



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

New Research

Domestic violence is increasingly recognised by the media as a serious social problem. However, it remains an area in which there is little detailed research.

The true extent of domestic violence is still agreed to be an unknown quantity (Smith, 1989), many commentators considering it to have one of the highest dark figures of any crime. Furthermore, the distribution of such violence by subgroup within the population is, at present, completely speculative and hypotheses generated with respect to its class based nature or its uniform distribution throughout the population are incapable of being substantiated.

Figures derived from agencies and women's refuges are inevitably selective, representative of just the 'tip of the iceberg'. Victimization surveys, both national and local, are said to be more likely to underestimate domestic violence and sexual offences than all other forms of crime (Crawford et. al, 1990). Levels of non-reporting are considerable because of fears of reprisals (the perpetrator may well be near to the interview situation), embarrassment, psychological blocking etc. (Walklate, 1989). It is unlikely, after all, that a victim will choose to reveal her experiences to a disinterested interviewer standing on the doorstep with a clipboard. Domestic violence, in short, is often unknown to anyone outside the home.

In response to the need for better information we are conducting a large research project on domestic violence in the Finsbury Park area of London, funded by the Department of the Environment. To date, this has involved interviewing a sample of 1,000 (580 women and 420 men) and generated a response rate of 74% which is comparable to victimisation survey rates of other less problematic crimes. Although still in progress, our work suggests that many of the problems in researching this difficult area can be overcome. The use of trained, sympathetic interviewers; the construction of more carefully worded questionnaires have resulted in greatly enhanced levels of reporting.

The project is in three stages. The first stage employed a general questionnaire on avoidance behaviour, victimisation and policing. This questionnaire included a separate section for men which was designed to generate data on the attitudes of men to domestic violence. This involved the use of

vignettes detailing where, in a 'conflict' situation, they would be likely to be aggressive. This section was supplemented by male self-report questions on actual violence.

It cannot be over-stressed that domestic violence obviously involves men and women, consequently the conventional focus on women alone is unable to fully tackle the causal problem of why men assault women (Smith, 1989).

This stage of the project additionally sought to produce data on relationships where domestic violence does *not* occur; the analysis of the differences between non-violent and violent men is essential in the development of an aetiology.

The second stage of the project involved women respondents only. This made use of a supplementary self-complete questionnaire. At the end of the interview for the first stage, the

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interviewer was instructed to hand out the questionnaire with a stamped addressed envelope. The personal contact made in the formal interview situation had previously been found to motivate the respondent to complete and return the questionnaire, thus boosting response rates. Pilot work had shown that this method generates a better and more accurate response than that of the traditional victimisation survey. This is likely to be because this method assures the respondent of her anonymity. Given the intrinsically private nature of domestic violence, it is easier for the respondent to record her experiences on paper than relate them verbally to a stranger standing on the doorstep. Postal surveys also allow time for the respondent to reflect on questions which results in more considered, precise answers. This section included questions on: the different forms of domestic violence, their incidence and prevalence; the use of the various agencies by victims and their assessment of effectiveness. In addition to completing the questionnaire, many of the women have written detailed accounts of their experiences.

The third stage of the project which is still in progress, consists of in-depth interviews with women randomly chosen from the survey. This has been included in response to the widespread recognition of the importance of a 'triangulation' of method (Jupp, 1989). That is, the



collection of both qualitative and quantitative data are essential if we are to accurately portray the experience of domestic violence.

Qualitative data are necessary to fully interpret survey data and, likewise, quantitative data are necessary to fully interpret the typicality or otherwise of case studies. This stage will provide information on the individual impact of domestic violence, contribute to the understanding of the longitudinal development of domestic violence and the 'trigger' points within the career of a relationship. The interviews, together with the survey data, will facilitate the development of a typology of domestic violence and enable us to explore the indications of clinical research that such violence is not a unitary phenomenon.

Qualitative interviews, further, tackle the problem of 'incessant' violence, that is, when violence occurs with a regularity that is simply not quantifiable in terms of the discrete, 'event orientation' implicit in victimisation surveys.

The first report of this study is currently being prepared. It should, we hope, begin to clarify many previously unanswered questions relating to domestic violence and have important implications for policy, particularly with respect to the needs of different groups of women and the patterning of potential demand on agencies.

References

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Jayne Mooney is Lecturer and Research Fellow at the Centre for Criminology at Middlesex University.