Response of Victims and the Police to Assaults on Wives

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Although there has been a growing awareness of the prevalence and criminality of assaults on women by their male partners, there is little evidence concerning the extent to which the actual behavior of victims and police reflects these changes. Victims may still be reluctant to use the criminal justice system, and police may still resist arresting men who assault their wives. This would not be surprising given the long historical traditions of gender inequality and the belief that the intact family is sacrosanct. These traditions have obscured public and private perception of the prevalence and criminality of wife assault. Changes in law, policy, and attitudes have occurred only through strenuous efforts by feminists and battered women’s advocates (Kaufman Kantor et al., 1985; Kaufman Kantor and O’Brien Stevens, 1986; Lerman, 1982; Schechter, 1982), through research that identified a “battered woman’s syndrome” (Walker, 1979), through survey research that documented the high incidence rates of wife assault (Chapter 6), and through research that provides evidence that a policy of arresting assailants reduces recidivism (Sherman and Berk, 1984; Sherman and Cohen, 1989).

Although public attitudes and police policy may be changing, the extent to which this has affected their actual response to assaults on women by their male partners is unknown. This chapter provides some of the needed information, using data from the 1985 Family Violence Resurvey. These data provide information on the following questions: (1) How often were police involved in instances of wife beating? (2) In what proportion of
cases was an arrest made? (3) Are the characteristics of the family and the severity of the assault related to whether the police are called and whether an arrest is made? (4) What strategies, other than calls to police, are used by victims to stop the assaults? (5) What strategies, other than arrest, are used by police in cases of wife assault?

Theoretical Issues

Two major theoretical perspectives need to be considered in understanding battered women’s reluctance to seek criminal justice support and police failure to intervene vigorously in wife assault cases. Both of these perspectives will be examined as they relate to definitions of criminality. The feminist point of view articulated by Dobash and Dobash (1979) and Martin (1976) emphasizes the historical role of patriarchy in controlling and subordinating women. The other view is concerned not only with wife assault but with all crimes occurring in the family and the normative ambiguity surrounding them. This ambiguity stems from the state’s need and desire to protect the privacy and integrity of the family as a social institution.

Feminist Theory

A feminist analysis of wife beating views the inadequate responses of the criminal justice system, such as police failure to arrest batterers, as evidence of the legitimation of coercive control of women (Kaufman Kantor and O'Brien Stevens, 1986). It can also be argued that historical definitions of the criminality of assaults on wives, implying official tolerance of some violence against women, were shaped by patriarchal interests. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century legal definitions viewed wife assaults as non-criminal as long as they left no visible marks (Dobash and Dobash, 1977) or were inflicted by a stick no thicker than a man’s thumb (Davidson, 1977). Modern-day vestiges prescribing the legal limits of wife assault are seen in the “stitch rule” used until recently by some police departments to determine the seriousness of wife assault (Straus, 1976). Moreover, criminal justice categorizations of assaults on wives as “family disputes” and as “domestic disturbances” have contributed to the ambiguity shared by battered women and police about when, short of homicide, a beating is “serious enough” to call for police protection (Reed et al., 1983).

Normative Ambiguity Theory

The second theoretical approach explains the differential treatment of wife beating, compared to other assaults, as but one manifestation of a
separate set of norms governing all types of crime occurring within the family. These norms reflect the value society places on preserving the family’s privacy and integrity (Gordon, 1988). This value can also be seen as serving patriarchal interests. Moreover, these values and norms have grown beyond their patriarchal roots to become an autonomous part of our culture.

As with many other aspects of social structure, there are conflicting rules and principles governing the family (Ryan and Straus, 1954; Straus and Straus, 1953) so that the situation regarding differential treatment of within-family crime is more adequately described as one of normative ambiguity. The norms concerning the family enjoin us to have a special concern for the well-being of other family members. At the same time, because of the social and legal connections that bind family members together, there are other norms that tolerate a certain level of mistreatment of family members. These norms include, for example, the social expectation that parents use physical punishment in controlling their children’s behavior and that family members express their feelings (even of hostility) rather than “holding them in.” These family norms legitimating violence are also discussed in Chapter 11 and elsewhere (Hotaling and Straus, 1980; Straus, 1974).

