

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS A RESPONSE TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Initially, survey research was conducted to examine the economic impact on domestic violence within a two-county area in South Texas. Surveys were distributed to the police departments in these areas to obtain this information. Once the data were collected, there was evidence that the downturn in the economy was having an effect on family violence. Physical threat of harm was identified as the typical type of violence, the abuser was most frequently male, and the victim female. Most of the victims came from a low socio-economic status, with little, if any resources. Recommendations from this study included the need for increased services for family violence, in addition to education about prevention. Contact was made with a local non-profit organization that provides shelter and services to victims of domestic violence. An inquiry was made regarding the availability of services to the victims of family violence, and also the need for additional services. Specific needs were identified by the agency, and a Civic Engagement grant was obtained through the university. A project was set up as a module in the counseling techniques class that provided hands on experience, in keeping with research-based information about the design and utilization of a therapeutic environment. The students carried out the work at the agency to create a space that allowed for group counseling, as well as children's play/play therapy area, and storage.*

*Keywords: Family Violence, Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Community Service, Service Learning, Student Involvement*

### INTRODUCTION

The evolution of this project began with one student's research paper which became the inspiration for a community service project partnering the university and the surrounding community which culminated in a service learning module for a new generation of students in the counseling program. The genesis of the first of several service learning projects was the investigation by the original researcher concerning local police officers' experience with domestic violence and how it might be impacted by a downturn in the economy. The results found in that paper were used as the foundation for a grant proposal through the university to help meet needs in the community identified by the original research. The grant provided funds to develop a multipurpose space at a local women's shelter. The project was developed as a learning module for the counseling techniques class and

the students partnered with the agency to complete the project. Further, the service learning project was expanded the following year to design children's areas at two local branches of Coastal Plains Community Mental Health/Mental Retardation Center and again part of the counseling techniques class. The third year, the same grant funded an Alzheimer's symposium, offered free of charge to the local community and partnered the wellness class and the Alzheimer's Association. All of the benefits to the community and students from all the projects to date, came to fruition from the seed of the original research paper.

The original research paper highlighted the social problems presented by family violence and posited that stressors resulting from economic problems might have an impact on the incidents of family violence. Family violence is a persistent problem in society and does not

appear to be decreasing over time. With the recent downturn the economy and the resulting added stress that may accompany this situation, the manifestations of stress may be transferred to the most convenient target, those in the household. Family violence is largely hidden problem mostly because of shame, fear, myths, and misconceptions held by the abuser, as well as the victim (Nicolson & Wilson, 2004). Violence is something that impacts millions of American's annually, (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Victims of this type of violence are particularly vulnerable since the abuser is a member of the household. There are emergency shelters available, but they are not in every city (Corcoran & Allen, 2005).

With the failing economy, there have been added stressors to people around the United States, including issues such as bank failures, health care concerns, fewer home and car sales and rising unemployment. All of the previously mentioned problems create additional stress for everyone, especially families. Families experience additional stress due to the added responsibility of caring for their children. The negative impact of a violent home persists even after the children are adults; according to Hill, et al (2009), children who grow up with a history of abuse or violence have a harder time finding a job, or keeping a job. The original study was conducted to examine the possible correlation between the downturn in the economy and the rise in family violence, and to investigate strategies intended to prevent such violence. The information gathered by the study was intended to provide insight about abuse and how it can be prevented for present, as well as future generations.

### Literature Review

Family violence is a particularly serious public health and social problem (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2007). Domestic or family violence has had an extensive history with differing points of view. In the Pilgrim society of the 1600's, women could be abused by their husbands, and children could be abused by their parents, but rarely was any abuser prosecuted (Karmen, 2001). Any abuse that did not leave permanent damage was tolerated, and likely to be considered "discipline." Even though the reform

movement of the 1800's saw the establishment of the numerous Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the home, the wife and the children were considered property of the husband, and he could discipline them as he saw fit (Karmen, 2001). Until the 1970's, acts of domestic and family violence were considered the family's private business, and nothing was done about it (Balenovich, Grossi & Hughes, 2008). However, with the passage of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, the federal government focused attention on women who had been the victim of intimate relationship violence, and billions of dollars have been allocated to all states for the prevention of family violence (Cho & Wilke, 2005).

