ESCALATION AND DESISTANCE OF WIFE ASSAULT IN MARRIAGE*

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This article examines two widely held beliefs concerning the nature of "careers" of wife assault. Most researchers and members of the public believe that assaultive behavior in marriage, once begun, tends to continue for the life of the marriage. It is also commonly believed that minor violence (e.g., slapping, shoving, throwing things at a spouse) is unrelated to severe assaults (e.g., punching, kicking, using a weapon). These beliefs are based on the most severe cases of wife battering, as described by the media and by women in shelters. Despite these beliefs, we suggest that wife assault is similar to other forms of deviance and crime, in that desistance is common and engaging in minor forms of deviance is a risk factor for engaging in major forms of deviance and crime. The article reports a study using data on a sample of 380 married respondents who reported some violence in their marriage in 1985 and were reinterviewed in 1986. The findings indicate that most marital violence is transient, but even minor violence by a wife poses a risk of escalation to more dangerous assaults by a husband. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Over half of American couples experience one or more incidents of assault between the partners during the course of a marriage (Straus et al., 1980:5-36). Little importance is typically attached to this statistic because there

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are implicit norms tolerating a certain amount of violence in families (Straus, 1976). The relevance of this statistic for criminology also tends to be minimized because most of the incidents are simple assaults, such as slapping, shoving, or throwing something at a spouse, rather than aggravated assaults. Moreover, in any single year most couples do not experience violence at any level. For the sample described in this article, the 1985 assault rate was 16%. It has been argued that rates of this magnitude indicate a relatively insignificant incidence of assault (Scanzoni, 1978). There are grounds, however, for regarding this level of minor violence as an important social problem and as central to understanding severely assaultive behavior.

First, over a third of these incidents involve severe assaults, such as punching, kicking, and attacks with objects or weapons (Straus and Gelles, 1988).

Second, the true annual incidence rate is probably much greater than 16% because it is almost certain that there was underreporting. Moreover, when an assault occurred, it was typically part of a repeated pattern. Two-thirds of the couples who experienced an assault reported more than one incident during the base year of this study.¹

Third, even if one regards 16% as a low rate, a large number of people are involved. If this rate is applied to the 54 million cohabiting couples in the United States in 1984, it yields an estimated 8.7 million assault victims (Straus and Gelles, 1988).

Fourth, violence between spouses tends to be transmitted from generation to generation (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986; Straus, 1983) and also is related to assaults and other crime outside the family (Hotaling et al., 1989).

Finally, even though the bulk of the assaults that occur in marriage are minor, they could continue indefinitely and escalate into more severe assaults. A number of studies report such a pattern (Giles-Sims, 1983; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1979).

¹. The National Crime Survey’s (NCS) domestic assault rate (Gaquin, 1977-78) is much lower than the rate from our 1975 national survey and from Time 1 of the 1985 survey reported in this article. The extremely low NCS rate occurs because although most people can be presumed to consider such assaults to be wrong, even horrible, they do not experience them as a crime in the legal sense and do not report such assaults to the NCS. Two circumstances do, however, lead to reporting such assaults in the NCS: if an injury occurs, or if the assault is by a former spouse or separated spouse. This causes the NCS injury rate from domestic assaults to be extremely high. It also produces statistics that appear to indicate that women are more vulnerable to assault by a former than a current spouse. Both of these findings are erroneous.
CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

VIOLENCE AND ASSAULT

The definition of violence used here is “an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person” (see Gelles and Straus, 1979 for an explication of this definition and an analysis of alternative definitions). Violence and assault are used interchangeably in this article because violence against a spouse is a crime in all U.S. states; the assault statutes do not exempt spouses (in contrast to most rape statutes, which do exempt spouses).2

CAREERS OF WIFE ASSAULT

The defining characteristic of the criminal career perspective is its emphasis on examining the pattern of criminal activity of individuals over time (see Blumstein et al., 1985, 1986, 1988; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1988). The value of the approach depends on the nature of the empirical phenomena being considered. At one extreme, if criminal events are independent of one another, then nothing can be learned from examining a criminal career, because knowing about one event indicates nothing about the likelihood of another. At the other extreme, if criminal events strictly follow one of a few patterns of succession, then the way to determine whether an individual will perpetrate a crime would be to determine that individual’s current position in a particular pattern (succession) of events. The dual problems of the criminal career paradigm are to identify patterns of criminal careers and to identify the position of each individual within a particular pattern.