Such normative ambiguity exists toward all criminal acts within the family (Straus and Lincoln, 1985). It is part of the reason for the difficulty in distinguishing child abuse from “normal” physical discipline of children (Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979), “minor” husband-to-wife violence from “serious” wife assault, and in identifying who are the “real” battered women (see Chapter 5). As Straus and Lincoln (1985) point out, we also tolerate intrafamily property crimes, such as children stealing from parents or siblings, that would be prosecuted if the victim and offender were strangers. This is true for property crimes within families and for crimes of violence.

In addition to the historically derived interest of the state in non-interference in family matters (and also the conflicting interest of the state in regulating the family) and with preserving the family as a social institution, there are other reasons for the different standards regarding family crime. These reasons are located in the characteristics of families and the needs of its individual members. For example, the family meets important personal needs and there is therefore a reluctance to dissolve a family even when there are serious abuses. As the quintessential “primary group,” the family is concerned with the “whole person” and his or her welfare, not just with one aspect of the member’s behavior, such as whether he or she hit or steals. These broader concerns make it possible to minimize or
deny behaviors when needs such as intimacy, affection, and economic survival are also being met by the "family offender."

Method

This study uses data from the 1985 survey. The forms of husband-to-wife violence analyzed in this paper include both the Minor Violence and Severe Violence indexes. The percent of victims of minor or severe assaults who reported the violence to the police were then cross-tabulated by race, income, employment status, urbanicity, and alcohol use during the violent incident. Women's other responses to the minor or severe violence were also investigated. Finally, police response to the violent incident is discussed, again separately for minor and severe violence cases.

Prevalence of Wife Assault and Reporting Effects

Prevalence Estimates

Estimates of the number of domestic assault victims (largely women) have been placed at 420,000 per year for the years 1978–1982 based on National Crime Survey (Langan and Innes, 1986). These figures are considerably less than those of the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (NFVS), which estimated wife assault victims to number about 1.8 million per year (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). The incidence rate from the 1985 data on wife beating (reported in Chapter 6) shows some reductions in both minor and severe violence rates compared to the 1975 survey. Gelles and Straus point out in that chapter, however, that the apparent reduction may be due, at least in part, to a greater reluctance by men in 1985 to admit to wife assaults. Evidence of such reporting effects are found in the fact that women respondents in the 1985 survey reported more incidents of violence than did men. Gender bias in reporting by male partners has also been found by other researchers (Edleson and Brygger, 1986; Szinovacz, 1983).

Police Involvement

The NFVS data revealed that only 6.7% of all husband-to-wife assaults are reported to police. This rate is similar to that of a Kentucky survey of one thousand women. (Harris and Associates, 1979) that found that only 9% of the beatings by husbands were reported to the police. On the other hand, the National Crime Survey (NCS) findings are very different. NCS analysts estimate that 52% of domestic violence victims reported crimes
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(Langan and Innes, 1986). What are the reasons for these greatly varying estimates?

We suggest that the large differences in the prevalence rates and in police reporting rates from the National Crime Survey (NCS) and the National Family Violence Survey (NFVS) are a function of differences in the context and nature of the two surveys. Although the NCS and NFVS are similar in that they both use large random samples, their differing approaches to the study of family violence are revealed in the wording and context of their questions (Straus and Lincoln, 1985). Respondents participating in the NCS are informed that they are part of the National Crime Survey and asked if they have been victimized by crime in the previous six months. If NCS respondents answer "yes," they are then asked a series of questions regarding the criminal incidents. In contrast, the major focus of the NFVS is families and things that family members do. This study is introduced to respondents as a study "for the National Institute of Health about family life, American couples and their children. . . ." Questions about family violence are thus embedded in a series of questions about family characteristics.

These contextual differences between the two surveys appear to lead to the NCS's underestimating the prevalence of family violence and overestimating the incidence of reports of family violence to the police. In order for victims to report crimes to either or both the NCS interviewers and the police, they must perceive their assaults as criminal in the legal sense as opposed to "just wrong or bad things done by someone in their family" (Straus and Lincoln, 1985). Congruent with this belief is the NCS finding that the most frequent reason women give for not calling police is that they consider the violent assault a "private or personal matter." The next most frequent reason for non-reporting is fear of reprisal (Langan and Innes, 1986).1