Violence and abuse occurs to people, regardless of social status, education, or income level. Violence can include acts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Nicolson & Wilson, 2004), and domestic violence can lead to death of the adult partner, as well as the children. Approximately 9 out of 10 of the abusers who murdered their partners were male (Durose, et al, 2005a). Law enforcement officers surveyed reported 15% to 40% of their calls were to domestic or family violence calls (Corcoran & Allen, 2005), and were often themselves harmed while responding to such calls.

In the 1970's, shelters began to address the needs of battered women (Karmen, 2001). The first shelter or safe house was set up in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1977, the first safe house in Texas was established in Austin and since that time, 76 have been developed around the state (Anderson, 2005). These shelters provide a variety of services such as, temporary shelter from the abuser, emergency clothing, transportation, self-help groups that can provide emotional support, counseling, as well as help with educational and legal matters. In the 1980's, there were more than 1,200 safe houses around the nation (Karmen, 2001).

In recent years, there has been a downturn in the economy. According to George (2009), over 7 million jobs in the United States are lost each year due to layoffs, companies having to down-size, or being fired for another reason. Some will keep their jobs but lose salary due to a

demotion or reduction in hours (George, 2009). As a result, pressure to provide for their children in a difficult economic climate adds to normal parental stressors, and can affect both men and women alike. No matter what the ethnicity, most Americans suffer from economic stress (Park, Coltrane, Duffy, Buriel, Dennis, Powers, French, and Widaman, 2004). Couples that are affected by financial strain are more likely to be affected by violence in their relationship, according to Benson and Fox (2004).

Research conducted by Glass, Perrin, Hanson, Mankowski, Bloom, and Campbell (2009) explored patterns of abusive partner's behaviors among known risk factors for intimate partner femicide. They conducted interviews with Latina and non-Latina survivors of recent intimate partner violence. The results demonstrated that there were differences between the two groups in the types of abusive behaviors used as control measures in the relationships. However, the Latina and the non-Latina survivors were both in extreme danger of lethal behavior. This research and project were conducted in a county where 71.4% of the population was Hispanic/Latina, according to the national census (US census Bureau, 2010). Sadly, the results found in the literature were demonstrated in the local community by the deaths of two young women, which occurred as a result of intimate partner violence, as reported in a statewide assessment of the prevalence of intimate partner violence (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2010). The first victim, a 22 year old female died when she was beaten with a sledgehammer by her boyfriend. The second victim, a 32 year old Hispanic/Latina female died as a result of family violence, when she was shot with a high-caliber rifle.

## Methodology

For this non-experimental, quantitative study, the original student researcher developed a survey instrument, along with her advisor, that was distributed to law enforcement officers in two police departments in two separate counties of South Texas. The paper and pencil survey was comprised of 12 questions, including those seeking specific demographic information and those seeking the participants' perceptions and opinions about the economy and domestic violence. The survey instrument

gathered data concerning utilizing a Lickert scale to rank the following: the number of calls per week that involved family or domestic violence, the use and type of weapons, the type of abuse, gender of both the abuser and victim, whether the officer had sustained any injury, the socioeconomic status of those involved, the employment status of those involved, and whether or not the law enforcement officer felt that the downturn in the economy had an influence on family or domestic violence.

A total of 125 surveys were distributed between the two police departments along with the informed consent form and the instructions for returning the instrument to the researcher in a sealed envelope. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the research questions using a quantitative design. Martin (2004) defined a quantitative design, "as one in which events can be quantified so that the data are expressed as numbers" (p. 5). Attention was paid to keeping the survey as brief as possible, thus there was only a total of 12 questions.

