



SPECIAL REPORT

Domestic Violence Programs Are Shortchanging Women

In 1994 the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed into law. The primary focus of the law is to strengthen the criminal justice system's response to intimate partner violence (IPV) by means of enhanced use of restraining orders, mandated arrest policies, aggressive prosecution measures, and training of criminal justice personnel.

But have these programs reduced levels of partner abuse? Have they paid heed to the needs and wishes of abused women? Have they supported the families and communities in which women live? Have they contributed to the troubling problem of over-criminalization? In short, has the federal commitment to thwart domestic violence delivered on its promises to women?

To answer these questions, we first need to understand the dynamics of partner aggression. Research shows men are more likely than women to be victims of partner violence.¹ For example, the CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reports the following:²

- Each year, 4.2 million men and 3.5 million women experience some type of physical violence at the hands of their partners.
- For severe acts of violence, victimization rates were slightly higher among males: Male victims: 2.0%, Female victims: 1.9%

In more than half of all cases, the aggression is bi-directional with no clear-cut initiator, based on population-based survey samples.³ About two-thirds of these cases are minor (e.g., shoving, throwing a pillow), while the remaining one-third involve severe incidents (e.g., hitting with a fist or attacking with a weapon).⁴

An estimated 1,500 domestic violence laws have been enacted at the state level that revamped the legal framework for addressing intimate partner violence (IPV).⁵ These laws:

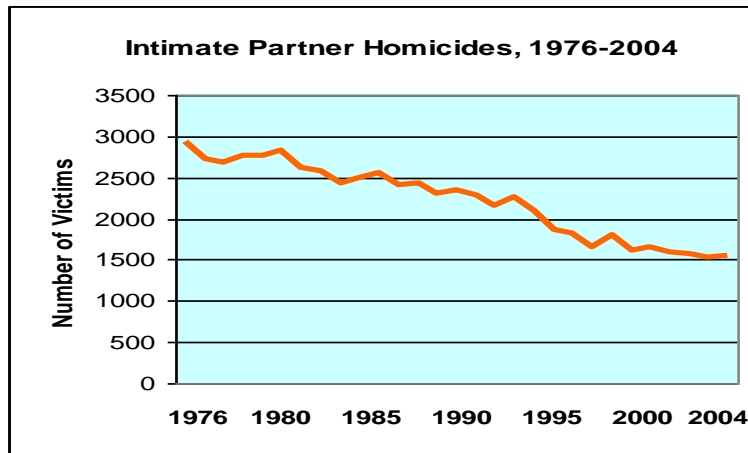
- Allow for the easy availability of domestic restraining orders
- Encourage or mandate arrest
- Allow jurisdictions to adopt aggressive prosecution policies
- Provide for a broad range of benefits to abuse victims

Nearly three decades after passage of VAWA, public awareness of the problem has been raised and many abused women are receiving services. But many domestic violence policies lack evidence of effectiveness and appear to be based on a "power and control" ideology. These concerns are examined in the following 10 sections.

1. No Proof of Effectiveness

Beginning in the 1970s, our society began to see a downward trend in all forms of violent crime. Changes in intimate partner homicides have followed this same course.

In 1976, 2,944 men and women were victims of intimate partner homicide. By 1994, the year that VAWA was enacted into law, that number had fallen to 2,087 persons—a 29% drop.⁶



So fatal partner crime began to fall long before VAWA had been passed. One analyst explains, “the downward trend in domestic violence is just part of a larger, society-wide drop in all violent crime. Indeed, incidents of violent crime generally dropped from about 80 per 100,000 people in 1993 to about 21 in 2010. That’s a decrease of almost 74 percent.”⁷

Hence, there is no evidence that VAWA-funded programs have contributed to or accelerated the decline in intimate partner violence. And as discussed below, some VAWA policies may be escalating partner aggression, resulting in higher homicide rates.

