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Domestic abuse is a nationwide problem that occurs among persons of all ages, genders, races, socioeconomic groups, and educational backgrounds. According to the American College of Emergency Physicians (2006), domestic violence, also called Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), arises when one person uses force to inflict injury, either emotional or physical, upon another person with whom they have, or had, a relationship. This type of abuse occurs between spouses and partners, parents and children, children and grandparents, and brothers and sisters (American College of Emergency Physicians, 2006). Domestic violence is also referred to as partner abuse, spouse abuse, or battering.

### **Domestic Violence in the U.S.**

Although women are more likely to be the victims in domestic abuse cases, violence against men by women is a serious problem that is often disregarded or underestimated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2006) estimate that 2.9 million men are the victims of domestic violence each year. Still, according to the National Violence Against Women survey, one out of every four women has been physically assaulted or raped by an intimate partner, as opposed to one out of every 14 men (Family Violence Program, 2004).

Women ages 20-24 reported more violence by intimates than any other age group (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007).

Nearly five million women are abused each year, and 1,300 of those battered women will die of their injuries (American College of Emergency Physicians (ACER), 2006). Researchers estimate that in the United States, 44% of female murder victims killed by their intimate partner had visited the emergency room within two years of their

homicide, indicating a continually abusive relationship (ACER, 2006).

Throughout the United States, the rates of homicide by intimate partners (spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends) have declined over the past 25 years (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). During that same time, policy reaction and public awareness of the dangerous ramifications of domestic abuse has enhanced. Consequently, domestic violence policies and programs developed considerably beginning in the early 1970's, when the battered women's movement began pressuring the public for greater awareness of spousal abuse, driving officials to redefine domestic violence as a criminal offense as opposed to a private matter. As a result, policymakers took action and strengthened criminal justice sanctions, specialized procedures, and services for victims (Dugan, L., Nagin, D., & Rosenfeld, R., 2003).

Domestic violence was made a federal felony in 1994 with the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). In 2000, the VAWA was amended to include cyber-stalking and remove several obstacles to federal prosecution, with reauthorization passed in 2006. (National Research Center for Women and Families, 2006).

### **Risk Factors**

Some contributing factors associated with intimate partner violence are chronic alcohol abuse, high levels of marital conflict, and a lack of communication skills (CDC, 2008). The common component, though, in every incident of intimate partner violence is the perpetrator's sense of entitlement to dominate and control the relationship (National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2007). Women who encounter

any form of domestic violence eventually may experience physical, psychological, and/or social consequences. They are also more likely to exhibit behaviors that present further health risks, such as substance abuse, alcoholism, and increased risk of suicide attempts (CDC, 2006). Children who witness such abuse are reported to be at greater risk of developing psychiatric disorders, developmental problems, school failure, violence against others, and low self-esteem (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2004).

It is important to be aware of potential risk factors of becoming a victim of domestic violence. The following are many of the indications of an unhealthy relationship which may become violent: The person you love...

- “Tracks” all of your time
- Constantly accuses you of being unfaithful
- Discourages your relationships with family & friends
- Criticizes you for little things
- Angers easily when drinking or using other drugs
- Controls all finances and monitors your expenses
- Humiliates you in front of others
- Threatens you or your children in any way
- Destroys personal property or sentimental items

(San Antonio Police Department, 2005)

### Domestic Violence in Texas

According to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, there were 186,868 cases of family violence incidents, 120 women killed by their intimate partner, 12,356 adults received shelter from their abusive relationships, and 16,968 children received shelter (Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV), 2009). Overall, the Health and Human Services Commission estimates 924,042 Texas women were battered in 2004 (TCFV, 2004). The Texas Council on Family Violence administered a statewide polling on prevalence and attitudes on domestic violence in 2002. The survey indicated that 74% of all Texans had either personally experienced or known a friend and/or family member who had experienced some form of domestic violence. Furthermore, 47% of all Texans report having personally experienced at least one form of domestic violence – severe (physical or sexual), verbal, and/or forced isolation from friends and family at some point in their lifetime (TCFV,

2004). Below is a table that reflects family violence in Texas from 2002-2006.

**Family Violence in Texas**

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Family violence incidents</b>	183,440	185,299	182,087	187,811	186,868
<b>Women killed by intimate male partner</b>	117	140	115 <sup>1</sup>	143	120

<sup>1</sup>TDPS 2004 Uniform Crime Report -Supplemental Homicide Report that does not include ex-girlfriends and TCFV research of news accounts (TCFV, 2004; TCFV, 2007; TCFV, 2009)

It is important to note above that intimate male partner is defined as husband, ex-husband, common-law husband, boyfriend, and ex-boyfriend.

