in three domestic violence homicides is the result of a homicide/suicide, hence appropriate and inclusive interventions might save two lives.

It is the goal of the NVDRS to develop a national system that, in an unbiased and non-ideological process, can actually document *the broad scope and tragic impact of domestic*

violence. For now, the data is only reported from 17 states. Utah is the only state, to this author's knowledge, that has published a more complete picture of the tragic impact domestic violence has on men, women and children. Let us hope that before long, the NVDRS will set truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth free from contemporary, fragmented and incomplete and sometimes ideological research.

Perception and polarisation

Many of the national recognised domestic violence organisations and researchers who write about domestic violence from a feminist ideological perception argue that some men's rights groups are guilty of extracting only data from studies that present their perception that men and women are equally guilty of domestic violence. A review of the literature documents that this is true.

For decades, however, the vast majority of the national recognised domestic violence organisations have done the same. It is written ubiquitously that around the world, *one in three* women has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime (www.janedoe.org/safety.htm). An unbiased review of the literature documents that, when researchers use the same methodology in gathering data, the data will reveal that the same is approximately true for one in three men. It is now written ubiquitously that one in five female high school students report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner (www.janedoe.org/know.htm). An unbiased review of the literature documents that, when researchers use the same methodology in gathering dating violence data, the data will reveal the same is approximately true for male high school students.

If one reviews the literature and websites, it is a fact that the nationally recognised domestic violence organisations, similar to the NCADV, have for decades now been presenting only data that supports their perspective and their concerns. And when an organisation similar to the NCADV does so, while it may not be a complete presentation of the data, it is understandable why the NCADV does so. The NCADV website clearly documents that the NCADV is only concerned with women and children. It is far less understandable when our public policy makers do the same. I think

that most people believe that our public policy makers should be equally concerned about males and females. H.Res.590 (House Resolution 590, 110th Congress, US Government, 2009) and the Violence Against Women Act (1994) are just two of many examples of where our policy makers are placing their concerns about females before males.

In March 2009, President Obama announced the formation of a White House Council on Women and Girls (White House, 2009). As the father of three daughters and two sons, I would like to commend President Obama for establishing a council that is intended to provide a co-ordinated federal response to the challenges that my daughters will confront in this 21st century. However, as the father of three daughters and two sons, I find it impossible to understand why President Obama believes it is not necessary to establish a council that is intended to provide a co-ordinated federal response to the challenges that both my daughters and sons will confront in this 21st century. The White House Council on Women and Girls is being established to ensure that agencies across the federal government, not just a few offices, take into account the particular needs and concerns of women and girls. In this 21st century there remain particular needs and concerns of men and boys.

Our sons are being raised in a society where the government focuses on the victimisation of our daughters while ignoring or minimising the victimisation of our sons (see www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm). Our sons are growing up in a society where far more males than females are dropping out of high school (Green & Winters, 2006). Our sons are growing up in a society in which almost 60% of students entering college are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Our sons are growing up in a society where males serve longer prison sentences than females (Staley, 1999). Our sons are growing up in a society where women live longer than men (Blue, 2008). Our sons are growing up in a society, as the NVDRS data clearly documents, where far more males are taking their own life than females. And sadly this is only a partial list of our sons' particular needs and concerns that are not being addressed. Those of us who voted for President Obama did so for a variety of reasons; however, the most prominent reason was that we believed we were voting for change.

Perhaps President Obama might consider a White House Council on Men and Women and Boys and Girls, which would meet regularly to serve as a forum for all involved federal agencies to focus on helping our sons as well as our daughters.

Conclusion

I have provided a URL for almost every citation in this paper. I suggest that before the reader agrees or disagrees with any of the positions stated by this author, they should use the URLs to examine the empirical evidence-based data and then reach their own conclusion. Too often, it seems to this author, too many interveners, too many public policy-makers, and the media simply accept the beliefs of others as fact without examining the facts.

Perhaps neither contemporary duelling positions (men are more violent than women vs. men and women are equally responsible for domestic violence) in the academe or those working in the field will find solace in the NVDRS findings as these are gender neutral and the NVDRS provides data both for and against each position (Straus, 1998). *Homicide Trends in the United States* (Fox & Zawitz, 2007) and other online Bureau of Justice Statistics data clearly document that men commit more lethal and injurious violence than women. However, NVDRS data documents that the vast majority of lethality, both inside and outside the home, is directed at other men or themselves. Given the OVW definition of domestic *violence*, it becomes improbable to impossible to responsibly claim that females do not commit an equal amount of *domestic violence as defined by the OVW* (Arehart-Treichel, 2007; Fiebert, 2009; Straus, 1998; Straus & Scott, 2007; Whitaker *et al*, 2007; and the RADAR website at www.mediadar.org).