VAWA programs “have never undergone scientifically-rigorous evaluations to ensure they are achieving their intended results.”—Independent Women’s Forum⁸

“We have no evidence to date that VAWA has led to a decrease in the overall levels of violence against women.” —Angela Moore Parmley, PhD, U.S. Department of Justice⁹

2. Rigid Arrest and Prosecution Policies Place Victims at Greater Risk

Studies reveal get-tough arrest and prosecution measures may place victims of intimate partner violence at greater risk:

Mandatory Arrest: A Harvard University study analyzed the impact of mandatory arrest laws in 15 states. The study concludes: “Intimate partner homicides increased by about 60% in states with mandatory arrest laws.”¹⁰ This outcome may be understood in light of another study which found mandatory arrest policies often discourage women from requesting police assistance.¹¹

Prosecution of Restraining Order Violations: Many jurisdictions have enacted policies that define a restraining order violation as a criminal offense. One Department of Justice-funded project studied the effectiveness of such prosecution policies and concluded, “Increases in the willingness of prosecutors’ offices to take cases of protection order violation were associated with *increases in the homicide* of white married intimates, black unmarried intimates, and white unmarried females”¹² (emphasis added).

In these two studies, mandatory arrests and prosecutions generally led to more homicides. No studies could be located that showed mandatory arrests and prosecutions decrease fatal outcomes.

In 2020, 46 state-level domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions signed a statement calling for major changes to domestic violence laws.¹³ Titled “Moment of Truth,” the statement notes, “We have invested significantly in the criminal legal system, despite knowing that the vast majority of survivors choose not to engage with it, and that those who do are often re-traumatized by it.” The paper expresses regret for the movement’s long-standing focus on “increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the primary solution to gender-based violence,” and calls for a greater focus on restorative justice.

3. Mandatory Prosecution Ignores Women’s Wishes

A majority of IPV cases involves disputes in which the conflict is a minor, mutual, and/or a one-time occurrence. Women may believe these situations are better handled through counseling rather than legal intervention. In a large majority of cases—80% according to one analysis¹⁴—women who request police assistance later recant or refuse to pursue the charges.

Mandatory, “no-drop” prosecution is controversial because if the woman refuses to testify, the prosecutor may charge her with obstruction of justice and threaten to take away the children. In one case, the county prosecutor put a woman in jail for 8 days after she refused to testify. She later won a \$125,000 settlement for false imprisonment.¹⁵

There is no evidence that mandatory prosecution is effective in curbing future IPV. One study of prosecution policies found that only one factor reduced abuser recidivism rates—allowing the victim to select whether and how aggressively the prosecutor would pursue the case.¹⁶ By their nature, no-drop prosecution policies remove the ability of abused women to make that choice.

And no-drop prosecution may deter women from seeking police help in the event of future violence.¹⁷

“Mandatory policies turn professionals away from women in abusive relationships by focusing so exclusively on arrest and prosecution and ignoring the opportunity, through human contact, to nurture a relationship with the victims.” -- Linda Mills, New York University¹⁸

4. Lulled into a False Sense of Security

Vulnerable women are led to believe that abuse-reduction policies and programs are there to help them. Yet there is considerable doubt about the effectiveness of these programs.

Treatment: Offenders are often ordered to undergo anger-management programs based on the Duluth model. But psychologist Donald Dutton, PhD notes, “Research shows that Duluth-oriented treatments are absolutely ineffective, and have no discernible impact on rates of recidivism.”¹⁹ The National Research Council explains that these programs lack effectiveness because they are “driven by ideology and stakeholder interests rather than by plausible theories and scientific evidence of cause.”²⁰

Restraining Orders: Restraining orders do not appear to be effective in deterring subsequent physical violence. One study concluded that restraining orders were flatly “ineffective in stopping physical violence.”²¹ A second report similarly concluded that “having a permanent order did not appear to deter most types of abuse.”²²

Criminal justice interventions that lack proof of effectiveness may in the end, “lull women into a false sense of security.”²³

5. Aggressive Criminal Justice Measures Ensnare Women

The Violence Against Women Act funds states to enact get-tough laws that promote the issuance of restraining orders, promote arrest, and facilitate prosecution efforts. But these policies may be going too far.

