Guest Editorial

INTEGRATIVE RESEARCH ON INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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Research on intimate partner violence is a relatively young enterprise. This should surprise readers new to this literature, including many readers of *Public Health Reports,* for the phenomenon of intimate partner violence—often called domestic violence or family violence in the popular literature—has long intersected several cross-currents of theory, research, law, and public policy on interpersonal violence. For public health professionals and advocates and for battered women, intimate partner violence is a major source of injuries and fatalities. Intimate partner violence presents recurring challenges to legal institutions and actors, who often are first responders to this widespread and persistent social problem. It is a robust contributor to a wide range of physical, social, and mental health problems among women and children, problems that help reproduce intimate partner violence across generations. Although the institutional and individual costs of intimate partner violence are broadly distributed, the burden falls most heavily on women, especially those with the fewest resources, who face the highest barriers to remediation or escape.

In the four decades since the research literature on intimate partner violence emerged, a vibrant array of diverse and intensive efforts has been launched to use this new knowledge for its prevention and control. Intimate partner violence has been the focus of state and federal legislation, numerous federal and state "blue ribbon" commissions, several important U.S. Supreme Court cases and numerous state court decisions, intensive advocacy and lobbying efforts at all levels of government, several criminal justice policy experiments, broad public education campaigns, professional development and training curricula of health and social service workers, and numerous treatments in popular culture and the media. It has drawn the interest of researchers and theorists from every discipline in the social and behavioral sciences, and research on intimate partner violence now populates the leading journals in each. Through this social, political, and legal mobilization, intimate partner violence has amassed a deep reserve of political and intellectual capital whose critical mass now challenges the underlying social and cultural norms that for centuries have condoned if not animated the abuse of intimate partners.

The commitment of both researchers and policy makers to develop robust knowledge to drive policy and practice may explain why, since 1990, intimate partner violence has been the primary or collateral focus of no fewer than five publications of the National Research Council.[1–5] This extraordinary scientific attention is unprecedented. Beyond consolidating and disseminating research knowledge, these recurring scientific reviews sustain the commitment of researchers, and have helped overcome the snobbery in academic settings that often devalues practice-based research. Instead, the attention of prestigious bodies such as the National Research Council (NRC) continues to energize a community of researchers to produce work that advances practical and theoretical knowledge while maintaining a sharp scientific edge.

The most recent of these NRC reviews was a Workshop in 2002 that led to the publication in 2004 of a research agenda on violence against women.[5] Intimate partner violence was a recurring concern in the Workshop papers, but not its primary focus. This special issue of *Public Health Reports* advances the Workshop's agenda by presenting a set of articles and essays that contribute directly to each of its topics with the focus on intimate partner violence. The collection samples contemporary work to illustrate the conceptual and methodological advances of the past two decades, and also shows the tight fit between practice and research. The articles span a wide range of research questions raised by the 2004 NRC agenda: social ecological influences on intimate partner violence, the efficacy of treatment interventions and legal interventions to enhance deterrence, and basic research on criminal careers and the factors that promote desistance.

But this collection goes beyond the NRC agenda through work that addresses other essential research questions, such as advances in risk assessment, new technologies for surveillance, and identification of the collateral social and emotional damage of intimate partner violence. There are also new and important contributions to this scientific literature, including both comparative research and research on immigrant communities. The collection is also extraordinarily diverse intellectually. Contributors are researchers in public health, nursing, law, criminal justice, psychiatry, and medicine, as well as from the social sciences: sociology, psychology, and political science. Several of the papers

represent partnerships among academics and professionals working in government agencies. This integration of ideas and disciplines suggests that intimate partner violence is no longer a stepchild or sideshow among social and behavioral scientists, nor is it captive of any one conceptual or ideological paradigm.

This collection provides insights into a set of connected questions on violence theory and research. First, what is the unique contribution of research on intimate partner violence to the prediction or explanation of violence generally? Several articles respond to this challenge. For example, some show the importance of the connectedness of the lives of women with abusive men, and the resulting difficulty of exit to achieve safety; others show the unique dimensions of risk that are a function of marital status. The second question builds on the first: do we need a special theory of intimate partner violence to make clear distinctions and accurate predictions of victimization of intimate partners, victimization of women generally, and general (stranger) violence? This is a more difficult question, and this collection provides valuable insights that will help shape an answer. For example, the review on the complexity of treatment interventions for perpetrators suggests that the etiology of intimate partner violence may include social, cultural, and mental health dimensions that are indeed unique from violence that takes place in other contexts.

The third question concerns methods: are unique measures and methods needed to produce reliable research on intimate partner violence? Here the answer is, on balance, yes, as shown in the articles on surveillance, risk assessment, and the facilitators of exit from abusive relationships. At the same time, some of the articles in this special issue—on neighborhoods, on desistance, and on marital status—show that the criminological tools of strong empirical research also can be put to work productively to create new and useful knowledge on intimate partner violence.

There are important theoretical and research perspectives that are missing from the collection in this issue. For example, economists have made important contributions through analyses that estimate the effects of law and policy on intimate partner violence. Also, basic research on the perpetrators of intimate partner violence is extremely important to inform clinical interventions and prevention strategies, and to understand the effects of social and legal sanctions. Although the collection in this special issue includes articles that estimate the impact of formal institutional interventions (e.g., arrest, prosecution, and treatment) and extra-legal or social interventions (such as divorce), research is missing from this volume on the life history of perpetrators; such work is desperately needed to better understand the processes and animating factors in "natural" or residual desistance from intimate partner violence.

We hope that future collections will include a broader palette of research enterprises, such as interactionist analyses of the situations and dynamics of episodes of intimate partner violence, risk factors and and processual dynamics of violence by women or within same-sex relationships, life history studies of victims in intimate partner violence that examine their decisions before and after their involvement in violent relationships. Studies of institutional responses to intimate partner violence also offer a unique contribution, and future collections should include studies that examine the interior dynamics of legal and social institutions through an organizational lens. Professor Carolyn Ramsey's historical essay, showing the struggles that took place a century ago within the law and legal institutions, illustrates this type of institutional and historic-contextual analysis. Similarly, Professor Deborah Weissman's essay on the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Crawford v. Washington*[6] illustrates the intersection of law and institutional interests that will shape legal responses to intimate partner violence and may adversely affect victims seeking help or escape.

We thank the contributors and peer reviewers for producing this strong and diverse collection of 12 articles and two essays that will immerse readers of *Public Health Reports* in the rich and rigorous research on intimate partner violence. As readers of *Public Health Reports* will recognize instantly, this important collection will help put research to work to address an urgent health and social problem.

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