In 2004, The Texas Health and Human Services Commission revealed the following information from the Family Violence Program about intimate partner violence in Texas:

- 83,349 victims and their children were served by its programs
- 948,610 direct services were provided
- 80% of victims were female
- 75% of victims were Anglo or Hispanic
- 71% of victims were under the age of 40
- 53% of victims reported experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse
- 40% of victims reported experiencing psychological and/or verbal abuse
- 179,061 hotline crisis calls were received at statewide programs from or about victims of family violence
- 7,201 victims and their children were denied shelter due to lack of space.

(Family Violence Program, 2004)

Hispanics throughout Texas face a higher than average risk of domestic abuse. Nearly, five million Hispanic Texans are affected by domestic violence (TCFV, 2004). The Texas Council on Family Violence 2002 survey sampled the Texas Hispanic population in an attempt to account for any cultural differences specific to the Hispanic community on domestic violence. The survey indicated that 77% of all Hispanic Texans have either personally, or know a family member and/or a friend who has, experienced some form of domestic violence (TCFV, 2004). Furthermore, 64% of all Hispanic Texans indicate that they or a

member of their family have experienced at least one form of domestic violence in their lifetime. The survey also found that two out of every five Hispanic Texas females (39%) reported severe abuse (TCFV, 2004).

### **Effects of Violence on Children**

There are various ways that children are negatively impacted by domestic violence. Studies show that in 30-60% of cases in which a parent abuses another parent, the children are also physically abused (American Bar Association, 2005a). Children may also witness acts of domestic violence by being present in the same vicinity during the incident of abuse, by hearing the violence from afar, or by seeing the aftermath of the abuse through their mother's physical markings—bruises and broken limbs. In some cases, children are severely traumatized by the abusive encounter and are in need of immediate intervention and therapy. In other situations, children may only need to be removed from the situation and offered need-based support. Nevertheless, the impact of residing in homes where domestic violence exists is destructive to the emotional, developmental, and physical well-being of those children (Powell, 2009). Studies reveal that at least 3.3 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year (Genesis Women's Shelter, n.d.). Many children experience severe post traumatic stress disorder after witnessing acts of domestic violence. Some of the symptoms that children may encounter are:

- Inability to sleep throughout the night
- Headaches, stomach aches, bed wetting, and soiling
- Anger acted out through temper tantrums or directed inward
- Withdrawal or disassociation
- Fear of strangers
- Fear of abandonment

(Powell, 2009)

As children grow older, they may begin to experience feelings of guilt and self-blame for not protecting their mothers or for not playing a more active role in preventing the occurrence (Family Abuse Center, n.d.). This may lead to drug and alcohol abuse in order to deal with the guilt (Powell, 2009). Furthermore, school-aged children tend to have poor academic performance, are frequently absent from class, may exhibit behavior problems, or withdraw from social relations.

Studies have shown that living in an abusive environment increases children's risk of getting involved with the juvenile justice system. The National Institute of Justice (2001) reported that children who grew up in violent homes had an increased likelihood of arrest: 59% as a juvenile; 28% as an adult; and 30% for a violent crime. Children may learn to use anger and aggression to resolve conflicts in their lives or to obtain control and exert power over others. Children who are raised in homes where domestic violence occurs are also more likely to abuse others or become victims of abuse as adolescents or adults (American Bar Association, 2005b). The younger the child involved in an abusive situation the more vulnerable the child becomes. When children are killed during a domestic dispute, 90% are under the age of 10, and 56% are under the age of 2 (Genesis Women's Shelter, n.d.).

### **Battered Woman's Syndrome**

Why women stay in abusive situations is a fairly complex phenomenon. In 1989, the Court in *People v. Aris* affirmed that there are various reasons why battered women are inclined to stay in abusive relationships. Some of those reasons include:

- Women are still positively reinforced during the honeymoon phase
- Women tend to be the peacekeepers in the relationships (the ones responsible for making the marriage work)
- Adverse economic consequences
- Rationalization that it is more dangerous to leave than to stay
- Prior threats by batterer to kill self, or children; or to run away with children
- Lost self-esteem
- No psychological energy to leave (resulting in a learned helplessness or psychological paralysis)

(Rubenstein, 2004)

The condition, known as "battered woman's syndrome," is best characterized as a subgroup of what the American Psychological Association (APA) defines as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, rather than as a form of mental illness (APA, 2004). This syndrome describes a pattern of psychological and behavioral symptoms found in women living in abusive relationships. There are four general characteristics of the syndrome: (the woman)

1. believes that the violence was her fault.
2. has an inability to place the responsibility for the violence elsewhere.
3. fears for her life and/or her children's lives.
4. has an irrational belief that the abuser is omnipresent or omniscient.

(Rubenstein, 2004)

Domestic violence affects persons of all ages across gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and education level. The vast majority of domestic violence victims in heterosexual relationships are women (American Bar Association, 2005b). Although a large number of the cases go unreported due to the fact that most incidents occur in the privacy of the home, domestic violence is still a grave national problem that has the potential to inflict devastating ramifications to all persons involved.

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