The most common approach to the application of the criminal career perspective is for researchers to try to identify a small number of career patterns and then determine which applies to a particular individual. Researchers

2. A number of other conceptual issues are not discussed in this article. First, we avoid the term abuse because of the ambiguity and inconsistency associated with it (Gelles, 1985; Gelles and Straus, 1979). Second, there are dilemmas connected with criminalization of acts within the family (Straus and Lincoln, 1985). Third, some feminist scholars criticize the use of acts as the criterion for defining and measuring violence (e.g., Breines and Gordon, 1983). They favor a definition that includes injuries as a criterion because acts alone do not take into account the presumed greater injury resulting from assaults by men as compared with women. There are important reasons for defining and measuring injury separately, however. One of the most important is consistency with the legal concept of assault, for which, as Marcus (1983: 89) puts it, “physical contact is not an element of the crime [of assault]”; or as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1975–1984: 21) puts it “attempts are included [in the tabulation of aggravated assault] because it is not necessary that an injury result.” Five other reasons for measuring assaults and injuries separately are discussed in a methodological paper (Straus, in press); such a separation makes it possible, for example, to treat the relationship between acts and injuries as an empirically researchable issue.
often identify patterns that involve engaging in criminal activity on a regular basis from a point of onset until a point of termination. Such patterns differ from one another in their points of onset and termination. A further simplification in the set of patterns is to consider only three ideal type patterns: (1) no criminal activity, (2) one criminal event followed by termination, and (3) regular criminal activity without termination. Such a simplification obviously cannot account for all cases, but if it could account for almost all of the cases it would be very parsimonious.

This typology has been suggested in the research on wife beating (see Pagelow, 1981: 43). The most significant substantive assumption of this typology is that wife assault that occurs more than once persists until the termination of the relationship (by separation or death). This assumption is widely accepted by both researchers and the general public. Pagelow (1981: 45) says: "One of the few things about which almost all researchers agree is that batterings escalate in frequency and intensity over time." The New Jersey Public Opinion Survey Regarding Domestic Violence (Irving Crespi and Associates, 1987) asked: "Which do you think is more likely to be the case with domestic violence—that it is something that repeatedly happens between two people, or, that it is an isolated incident that will pass over?" Eighty-three percent said that it "repeatedly happens."

The perception of continued violence by both researchers and the general public, however, is based primarily on experience with treatment group samples, such as clients of shelters for battered women, and the sensational cases that appear in the news media. Those women who experience violence that subsides might not go to shelters nor receive treatment, even if the assaults are severe. Thus, treatment samples and news stories do not necessarily indicate the experience of most victims of violence.

Despite the well-entrenched beliefs about the persistence of wife assault, the available evidence suggests that most wife assault subsides. Sherman and Berk (1984) followed up men who had been reported to the police for wife assault; among those men who received the least intervention by police (mediation), 37% assaulted their wives again within 6 months, that is, 63% did not. This low recidivism rate excludes many cases that were not available for follow-up and does not take account of recidivism after the 6 months. Moreover, the low recidivism rate may reflect both the initial intervention by police and the ongoing interview process by the researchers. Nevertheless, the low rate of recidivism stands in marked contrast to entrenched beliefs of researchers and the public in the inevitable persistence of violence. Dutton's (1988) follow-up of arrested wife assaulters showed that 60% of the untreated men did not generate new police reports within 3 years of their arrest. Here, the low rate of recidivism may be deflated by the exclusion of assaults that did not come to the attention of police, and the actual recidivism rate may have been lowered as a consequence of the initial arrest. Finally, Fagan et al.
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(1984; summarized in Fagan, 1989), found that 55% of men with whom police used the minimal intervention (informal mediation and separation) reported no subsequent assaults (Carmody and Williams, 1987). Again, the mere involvement of the police could have lowered recidivism. Nevertheless, the low recidivism rates in all of these studies contradict the conventional wisdom that wife assault does not cease.

DESISTANCE, PERSISTENCE, AND ESCALATION

Desistance refers to cessation of a pattern of criminal behavior. It is used in contrast with recidivism and persistence, which refer to continuing a pattern of criminal behavior, and with escalation, which specifically refers to continuing the criminal behavior at a higher level. In the article in which he introduced desistance to research on intrafamily violence, Fagan (1989) uses the term in two ways: (1) In the broad sense, desistance refers to the termination of criminal behavior for any reason except incapacitation; (2) In the narrow sense, desistance refers to termination in the absence of any effects of others.3 For purposes of this article, we use the term in the broader sense. We believe that most desistance results from actions taken by the husband, wife, family, neighbors, and associates without any formal outside intervention. However, this is an empirical issue that should be addressed in future research.