Factors Affecting Reports to the Police

Because most research on the police and wife assault has examined cases in which the police were involved, little is known about the characteristics of families and violent events when the police are not called (Dutton, 1988; Loving, 1980; Parnas, 1971; Stephens, 1977). Because our data come from a random national sample, they can provide information on those violent families who do report to the police, as well as those who do not. First, we examine how the severity of the assaults and characteristics of the family are related to reports of husband-to-wife violence to the police.
Severity of Assault

When assaults are categorized according to the degree of severity, we found that only 3.2% of minor violence cases and 14.4% of instances of severe violence are reported to police (p < .001). Although assaults categorized as minor by the CTS have the potential (albeit less so than severe violence) to result in major injuries, more than 96% of minor assault victims did not call the police. Even if only those cases where the type of severe violence often characterized as “wife beating” is examined, the vast majority (86%) of violence by husbands remains unreported.

Despite the low rate of reporting instances of assaults to the police, the fact that the police were involved four times more often in cases of severe assault than in cases of minor assault is an important finding. It contradicts long-standing police claims that domestics are “social work” (Reed et al., 1983) and official categorizations of wife assaults as domestic “disputes.” These stereotypical conceptions of wife assaults are paradoxical since they co-exist with police beliefs that “domestic” calls are among the most dangerous to police. However, recent research reveals little risk of death or injury to police during responses to domestic calls (Garner and Clemmer, 1986).

Social Characteristics

Race. Table 26.1 shows that there are no significant differences by race in reporting violent incidents to the police, whether the incident involved minor or severe violence. Again, our findings differ from those of the National Crime Survey, which found greater reporting to police by Black women (Langan and Innes, 1986), but in this case we do not have an explanation for the difference between the surveys. Comparing the figures in the two columns of Table 26.1 shows that severity of assault is associated with the use of the police regardless of the race of respondent.

Income. No statistically significant differences were found in respect to income. These results are not only non-significant, but also inconsistent: families with incomes below the poverty threshold called the police three times more often in cases of minor violence than did financially better-off families. This is consistent with previous research on socioeconomic status and calls to police. However, low-income families reported severe violence only half as often as families above the poverty line. One explanation of these findings is that impoverished women’s reluctance to report severe violence to the police is related to their fears that their spouse may be incarcerated.

Husband’s unemployment. For minor violence there is no difference
TABLE 26.1
Percent Reporting to Police by Violence Type and Social Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minor Violence</th>
<th>Severe Violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty &lt; $10,000</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; $10,000</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p = .07*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Husb. Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x², N.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wife Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p = .06*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urbaneness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small City</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x², N.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drinking at Time of Violence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Drinking</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking by one of the parties</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x², N.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the rate at which the assaults of employed and unemployed husbands are reported to the police. For severe violence, assaults by unemployed husbands are much more likely to be reported. It may be that women find it easier to label an unemployed husband's status as "criminal." Another possibility is that unemployment is associated more with severe rather than minor violence, meaning that the relationship of unemployment to police reporting is a spurious one. Unfortunately, too few cases are available in these data to test this possibility.

*Housewives.* Although the differences are not statistically significant,
the percentages in Table 26.1 suggest that housewives are more likely to report in cases of minor violence, but less likely to report in cases of severe violence.

Despite the fact that the differences are not statistically significant, the findings for both husband's unemployment and housewives are worth discussing, in part because they seem to be consistent with each other and also theoretically meaningful. Both refer to families with limitations based on the number of wage-earners. It appears that situations that limit the economic resources of a family—unemployment, poverty, and one-wage-earner families—diminish the likelihood of severely battered women calling police. Economically dependent women may fear the consequences if police are called. At the same time, husbands with greater economic resources are less likely to receive official sanctions.

Size of city. This was examined as a potential factor in police reporting because perceptions of police, police effectiveness, and police-community cohesiveness can vary by community size and geography. However, no significant differences were found.

Drinking and drunkenness. This is commonly associated with wife assaults and other crimes of violence, though these relationships can be spurious (see Chapter 12 in this volume and Pernanen, 1981) and alcohol may be more an excuse for than a cause of violence (Coleman and Straus, 1983). Nevertheless, in the instance of severe violence, police were twice as likely to be called when one or both partners had been drinking. Further, drinking-related severe violence was ten times more likely to be reported to the police than drinking-linked minor assaults.