Restraining Orders: State laws have been broadened to the point that a broad range of non-violent actions are now defined as “violence.”²⁴ Each year, 2-3 million temporary restraining orders are issued—15% of them against women, with many of them for arguably trivial incidents:

Arrest: Thirty states have enacted laws that promote or mandate arrest for domestic violence.²⁵ As a result, the number of female offenders in domestic violence arrests began to rise. In California, the number of women arrested soared by 446% as a result of such policies.²⁶

Prosecution: In Colorado, a “Fast Track” prosecution system put accused persons in jail, charged them with third-degree assault, and then offered a plea bargain involving a lesser charge. In exchange, the defendant agreed to not seek legal representation—an apparent violation of due process protections. One woman who went through the system remarked, “It ain’t about justice, that’s for sure.”²⁷

“Mandatory arrest policies have been widely criticized, in part because they have led to an increase in dual arrests, or the arrest of both partners during incidents of IPV.” – Jill Messing, Arizona State University²⁸

6. Heavy Caseloads Make It Harder for Victims to Get Help

Broad definitions of domestic abuse have had the effect of bringing minor cases under the purview of the criminal justice system. One National Institute of Justice report questioned the value of mandatory arrest laws, saying that “arrests for all suspects may unnecessarily take a community’s resources away from identifying and responding to the worst offenders and victims most at risk.”²⁹

Regarding restraining orders, half of all orders in one state do not include any allegation of physical abuse.³⁰ Commenting on the improbable course of this case, one commentator argued the “abuse of temporary restraining orders endangers real victims.”³¹

As a result, court dockets are becoming filled with minor cases of intimate partner aggression, diverting scarce resources from victims of serious crime.

Judge Rucker Smith, of Sumter County, Georgia, was assaulted by his ex-girlfriend. Even though she had instigated the incident and he did not retaliate, he was charged with battery. A jury later acquitted Smith of all charges. The judge subsequently recounted, “For someone to falsely accuse another out of anger and vengeance silences the voices of the many real victims.”³²

7. Female Abusers Can’t Get the Assistance They Need

Abuse-prone women need help before conflict escalates to a level of overt violence. Violence initiated by a woman increases the chances of retaliatory aggression,³³ making female-perpetrated abuse an important risk factor for subsequent female victimization. Dr. Sandra Stith has called this “a dramatically more important factor than anything else.”³⁴

But when abusive women seek help from VAWA-funded agencies, their request for treatment may be dismissed with comments such as, “He must have provoked you.”

Researcher Susan Steinmetz tells of receiving letters from violent women who recognized that they needed help, but were “turned away or being offered no help when they called a crisis line or shelter.”³⁵ As attorney Linda Kelly puts it, “Today’s treatment denies the possibility that women can be violent.”³⁶

8. Abuse Shelters Lack a Therapeutic Focus

Abuse shelters are a mainstay of treatment services for domestic violence victims. But evidence supporting the effectiveness of these shelters is not persuasive. Whether the measure is recurrence of the violence, long-term separation of the abuser and victim, or victim satisfaction, the results have been found to be equivocal.³⁷

The lack of demonstrated success may be the by-product of a misplaced focus. One study found that half of the surveyed shelters stressed feminist political activism, rather than providing residents with practical solutions to daily problems.³⁸

In Massachusetts, a mother attending a group for abused women discovered the group was run by volunteers with no professional qualifications. She later claimed the clients were coerced by use of “threats, intimidation, and fear of losing their children.”³⁹

Marilyn Hooks, 25, and Milaus Almore, 8 weeks pregnant, were residents in the SafeSpace shelter in Stuart, Florida. On October 31, 2007, the women fell into an argument. Hooks pulled out a knife and fatally stabbed Almore. Hooks was later charged with second-degree murder.

*Before the incident, Hooks had made death threats to a staff member and resident, but the shelter manager ignored staff recommendations to evict the woman. The manager was later terminated from her position.*⁴⁰

9. Children Removed from Their Homes

In many states, the definition of child abuse has been expanded so merely *observing* partner aggression is deemed to constitute child abuse. In practice, an accusation of partner aggression means the non-abusing parent also becomes suspected of child abuse. This may become the basis for removing the child from the family home.