The first question on the survey asked, "How many family or domestic violence cases do you report to a week?" The officers surveyed were asked to choose between three possible options: "0 to 5," "6 to 10," or "11 or more." Of the total responses, 29 or approximately 54% reported answering "0-5" family or domestic violence calls, 19 or approximately 35% reported answering "6-10" such calls, and finally 6 or about 1% reported responding to 11 or more family or domestic violence calls. Figure 1 illustrates how many calls per week officers responded to family violence calls.

Questions two and three inquired about the use of weapons. The officers surveyed responded to weapons used, only one officer indicated that a gun was used, five of the officers indicated that a knife was used 48 officers reported that blunt object was the used in the cases. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the types of weapons used.

Question four asked the officers to indicate what types of abuse they had encountered. The responses of the officers surveyed indicated that physical abuse was

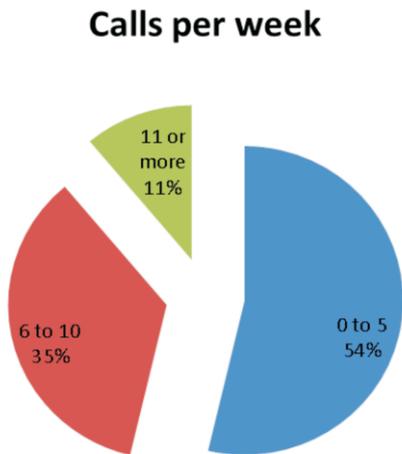


Figure 1. Calls Per week

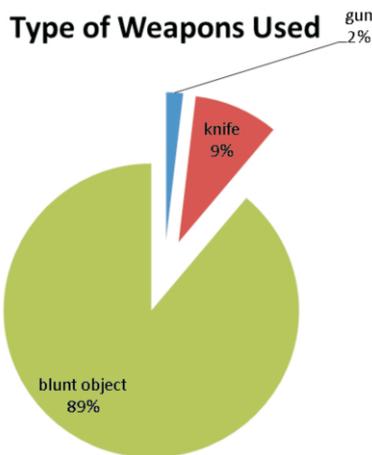


Figure 2. Types of weapon used

involved, 100% of the time. None of the officers surveyed indicated that emotional abuse was the type of abuse involved in their cases, nor did any indicate psychological abuse was involved. Figure 3 illustrates the types of abuse encountered by the officers when they respond to domestic violence calls.

When asked about the gender of the abusers and victims in questions five and six, approximately 96% of the officers responded that the victim was most often a woman; the other 4% said the victim was most often a child. None said the victim was most often the victim was a man. Further, 100% of the officers indicated that the abuser was male. No officers reported that the abuser was most often either female or a child. Figure 4 shows these results.

Question seven asked the officers if they had ever been

injured while responding to a domestic violence call. Of the total responses, approximately 38% said that they had been injured while responding to a domestic violence call.

Questions eight through eleven asked officers about the socioeconomic status and the employment status of the individuals involved in the domestic violence cases to which they respond as well as their opinion as to whether or not economic recession is a factor in their domestic violence cases. All of these questions had simple "yes or no" responses. Table 1, shows the results of these questions.

When asked if most of the families involved in the domestic violence cases to which they respond were of low socioe-conomic status, about 87% of the officers said "yes" and about 13% said "no." When asked if the abusers in their cases were unemployed, 24% of the officers answered with "yes" and 76% answered "no." The officers were also asked if the victims in their cases were