Another problematic aspect of the definition of desistance is its permanence. If a husband assaults his wife and then does not do so again for a year, we consider that he has desisted, even if he assaults her again at some later time. From a longer term perspective, desistance that is later followed by violence might be considered false (Blumstein et al., 1985: 217). We believe, however, that a year of peace is important enough to be considered true desistance even if new violence is initiated later. Moreover, our data indicate that the rate of initiation of severe violence (following a year with no severe assaults) is low, as will be discussed below. For these reasons, we believe that a year without violence is appropriately considered desistance. At the same time, we recognize that violence that recurs after long intervals is another important subject for future research.

3. Fagan (1989) concludes that “there are no studies which document ‘natural’ or spontaneous desistance without intervention by the victim or as a result of some form of sanction or treatment.” However, this statement implies an unusual limitation on the definition of natural desistance by treating actions of the wife as apart from the natural desistance of violence in relationships. Bowker (1983) shows that successful intervention by the victim can include a wife’s talking to friends or relatives, making nonviolent threats, and taking other actions within the context of ongoing relationships. Presumably, these types of behaviors of a wife are among the factors that encourage natural desistance in many other types of deviant behavior, including alcoholism, drug use, and property crimes (see Fagan, 1989; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1986). The common difficulty in distinguishing desistance from the results of intervention is exaggerated with regard to wife abuse because the wife is both part of the natural process of desistance and the victim.
We use the data from a 1985-86 panel study (described below) to determine the desistance of wife assault among those couples in which the husband was reported to have severely assaulted the wife in 1985. We hypothesize that there will be a high rate of desistance among all couples, including those with the highest rate of assault, although we expect that the highest rates of desistance will be among those who begin with lower frequencies of assault. We separate those couples in which one or two instances were reported from those in which more instances were reported in 1985, and we examine their desistance in 1986.

MINOR AND MAJOR VIOLENCE

The link between minor violence and severe violence is a controversial aspect of research on family violence. The public and many researchers emphasize the distinction between innocuous violence (minor violence and violence by women) and real violence (severe assaults, especially by husbands on wives), as exemplified in the comments of U.S. Representative Scheuer in congressional hearings on family violence, as reported in the Congressional Record and reprinted in Straus (1979). Feminist scholars, such as Breines and Gordon (1983) emphasize the unique nature of assaults by husbands on wives. Such distinctions lead to the expectation that the different types of violence have different causes and that understanding one does not help to understand the other.

On the other hand, the continuum of violence and cultural spillover approaches (Archer and Gartner, 1984; Baron, Straus, and Jaffee, 1988; Straus, 1983) suggest that, although there are important differences between types of violence, all violence has certain common elements and there is a spillover effect in which the existence of one type of violence tends to legitimize and increase the likelihood of other types. From these perspectives, understanding severe violence is helped by simultaneously understanding violence in its more innocuous forms.

To the extent that violence by the wife is thought to affect the violence of a husband, it is often assumed to deter the continuation of wife assault (see Pagelow, 1984). Bowker (1983) reports that some formerly assaulted wives believe that an aggressive defense was effective in stopping the assaults; however, he also reports that other formerly assaulted wives believed that such tactics had only exacerbated their victimization. At this point, there is no systematic evidence of either the deterrent or escalatory effect of violence by wives on the behavior of their husbands.

Using the 1985-86 panel data, we investigate whether the occurrence of minor assaults by either the husband or the wife and/or severe violence by
the wife increases the likelihood of severe assaults by the husband in the following year. The occurrence of any assaults can be viewed as both an indicator of the presence of certain underlying causes of severe violence and as a cause of escalation of violence. Consequently, we hypothesize that the occurrence of any assaults in Year 1 will be associated with the presence of severe assaults by the husband in Year 2.