Women's Immediate Response to Violence

Table 26.2 presents data on women's responses to their husband's violence. If, as was usually the case, there was more than one incident during the year, we asked about the most recent occurrence of the most severe violence in the past year. The table classifies women's responses by two other factors: whether they reported the violence and the severity of the assault. Not surprisingly, the most frequent response by non-reporting women, regardless how severe the violence, was to cry. It is also not surprising that yelling and cursing was the second most frequent response to the humiliation and pain of a spousal assault. Taken together, passive strategies account for almost half of unreported minor and severe violence. Active strategies such as hitting back, fleeing the batterer by running out of the room or leaving the house, or calling someone rarely occurred. Considered collectively, they account for a quarter of unreported minor and severe violence victim behavior. Victims of both types
TABLE 26.2
Women’s Responses to Violence by Violence Type and Reports to Police

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Reporters</th>
<th></th>
<th>Reporters</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor (N = 209)</td>
<td>Severe (N = 122)</td>
<td>Minor (N = 6)</td>
<td>Severe (N = 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit Back</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cried</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelled, cursed</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ran to other room</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left house</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called someone</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of violence respond in similar ways, though women experiencing the worst assaults more often escape to another room and are two and a half times more likely to call someone.

As noted above, minor assault victims rarely call police. Table 26.2 also demonstrates that victims who call the police are less likely to have retaliated than have non-reporting women. Perhaps this is due to guilt experienced by women socialized into non-aggressiveness. Women violating traditional sex-role norms, though few in number, may feel that because they have fought back they are equally guilty and therefore less deserving of police assistance. On the other hand, when victim-aggressor roles are clearly differentiated, women can feel more justified in getting help. Police also need victim-aggressor roles to be clearly defined, and they are less likely to arrest when they believe the violence has been mutual (Reed et al., 1983). Women reporting to police are much more likely to react in some way than non-reporters, though three-quarters simply cry, yell, or curse.

In contrast to the small proportion (a quarter) of non-reporting women using active strategies, 81% of reporting women actively tried to escape. This means that the minority of women who report to police also are more likely to try other active strategies. These differences between reporting and non-reporting women lend support to patterns of learned helplessness handicapping a majority of women. It is also possible that husbands physically stopped women from leaving as well as from contacting the
police or that women were too stunned or injured to react in any active manner (Reed et al., 1983).

**Police Responses to Wife-Assault Calls**

A large body of research for the past twenty years has documented the rarity of arrest of men who have assaulted their wives (Berk and Loseke, 1980–1981; Berk et al., 1983; Black, 1980; Ford, 1983; Loving, 1980; Parnas, 1967; Reed et al., 1983; Straus, 1974). Consistently, researchers have documented other problems in police behavior, including siding with the batterer, patriarchal and patronizing attitudes, infrequent referrals of battered women to services, failure to file reports, and failure to adhere to prescribed policies and laws. Some of these actions or failures to act have been attributed to police fear of the dangerousness of these calls to their own lives, frustration with battered women’s failure to sign complaints, lenient or unsympathetic prosecutors and judges, and police training practices stressing crisis intervention and mediation strategies (Bard, 1970; Liebman and Schwartz, 1973; Loving, 1980; Reed et al., 1983).

The recent improvement in police response (Crime Control Institute, 1987; Kaufman Kantor et al., 1985) can be attributed to concerted efforts by battered women advocates and new laws making explicit the criminality of domestic violence. Additionally, researchers have exerted influence by directing criminal justice attention to the association between inadequate police response, family violence and family homicides (Wilt et al., 1977), and the deterrent effects of police arrest on misdemeanor assaults (Sherman and Berk, 1984). Sherman and Berk’s notable Minneapolis experiment found a lower rate of repeat assaults when police made an arrest. Langan and Innes’s (1986) analysis of NCS data revealed that just calling the police decreased the likelihood and severity of subsequent assaults. However, both the Minneapolis experiment and the National Crime Survey reports are relatively recent. Diffusion of these results, consensus on the need for change, and efforts to enforce change may be slow in coming.

The results of this study show just how slow that process is. In fact, reports to police of assaults on wives are so rare that when one seeks to analyze what the police actually did in those few cases where police intervention occurred, the number of cases becomes extremely small. Nevertheless, because the data are based on a representative sample of couples and because of the importance of this issue, even these few cases need to be analyzed. Table 26.3 therefore shows the distribution of police actions in the 14 cases where the police intervened in assaults that were restricted to minor violence and in the 24 cases of severe violence.