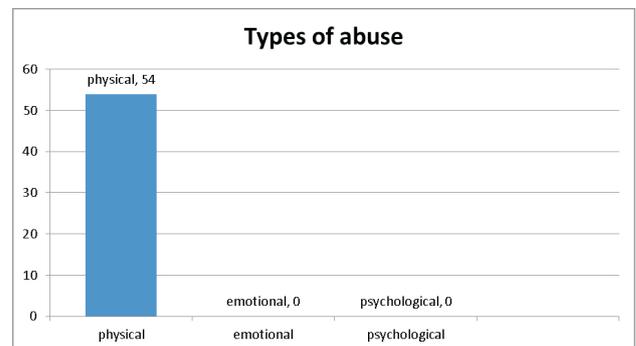


Figure 3. Type of abuse encountered

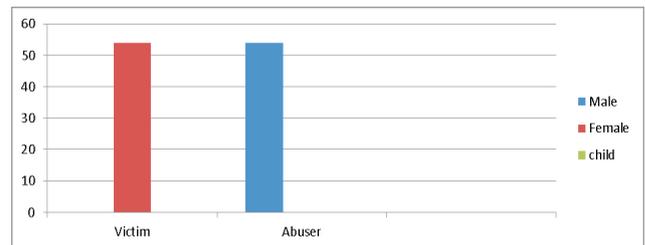


Figure 4. Gender of the abusers

Questions	Yes	No
Low economic status	47	7
Abuser unemployed	13	41
Victim unemployed	8	46
Recession an influence	28	26

Table 1. Socioeconomic and Employment Status

unemployed and approximately 15% said that "yes" the victims were unemployed while about 85% said that "no" the victims were not unemployed. Question 11 asked, "Do you think that the recession has an influence on family or domestic violence?" The answers given by the officers surveyed to this question were fairly evenly split. Of the 54 total responses, 28 or about 52% of the officers said that "yes," they think that the recession has an influence on and the remaining 26 or 48% indicated that they do not think that the recession is an influence.

## Conclusion

In the summary of the original study, the results showed that 52% of the officers responding to the survey were of the opinion that the downturn in the economy had an influence on family or domestic violence. In addition, 24% reported the abuser was unemployed and 15% reported that the victim was unemployed. Since these percentages were significantly higher than employment rates published by the National Conference of State Legislators, it seemed that the officers' opinions demonstrated that the economy was a factor in the domestic violence cases they saw, since the unemployment rate for both victims and abusers they saw is disproportional to the national average.

The results of the study suggested that the economy seemed to have a negative impact on domestic and family violence, and that it was most frequently manifested in physical violence. Also, the victims were most frequently female, and the abusers were most often male. Additionally, the victims were from a low socio-economic population, with limited, or any resources.

As a result of the data gathered for this study and presented with an opportunity to apply for grant funding, the faculty of the Counseling and Guidance Program at the South Texas university where the research was conducted developed a grant proposal for a Civil Engagement Project, which was funded.

As stated by Slavkin (2007), this type of service-learning project connects the classrooms and curriculum to community needs, and requires students to learn from a service-based activity. This project was developed into a

module for one of the counseling courses. It required the students to conduct research pertaining to the appropriate design and use of space for group counseling, in addition to a children's play therapy area and a storage area for personal needs items that are donated by the community and utilized by the clients. Since service-learning provides an opportunity for the students to gain hands-on experience in a real-world environment, this project afforded the students a glimpse into the operation of a non-profit organization, as well as the services provided by a shelter for victims of domestic and family violence. Since service-learning requires students to become active members in their community (Slavkin, 2007), this project made clear the impact of domestic and family violence on the victims as well as the community. In turn, this learning module made a positive impact on a valuable community agency. It began with student research, and was put into practice in an area of need in the community and came full circle with real world experience and learning for another group of students. This project was not just a win/win situation. It was a win/win/win.

## Recommendations

Results of this study perhaps could encourage counselor educators to include experiential learning in the form of civic engagement projects to engender an understanding of service availability in their community, the mechanics of the service provision, and an understanding of the needs of the clients that are served.

Future research might include community needs assessments to support similar projects, and data collection from the students involved to demonstrate intended learning objectives.

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