CAUSES OF ESCALATION AND DESISTANCE

We suggest that there are four reasons why minor assaults indicate the likelihood of subsequent more severe assaults. These reasons are similar to reasons why one might expect that other minor forms of deviance (e.g., use of marijuana) could indicate a risk of more major forms of deviance (e.g., use of heroin). First, the presence of minor violence may indicate that the counternormative aspect of violence has been "neutralized" (see Sykes and Matza, 1957) for this couple, that is, the presence of minor violence may indicate that violence is permissible or tolerable and therefore severe violence is more likely to occur. Second, although the motivation toward violence varies from time to time and situation to situation, the presence of any violence at one time indicates a greater likelihood of violence-motivating factors (e.g., stress, power struggles) at other times; some of those factors could motivate severe as well as minor assaults. Third, violence could be an effective way for a husband to achieve his ends; consequently, he might be motivated to continue its use and even escalate its level when minor violence is no longer effective. Finally, assaults of any level by one partner increase the likelihood of violent response by the other partner, which in turn may provoke response from the first partner, and so on. Such interchanges could continue over a long time, and sometimes escalate.

The relevance of these four reasons for escalation of other forms of deviance is easily recognized if the reasons are only slightly generalized: (1) neutralization of the countervailing norms (e.g., drugs are okay because no one is hurt); (2) some stability in the external factors causing deviance (e.g., young people who are not successful by conventional means may search for alternatives); (3) the effectiveness of deviance for meeting the goals of the individual (e.g., selling drugs may bring money and prestige); and (4) minor deviance may provoke negative responses from others (authorities, friends, relatives) that provoke further deliberate acts of rebellion or spite.

At any given time, there are countervailing pressures toward desistance corresponding to each of the reasons for persistence and escalation. First, norms are rarely completely neutralized; consequently, individuals may stop their deviance in response to the continued normative pressures. Second, although the motivation for deviance has some stability, it also changes—for example, financial stress may be overcome, one spouse may give up the power struggle, and so on. Third, the deviant behavior may not accomplish the ends
of the individual and may lead to undesired consequences. Fourth, the responses of others (whether punitive or permissive) may deter or discourage further deviance.

Each of the above reasons may lead the violence and accompanying intimidation to stop. It is also important to recognize that assaults may cease temporarily or permanently even as the threat of violence continues to intimidate. The husband may accomplish his goals of getting his own way and/or punishing his wife using verbal assaults and other punitive behaviors accompanied by the threat of violence. If the wife is effectively intimidated, she may be able to avoid assaults by her husband for long periods of time by doing what he wants, avoiding situations that she knows set him off, and the like (see Walker, 1979). Under such conditions, the threat of violence is ever present, and the wife remains its victim. Such desistance fits the letter of the definition, without fitting its spirit. In this study, there is no way to distinguish this form of desistance from others.

SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESES

To summarize, our purpose in this paper is to determine if intrafamily assaults are similar to other forms of deviance in two ways: (1) desistance is high and (2) minor forms are a risk factor for major forms. More formally, our two hypotheses are

1. There will be a high rate of desistance among all couples, including those with the highest rate of assault.
2. The occurrence of any assaults in Year 1 will be associated with severe assaults by the husband in Year 2.

If these hypotheses are supported, future research should investigate the specific characteristics and circumstances of individuals and couples that encourage desistance and discourage escalation of wife assault.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

Rates of persistence and escalation of spouse assault cannot be estimated from cross-sectional survey data. Both the 1975 and the 1985 National Family Violence Surveys (Straus et al., 1980; Gelles and Straus, 1988) find a steady decrease with age in the rate and severity of assaults between partners. Since violence frequently precipitates divorce, however, this could be the result of selective attrition of marriages rather than desistance of violence within marriages. Also, the selective attrition of marriages could obscure the fact that violence escalates within the violent marriages that remain. A panel analysis is necessary to test the hypotheses.

Many of the respondents in the cross-sectional surveys who report no recent assaults nevertheless report that they have experienced violence within this relationship in the past. This information, however, is insufficient to
determine the nature, extent, or duration of the previous experience with violence. No information was obtained on assaults in relationships that eventually fell apart. A panel study over a relatively short time period enables us to investigate changes that take place within relationships.

Almost everyone who engages in a severe assault also commits less violent acts. Our prior cross-sectional analyses show that husbands who punch or kick their wives almost always also slap and throw things. However, this does not indicate whether there were periods involving only minor assaults prior to incidents of severe assault. A panel study provides a way to determine if, at some prior time, there was minor violence but no severe assaults.