What has not been recognised until now, as the NVDRS data demonstrates, is that it appears that the majority of domestic violence-related deaths are suffered by males, *not* females. The question that now must be explored is how much of the female violence, as defined by the OVW, is responsible for, or at least a factor for, the high rate of domestic violence-related deaths suffered by males. Researchers Evan Stark and Anne Flitcraft have suggested that some women are driven to suicide because

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of power and control issues (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996, p107). Women request and are issued restraining orders far more often than men, and women initiate divorce or separation more often than men. Restraining orders and divorces are most often based on the perceptions of those involved rather than empirical evidence-based data (www.mediadar.org).

It is most often men who lose the children, the home, and perhaps their sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem along with being ordered to pay alimony and child support. All of the above are issues that include emotional and psychological life-altering stressors, that may depress some men and drive some to suicide because they now have lost everything they have worked for (Frankel, 2009). The NVDRS may have revealed that some of the least recognised wounds that are not physical may be the most lethal. And if divorce follows years of constant criticism of a man, the diminishing of his abilities and name-calling, followed by the issuance of a restraining order that often damages his relationship with his children, this behaviour might fit the OVW definition of 'abuse'. Most often, society views the divorce process as 'a person's right to choose' and rarely is that process viewed as 'abusive behaviour' (Frankel, 2009).

These findings join the ever-growing list of data that document that domestic violence-related fatalities are a problem for adult heterosexual women. However, the NCDRS reveals that domestic violence-related fatalities are not exclusively or primarily a problem for adult heterosexual women. Also, fatality reviews (see the National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative website at www.baylor.edu/ndvfri) and NVDRS data clearly document that the deaths inside and outside of the home, regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation, have far more complex and multifaceted causes than sexism and oppression. It was the MDVHR (Lauby *et al*, 2006) that led me to the Utah report (Utah Domestic Violence Council, 2006) and the CDC that led me to the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). The authors of the MDVHR clearly document the many multifaceted complexities, contexts and unreasoned or irrational circumstances and happenstances of some domestic violence homicides. However, it appears that the authors view domestic violence homicide through the lens of feminist ideology that dictates those

homicides occur because of sexism and the oppression of women by men, hence those distinctions the authors document seem to elude them.

Despite the data to the contrary, Lauby *et al* (2006) conclude that social norms, although their report does not specify or acknowledge what these social norms are, are the primary cause for these homicides. The authors further conclude that these homicides could be prevented if the media properly reported the homicides. This subjective conclusion lacks any evidence-based data in their report and probably rests on the dated mid-20th century hypothesis that violence against women is very different from violence in general and that violence against women is exclusively or primarily caused by sexism and the oppression of women.

The National Research Council report *Advancing the federal research agenda on violence against women* (Kruttschnitt *et al*, 2004) concludes:

'Finally, there is emerging and credible evidence that the general origins and behavioral patterns of various forms of violence, such as male violence against women and men and female violence against men and women, may be similar.' (Kruttschnitt *et al*, 2004, p 100)

Perhaps the NVDRS data will set some researchers, domestic violence interveners and policy-makers free from concluding that, as too many domestic violence websites suggest, they have already discovered the single correct answer to this enigma that continues to plague children, women and men.

Implications for policy-making

- If domestic violence interveners end minimising or ignoring male victimisation and female offending, more males might become involved in intervention efforts.
- Interveners, public policy-makers and the media should publish all information on victimisation and resources that are available, regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation.
- If parents and educators become more aware of female offending and male victimisation, perhaps interveners, public policy-makers and the media might provide both our daughters and our sons with proper domestic violence interventions.

- Once the differences *and the similarities* between all forms of violence become more evident, more inclusive and effective interventions for all forms of violence can be put in place.

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www.cdc.gov

Duluth Model
www.theduluthmodel.org
Massachusetts, Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence (Jane Doe Inc.) www.janedoe.org

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)
www.ncadv.org

National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative (NDVFRI)
www.baylor.edu/ndvfri

National Violent Death Reporting System
www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs

Office on Violence Against Women
www.ovw.usdoj.gov

Respecting Accuracy in Domestic Abuse Reporting (RADAR)
www.mediadarar.org

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