It is apparent from Table 26.3 that arrest is far from typical. An arrest
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TABLE 26.3
Police Responses by Violence Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police Response</th>
<th>Minor N = 14</th>
<th>Severe N = 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broke up fight</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit or pushed someone</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried to calm everyone</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listened to response’s story</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave warning</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took info; filed report</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordered husb. out of house</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened arrest, now</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened arrest, next time</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrested husband</td>
<td>7.0% (1)</td>
<td>20.8% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrested wife</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.2% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

was made in only one (7%) of the minor violence police calls, and this may not be surprising. However, it is remarkable that, despite the alleged improvements, these national survey findings show arrests occurred in response to only five (21%) of severe wife assaults. Furthermore, in the majority of cases police do not file reports or, at least, victims are not aware that they have. With regard to instances of minor violence, even threats of arrest or other warnings are rare.

Comparison of the minor and severe violence columns of Table 26.3 shows that just as battered women use more strategies in severe violence, so do police. However, these are predominantly mediation or “cooling out” strategies. The most frequently used police techniques are calming the participants, listening to the partners’ stories, warning the parties, ordering husbands out, and breaking up the fight. Arrest or threat of arrest is rare. The practice of police favoring arrest for assaults on wives may be spreading, but the experience of the 504 battered women in this 1985 national sample suggests that little has actually changed.

Impediments to Change

Despite extensive efforts over the past decade, battered women still rarely call police and, when called, police rarely arrest or threaten to
arrest assailants. Why has change been so slow? The reasons are numerous and complex. For example, patriarchal attitudes and behaviors are difficult to change because they are entrenched in the economic and political organization of society. In addition, most wife beating occurs in isolation, inducing passivity and maintaining the isolation of battered women. Moreover, as we suggested, defining family violence as criminal poses important contradictions and moral dilemmas.

Although we do not pretend to have a full understanding of the impediments to change, the following sections are intended to provide a better understanding by looking at the issue from the perspectives of the batterers, the battered women, and the law enforcement agents involved.

**Batterers**

An analysis of the extent to which legal and other sanctions might deter potential batterers was carried out by Carmody and Williams (1987) using other data from the NFVS. This analysis sheds some light on the assailants’ perspective. They examined the relationship between perceptions of possible sanctions for wife assault and actual incidence, i.e., deterrent effects. The formal and informal sanctions they considered were retaliatory violence, police intervention, separation and divorce, and social condemnation (loss of respect or disapproval of friends and relatives). Two perceptual components of sanctions were considered: *certainty* (the respondent’s estimate of the chances that the sanction would be imposed) and *severity* (how bad it would be if it happens). One of the main findings is that although arrest was viewed as a severe sanction, the subjectively experienced deterrence of this sanction may be almost zero because batterers believe that arrest is very unlikely. Our finding of a police intervention rate of only 6.7% and an arrest rate of about 1% indicates that batterers are correct in this belief. Carmody and Williams also examined the perceived deterrent effect of the spouse leaving. The results were similar to the analysis of arrest and for the same reason: few assailants think their wives would leave them. These findings suggest that part of the reason men beat their wives is that they believe they can get away with it.

**Battered Women**

Our survey did not ask women specifically about why they did not call the police, but inferences are possible based on the relationships examined. For example, the predominance of passive strategies in coping with violence suggests that learned helplessness (Walker, 1979) may play an important role. It also appears that economic dependency undermines
decisions to call police, as it does in determining whether the woman stays or leaves (see Chapter 20). Women’s helplessness is not just learned or psychological but real in economic terms.

Other research findings indicate that perceptions of assaults as personal and private matters, fear of reprisals (Langan and Innes, 1986), physical inability to call the police, and difficulty in defining themselves as “sufficiently battered” are all factors in decisions not to report (Reed et al., 1983). The following comment by a woman who did not call police (from Reed et al., 1983:29) is an example of women’s difficulty in defining themselves as battered: “He didn’t really beat me. He just grabbed me, turned me upside down and banged my head on the floor.” Reed et al. give several examples of the most frequent reason they found for lack of police contact, the physical inability to call the police: phones were often destroyed by batterers or the household simply did not receive telephone service, victims were sometimes too injured to place a phone call or were held captive by their husbands. Thus many victims might seek help from the police if they had the opportunity to do so.