THE NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEYS

The panel study is part of a series of national surveys on violence in American families that began in 1975 (see Straus et al., 1980, for the findings of the 1975 survey). The initial survey was replicated in 1985. The Year 1 data reported in this article are from the 1985 survey of a national probability sample of households, obtained by telephone interview. Sampling methods using random digit dialing were employed. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. The response rate, calculated as “completed portion of eligibles,” was 84%.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

To be eligible, households had to include an adult 18 years of age or older who was (1) currently married, (2) currently living as a male-female couple, (3) divorced or separated within the past 2 years, or (4) a single parent with a child under 18 and living in the household. When more than one eligible adult was in the household, a random procedure was used to select one respondent according to gender and marital status. Thus, one member of each household, either the husband/male partner or the wife/female partner, was interviewed. Although a husband and wife from the same couple may not report identical information, previous analyses of these data (Stets and Straus, in press) have indicated that substantive results are generally similar, whether they are based on reports from the husbands or wives (see also Szinovacz, 1983, for similar findings). In the present context, the small numbers

4. Experience with studies of family problems, including spouse abuse, rape, and parental kidnapping (Gelles, 1983), shows that telephone interviewing produces higher response rates than one could expect from in-person interviews on sensitive family topics. Not only do the flexibility and anonymity of the telephone lead to a higher response rate, but there is reason to believe that these attributes of the survey technique yield data that are equivalent in reliability and validity to face-to-face interviews. A study by Bradburn and Sudman (1979), for example, found statistically indistinguishable differences in admitting to a conviction for drunken driving among persons who had in fact been convicted of that offense.
of cases involving severe assaults make separate analyses too unreliable to report, but the general patterns for each are similar to the combined analyses that are reported.

Blacks, Hispanics, and residents of small states were oversampled (as explained in Gelles and Straus, 1988; Straus and Gelles, in press; Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1988). In most other analyses using these data, weighting was used to correct for these oversamples; however, for the purposes of this article, the weighting makes no substantive difference. We present the raw numbers because they better represent the data to the reader and avoid the statistical ambiguities of weighting. Further information on the sample is given in Gelles and Straus (1988) and Straus and Gelles (1986).

The median age was 40 years for male respondents and 38 years for females. The median duration that couples were married was 14 years. The median years of education was 12. Fifty-four percent had at least one child less than 18 years old at home. The median family income was in the $25,000–$30,000 range. Eighty-two percent of respondents designated themselves as married, 4% as cohabiting, and 10% were single parents or persons who were separated or divorced during the 2 years prior to the interview.

MARRIAGE PANEL STUDY SAMPLE

835 of the married respondents reported one or more assaults in their marriage in the previous year; attempts were made to reinterview all of these respondents. In addition, respondents who reported no violence in the past year were asked whether they had ever experienced violence in their relationship, and attempts were made to reinterview all 560 of those who reported some previous violence. For the 2,801 respondents who reported no previous violence at all, attempts were made to reinterview only a random sample of 1,528.

Panel studies have often been hailed as the best approach to studies of causal and time-ordered processes. Unfortunately, the reality of panel studies presents new and different problems from cross sections. Specifically, many individuals who were initially interviewed will not be reinterviewed. The attrition is multifaceted and has both substantive and methodological implications.

First, divorce and separation are important causes of sample attrition, and both are known to be associated with marital violence. The interviewers found nonworking or wrong numbers for 157 (17%) of the 835 subjects who reported one or more assaults in Year 1.5 Most of these are probably people

5. The description of the sample attrition is based on the report from the interviewing organization (Louis Harris and Associates, 1987). The specific information applies to the complete sample of "coupled" respondents. This analysis excludes the respondent who were not married or who separated during the intervening year, 1985–86. The information
who moved, including many separated couples. In another 59 cases (7%), the respondent was reported to have moved; these are cases that are most likely to be separations. In addition, there were 9 “no-answer,” 33 “respondent not available,” and 8 “respondent incapacitated” cases. These numbers suggest that many of the lost subjects could have terminated their violence through separation.

At the same time, the couples who engage in continued violence might be difficult to reinterview. Seventy-two respondents refused (and 2 were refused by the spouse) and 4 terminated the interview. Another 70 respondents were reached at a time when the interviewers could not complete the interview and were not successfully reached again. These respondents could have been disproportionately violent couples.