In one case, a shelter organized meetings for abused women and promised their statements would be kept confidential. In spite of these assurances, one woman’s comments were passed along to the state child abuse agency. Shortly afterwards, the agency ordered the woman’s daughter be removed from the home, accusing the mother of neglectfully allowing the girl to be exposed to domestic violence. The daughter, who had never suffered any physical abuse, was returned home 13 months later.⁴¹

In addition, when a restraining order is issued, it forbids contact not only between the alleged offender and the victim, but also between the alleged abuser and the *children*. This restriction extends to the couple’s parents and extended family members as well. As a result, grandparents may be prohibited from seeing their own grandchildren.

*“The impact of violent state intervention in cases of domestic violence is traumatizing, particularly when children are isolated in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by people who don’t speak their native language or don’t come from the traditions of the children that are placed in state care.” -- Margarita Guzman, Violence Intervention Program, Inc.*⁴²

10. Family Dissolution

According to the Department of Justice, only 2% of partner aggression incidents involve currently married couples who live together,⁴³ suggesting that the safest place for women is in the intact family. In cases of minor or one-time aggression, reconciliation is often preferable over marital dissolution. But no-contact restraining orders preclude persons from receiving couples' counseling.

Harvard law professor Jeannie Suk argues that restraining orders amount to “state-imposed *de facto* divorce” in which the mere presence of the accused offender in the family home becomes a proxy for the crime of domestic violence. As a result, the government “initiates and dictates the end of the intimate relationship as a solution to DV.” Suk wonders whether such orders violate persons' fundamental right to marry.⁴⁴

Thus, only the allegation of domestic violence can lead to family break-up.⁴⁵ As a result, the child often loses regular contact with his or her non-custodial parent. Children who grow up in a one-parent family are at greater risk of child abuse, and fare worse on a broad range of indicators of academic, emotional, and social well-being.⁴⁶

“Power and Control” Ideology

Gender ideology posits that intimate partner violence is an outgrowth of patriarchy, and that the male need for “power and control” is the root cause of partner aggression.⁴⁷ This formulation cannot account for the well-documented fact that over half of all partner abuse is female-initiated, and abuse rates among lesbian couples are far higher than among those in heterosexual relationships.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, this ideological framework has been highly influential in shaping domestic violence laws, policies, and programs across the nation. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Violence Against Women has defined “domestic violence” as: “a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain *power and control* over another intimate partner.” [emphasis added]⁴⁹

The reliance on “power and control” ideology has given rise to a rigid criminal justice system that, ironically, has the effect of disempowering women. This system has contributed to the problem of over-criminalization. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 109,300 persons, representing 15.5% of all convicted violent offenders in federal, state and local correctional facilities have committed a crime against someone in their family.

Women's groups from the full range of political persuasions have expressed similar criticisms:

- *Concerned Women for America*: VAWA “is, in large part, a rigid series of ineffective law enforcement programs.”⁵⁰

- *Everyday Feminism*: “The current system isn’t working. Retributive justice is more oriented towards punishment with minimal emphasis on reparations for victims, survivors, and communities impacted by an offender. And in the US, the court system typically emphasizes jails and prisons as being effective consequences for perpetrators of crime.”⁵¹
- *Independent Women’s Forum*: VAWA “overlooks many of the proven causes of violence (such as substance abuse), and has been a source of waste, fraud, and abuse of taxpayer resources.”⁵²
- *Ms. Foundation for Women*: “Unfortunately, when state power has been invited into, or forced into, the lives of individuals, it often takes over.”⁵³

This Special Report documents how the Violence Against Women Act, and the state-level laws it has engendered:

- Are ineffective in reducing abuse
- Promote arrest and prosecution policies that place women at greater risk
- Often ignore the wishes of abused women
- May lull women into a false sense of security
- Ensnare women in a rigid criminal justice bureaucracy
- Make it more difficult for real victims to get help
- Shortchange the needs of female aggressors
- Abuse shelters lack a therapeutic focus, and
- Can lead to the removal of children from their homes

Scientific research, expert recommendations, and the collective experiences of millions of women all point to a singular conclusion: Our nation’s domestic violence system, conceived with high hopes and the best of intentions, is desperately in need of reform.

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