Furthermore, the same dynamics that maintain women in abusive relationships such as “the battered women’s syndrome” (Walker, 1979) deter women from calling the police. Erratic, unpredictable, uncontrollable violence induces helplessness, passivity, and despair. Because the violence is inconsistent with the partner’s loving behavior, the spouse expresses remorse or assures his wife it won’t recur, so she remains silent. Moreover, calling the police on one’s spouse is a flagrant violation of family norms.

Police

Why do our data show such a low arrest or even warning of arrest? Part of the answer probably lies in the general reluctance of police to arrest for any type of civil disturbance crime. However, police are also greatly influenced by prosecutorial and judicial decisions. Another part of the answer is that police have gone to the same cultural school as women. Women have been “trained” to be dependent on men and to preserve family relationships. The police equivalent of this is the formal and informal injunction to tread carefully in family situations. Both battered women and police are likely to experience the same ambiguity about whether a family assault is truly “criminal,” even though the same standards for misdemeanor and felony assaults should apply regardless of the victim-perpetrator relationship. Another factor may be that police are responding to some women’s wishes that the violence just stop or that the assailant be simply removed (Ford, 1983; Reed, et al., 1983; Straus, 1976).
The data from the 1985 Resurvey provides some evidence indicating that this is still the case. We found that despite the rarity of arrest, 77% of severely assaulted women and 92% of victims of less serious assaults were satisfied with police response. Perhaps women feel that the symbolic threat posed by police presence is a sufficient deterrent.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter, based on data from the 1985 Resurvey, found that reports to police were the exception rather than the rule. Only 6.7% of all husband-to-wife assaults are reported to police. When severity of violence is considered, 3.2% of minor violence and 14.4% of severe violence is reported. In contrast, the NCS found that 52% of domestic violence victims reported crimes to police. We suggested that the reason for the difference is that respondents in the NCS did not define most assaults by husbands as a "crime." Rather, NCS respondents may have limited their reports to only those assaults that were perceived as criminal, such as those resulting in serious injury. This explains why the NCS finds a much lower incidence rate of wife assault and a much higher rate of reporting assaults to the police. Normative ambiguity about when violent acts by family members can be considered criminal appears lessened only when the assaults fall at the extreme end of the violence continuum. However, even when physical violence is extreme or brutal, reasons other than ambiguity can interfere with actual reports to the criminal justice system.

Examination of characteristics associated with reports to police revealed that severity of violence is the most important correlate. Factors promoting economic dependency such as husband’s unemployment, housewife status, and poverty deter victims of severe violence from calling police. On the other hand, women were significantly more likely to call police when drinking had occurred at the time of violence. This may be related to women’s disgust with the husband’s drunkenness or greater feelings of justification when a spouse is drunk, regardless of how severe the assault. Additionally, they may fear more extreme violence because of past experiences with their husband’s drunken rages.

Calling the police and arrests by police remain rare strategies of last resort. Mediation still dominates as the typical means of police intervention. While mediation may be appropriate under certain circumstances, recent research has shown that the strongest deterrent effects occur when police arrest. It is clear that a double standard for criminal justice processing of extra-family and intrafamily crime remains. This is part of the reason why wife beating persists despite almost universal condemnation of this type of assault and despite recent legislation that more clearly
defines it as criminal. Until the probability of arrest increases, assailants will continue to receive a de facto message that they can assault their wives with impunity. Nevertheless, important as legal sanctions may be from the police through the judiciary, formal sanctions alone will not make the problem of wife-beating disappear. Many other aspects of our culture also underlie the high rate of assault on wives in the United States and are discussed in Chapters 23 and 28. These include the high level of “legitimate violence” in American society (Baron and Straus, 1987) and gender-based inequality under which women are socialized for dependent roles and denied the economic resources to leave violent marriages.

Notes

1. This explanation also helps us to understand the huge differences in injury rates from the two surveys. Approximately half of all spouse assaults in the NCS involved injury, compared to only 2.5% of the assaults in the NFVS. We suggest that the difference exists because the occurrence of an injury is one of the factors that leads a woman to redefine the assault from a “family problem” to a “crime” and therefore to describe it to the NCS interviewer.

2. The question posed to women about their immediate responses to the violence was of a forced choice type: “Which of the following describes what you did as a result?” Therefore, the responses discussed here may not be representative of the creativity of women’s reactions and strategies in eluding or deterring the violence. See Bowker, 1983, for a discussion of women’s strategies in coping with violence.
REFERENCES