Overall, about half (420) of the relevant respondents were successfully reinterviewed. Analysis of the panel sample indicates that it is comparable to the entire sample with respect to major demographic variables (see Louis Harris and Associates, 1987); however, the reinterviewed subsample had reported somewhat less violence in Year 1 than those who were lost. Table 1 shows that there was a greater loss of violent couples; this loss could reflect both a disproportionate breakup of violent marriages and the relative inaccessibility of violent couples. Thus, the sample could overrepresent the continued violence (to the extent that the violent couples that were lost had separated) or underrepresent the continued violence (to the extent that the violent couples that were lost disproportionately continued their violence).

Table 1. Success of Reinterview by Frequency of Husband’s Assaults in Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success of Reinterview</th>
<th>Husband’s Assault Frequency At Time 1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinterviewed</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(350)</td>
<td>(416)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square = 0.43, d.f. = 1, p<.51

NOTE: This table indicates a bias in the panel sample, even though the lack of statistical significance indicates that we cannot be confident that such biases will generally be found.

available does not allow separate analysis of the sources of attrition of the married couples alone.
No definitive conclusions can be drawn because the information about subsequent violence is obviously lacking for those who were not reinterviewed. Also, sample attrition might have complex effects on the associations that are observed (e.g., see Berk and Ray, 1982), and one must consider the possibility that the sample results might reflect an attrition bias. However, these data are more complete than any other that have been collected.

VIOLENCE MEASURE

The violence scale of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) was used to measure the incidence of assault (Straus, 1979, in press). The CTS asks the respondent about the ways the couple dealt with “problems” between them. Specifically, respondents were asked how frequently they and their spouses did each of a list of actions when engaged in a conflict or angry with the spouse in the past year. The items ranged from discussing the problem, to yelling and insulting, to pushing, shoving, and slapping, to attacks with a knife or gun. The assaultive acts in the CTS are classified as either minor or severe. The minor assault acts are: threw an object at the spouse and pushed, grabbed, shoved, or slapped spouse. The acts classified as severe assaults are: kicked, punched, hit with object, beat up, choked, threatened with knife or gun, and used knife or gun.

The CTS has been successfully used in many studies of intrafamily violence (e.g., Brutz and Allen, 1986; Gelles and Straus, 1988; Giles-Sims, 1983; Henton et al., 1983; Hornung et al., 1981; Jorgensen, 1977; Kennedy and Dutton, 1987; O'Leary and Arias, 1988; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus and Gelles, 1988). At the same time, the CTS has been criticized on a number of grounds; for example, the distinction between minor and severe assaults is not as clear as the above description suggests because “throwing an object” could describe throwing a pillow or throwing a rock. Despite these and other limitations, Straus and several independent investigators have produced evidence indicating the reliability and validity of this instrument (summarized in Straus, in press).

VIOLENCE OVER TIME

PERSISTENCE AND DESISTANCE OF SEVERE VIOLENCE BY HUSBANDS AS A FUNCTION OF FREQUENCY OF SEVERE VIOLENCE BY HUSBANDS

Couples were classified by the most severe husband-to-wife assault in Year 2—none, minor, or severe. This is the dependent variable for our analyses of desistance and persistence over the year of the study. In Table 2 the frequency of severe assaults by the husband in Year 1 is related to the level of husband-to-wife violence in Year 2. (Note that one cannot reconstruct the entire nonpanel sample in Year 1 from this table without weighting, because
the reinterviewed sample deliberately overrepresented respondents who had experienced violence.) The table clearly indicates that the level and persistence of wife assault is related to the frequency of the initial assaults. The left-hand column of Table 2 shows that when the husband had committed no severe assaults in Year 1, 3% committed a severe assault in Year 2; the middle column shows that 19% of the husbands who committed one or two severe assaults in Year 1 severely assaulted their wife in Year 2; and the right-hand column shows that 57% of the husbands who committed three or more assaults severely assaulted their wife in Year 2. Adding the percentages for minor and severe assaults in each column of Table 2, assaults by the husband (either minor or severe) followed in 10% of the cases when there were no assaults in Year 1, in 42% of the cases when there were one or two severe assaults in Year 1, and in 67% of the cases when the husband had severely assaulted three or more times in Year 1.

Table 2. Severity of Husband’s Assaults at Year 2 by Frequency of His Severe Assaults in Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband’s Severe Assault Frequency in Year 1</th>
<th>0*</th>
<th>1-2</th>
<th>3+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1,270)</td>
<td>(54)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square = 195.5, d.f. = 4, p < .001

* This column underrepresents couples with no previous history of assault because attempts were only made to interview a random half of such couples. Thus, this column overstates these assault rates. This does not affect the desistance rates—the substantive issues of this table.

For our purposes, the most important implication of Table 2 is the high rate of desistance, even among the most frequent perpetrators of severe assaults. The right-hand column of Table 2 shows that 33% of the most frequent perpetrators did not assault their wife in Year 2, plus an additional 10% (making a total of 43%) used no severe violence. A 57% severe assault rate obviously constitutes a serious social problem, but the other 43% holds out the possibility of desistance. Other evidence in the study suggests that
outside intervention of any sort (e.g., by police or counselors) was rare (Kaufman Kantor and Straus, in press) and probably cannot account for the desistance. Thus, the possibility of desistance holds out some hope, and as Fagan (1989) suggests, researchers and policymakers might try to encourage and build on the situational tendencies toward desistance that are already present to encourage desistance in more cases.

We should make it clear that however important this "high" rate of desistance is, it leaves a high rate of recidivism. Desistance itself may be part of the solution, and lessons learned from desistance may be another part, but neither obviates the need for intervention to reduce the continuing levels of wife assault.

Another implication of Table 2 is that severe assaults by husbands occurred in Year 2 in a small but significant proportion of cases (3%) involving husbands who had not engaged in any severe assaults in Year 1. In the next section, we examine the significance of minor assaults and assaults by wives for indicating the likelihood of escalation to severe violence by husbands over time.

PERSISTENCE AND DESISTANCE OF SEVERE VIOLENCE BY HUSBANDS AS A FUNCTION OF MINOR VIOLENCE AND VIOLENCE BY WIVES

The analysis up to this point used frequency of severe assaults by the husband as the independent variable. For the analysis in this section, we classified couples by the maximum severity of the assaults that each employed in Year 1. The dependent variable is a severe assault by husbands in Year 2. Table 3 shows the percentage of husbands who severely assaulted their wives in Year 2 for couples having each combination of severity of assaults by husbands and wives in Year 1. The percentages in Table 3 should be interpreted tentatively because of the small numbers of cases in most cells. Nevertheless, there is a clear pattern whereby minor assaults by either spouse increase the likelihood of severe assaults by the husband, and minor assaults by both husband and wife triple the probability of subsequent severe assaults by the husband (6% compared with 2%). Even so, minor assaults escalate infrequently.

Another important finding concerns severe violence by the wife. It is generally accepted that severe violence by the wife does not usually indicate a high risk of injury (Breines and Gordon, 1983; Straus and Gelles, 1986: 410), but researchers have not determined whether violence by the wife puts her at risk of injury because it increases the probability of violence by the husband. As seen from Table 3, when a husband does not severely assault, but his wife does, there is a 1 in 7 chance (13% or 15%) that he will severely assault her in the following year. That is a substantial increase in risk compared with the risk of escalation associated with minor assaults by the wife. Moreover,
minor assaults by the wife are associated with a substantial increase in the probability of continued severe assaults by the husband. When the wife abstained from violence, only 6% of the husbands continued. When the wife used minor violence, 23% of the husbands continued. And when the wife severely assaulted her husband, then 42% of the husbands continued. These findings suggest that assaults by the wife increase the probability of severe assaults by the husband.

Table 3. Percentage of Couples Reporting Severe Husband-to-Wife Assault In Year 2, by Severity of Assaults by Husbands and Wives in Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wife’s Severity in Year 1</th>
<th>Husband’s Severity in Year 1</th>
<th>p*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                          | (942)                       | (.001)
|                          | Minor                       | 3% |
|                          | (63)                        | (.001)
|                          | Severe                      | 6% |
|                          | (16)                        | (.001)
| Minor                    | None                        | 4% |
|                          | (72)                        | (.089)
|                          | Minor                       | 6% |
|                          | (87)                        | (.089)
|                          | Severe                      | 23% |
|                          | (13)                        | (.089)
| Severe                   | None                        | 15% |
|                          | (34)                        | (.012)
|                          | Minor                       | 13% |
|                          | (23)                        | (.012)
|                          | Severe                      | 42% |
|                          | (40)                        | (.012)
| p*                       |                             | (.001)

NOTE: Percents in the body of the table are the percentage of couples reporting severe violence by husbands in Year 2.

a These are the significance levels for Chi-square with four degrees of freedom, based on each partial table, with dependent variable “husband severity in Year 2” in three categories (none, minor, severe).
b This cell includes those who reported no assaults in Year 1 but had experienced an assault in some previous year and those who reported no assaults in Year 1 or ever. When both husbands and wives reported no assaults in Year 1, they were asked whether either had ever assaulted the other; for those who had never assaulted (613), 1% of husbands severely assaulted in Year 2; for those who had assaulted before but not in Year 1 (321), 3% of husbands severely assaulted in the Year 2. The panel sample overweighted the latter group; thus, the best estimate for the “none-none” group in the population is less than 2%.

Although this is one plausible interpretation of the findings, an alternative possibility could be that the assaultive behavior of wives is in response to assaults by husbands that occurred before the 1-year referent period of the Year 1 study. To the extent that occurred, the wives who assaulted are those who were already confronted by abusive husbands, and one might expect those husbands to continue or escalate apart from the behavior of the wives.6

6. Respondents who reported no violence in the past year were asked whether they
Only experimental intervention (e.g., by encouraging either retaliatory violence or nonretaliation) could distinguish between the causal processes. In any case, assaults by wives are indicative of the future violence by husbands.

Bowker (1983) and Gelles and Straus (1988) find that several strategies used by wives have been somewhat effective in discouraging subsequent violence (e.g., threatening to leave and/or leaving the situation). Consistent with findings in these other analyses, we found that hitting was the least effective strategy for discouraging subsequent assaults.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Our findings confirmed the hypothesis that specified a high rate of desistance, even for husbands who had frequently used severe violence. The reported rates of desistance could be somewhat inflated by the methodological artifacts of selective attrition of the panel and reactive effects of the Year 1 interview, but these high rates of desistance are the best estimates available for the general U.S. population.

The findings also confirmed the hypothesis that minor assaults and assaults by wives are associated with subsequent severe assaults by husbands. These findings may indicate that minor assaults tend to encourage major assaults. There are two important alternative possibilities, however. First, couples with severely assaultive husbands typically also exhibit lesser forms of violence by both husbands and wives; if the severe assaults by husbands are intermittent, then the survey might only pick up the less serious assaults in the first year. The minor assaults might not cause the severe assaults, but only indicate their presence in the behavioral repertory. Second, both minor assaults and severe assaults might result from the same precipitating factors (e.g., unemployment, stress, youth, male dominance) and not be causing one another; in which case, frequent minor assaults might indicate the underlying precipitating factors that cause severe assaults.

Although it is difficult to disentangle these different types of causal processes, the extent to which minor assaults cause subsequent severe assaults had ever experienced violence in their relationship. This information did not distinguish whether husband or wife used the violence. Nevertheless, those who had experienced previous violence reported higher subsequent violence (5% minor and 3% severe) compared with those who had never experienced violence (3% minor and 1% severe). These findings indicate that prior violence (more than a year ago) is obviously a risk factor for subsequent violence (compared with no prior violence), but much less so than violence within the past year (19% minor and 11% severe).

7. As previously mentioned, sample attrition could bias associations. In this case, the evidence suggests that the perpetrators of more severe violence (presumably including those who escalate to severe violence) are disproportionately part of the attrition. If that is so, our results would only underestimate the association between minor violence and subsequent major violence.
is not crucial for our purposes. Our purpose has been to investigate an aspect of the natural history of violence by testing the hypothesis that minor and severe assaults are related. Since this hypothesis was supported, one implication is that steps to reduce severe assaults on wives should include minor violence as well. Even if frequent minor assaults are only a minimal cause of subsequent severe assaults, they are an indication of the increased risk of more severe violence.

It would be useful to know specifically whether reducing minor assaults could reduce the likelihood of major violence. Experiments could involve intervention with couples reporting minor violence. Intervention might include reduction of stress, provision of social and material support, and efforts to increase equality between spouses and to change values that tolerate minor violence. The rates of desistance and escalation among those couples could be compared with the rates among couples without intervention.

We have only begun to describe careers of wife assault. It is clear that the simple conceptions of the process that are commonly held by the public and many researchers are insufficient, particularly the ideas that minor violence is irrelevant to major violence and that major violence by husbands almost always continues or escalates. Future research must elaborate the processes of desistance and escalation to determine the other factors (especially age and life circumstances) that affect the likelihood of desistance or escalation over the life course of marriages.

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