Non-Fatal Firearm Uses in Domestic Violence

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September 2017

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This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K047 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

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The United States Department of Justice (2017) defines domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner." The use of firearms constitutes one of many tactics abusive partners employ to control and, often, terrorize their victims. Survivors of domestic violence have noted that while their violent intimate partners (often termed "batterers") did not need guns to be violent, guns were tools used by abusers in their violence and increased the danger to their victims (Lynch & Logan, 2015). Additionally, survivors report that batterers use guns to gain power over them, including coercing them to do things they do not want to do. Indeed, this tactic may be particularly effective in controlling partners and has particularly dire outcomes. As so well-put by Sorenson & Schut (2016, p. 3): "An abuser can simply display his gun during an argument or otherwise exhibit the gun in a hostile manner in order to imply a threat, which understandably elicits acquiescence from an intimate, as it often does in a robbery or other criminal act against a stranger."

While much of the focus on the use of firearms in domestic violence is on homicides, nonfatal uses of firearms in domestic violence impact a greater number of people in the United States (Truman & Morgan, 2014). Despite this, nonfatal uses of firearms in domestic violence is an understudied area. This paper reviews what we know about firearm access, frequency of use, and outcomes of firearm use in domestic violence.

Gun access for batterers

Research suggests that the risk of homicide increases when a violent intimate partner has access to a firearm (Campbell, et al., 2003). Similarly, the risk of using a gun in nonfatal domestic violence is also greater when a violent intimate partner has access to a firearm (Rothman, Hemenway, Miller, & Azrael, 2005). Studies differ, however, on how common it is for an abusive partner to have access to firearms. These differences are due, at least in part, to what or who is studied (Sorenson & Schut, 2016). For example, researchers may survey victims or batterers, or they may obtain information from police reports or domestic violence restraining order petitions. These different sources of information can vary in the accuracy and completeness of data they provide. Differences in estimates of batterer firearm access may also be due to the locations under study. States vary greatly in their approach to regulating firearms, both in response to domestic violence and otherwise, and whether a batterer's possession of a firearm is legal or illegal may depend on the state the batterer is in.

In a population-based study of women who had been victimized by an intimate partner in 11 U.S. cities in multiple different states, 24 percent of women who had

been victimized by their partners within the previous two years reported that their partners had access to firearms (Frye, Manganello, Campbell, Walton-Moss, & Wilt, 2006). The participants in the study were identified through random digit dialing phone numbers and asking women to complete the interview. It is generally thought that this type of approach (called random sampling) to recruiting participants may provide a reasonably representative sample of the population under study.

Other researchers have recruited partner-abused women who have engaged in help-seeking for domestic violence. In a study of women in battered women's shelters in California, 39 percent of women interviewed reported that their abusive partner owned a gun (Sorenson & Wiebe, 2004). Similarly, 38 percent of abusive partners were reported to have access to guns in a study of domestic violence restraining order cases in a North Carolina county (Moracco, Clark, Espersen, & Bowling, 2006).

Researchers have also studied court-involved partner abusive men. Only 1.8 percent of batterers enrolled in batterer intervention programs in Massachusetts self-reported that firearms were kept in their homes at the time of the interview (Rothman, Johnson, & Hemenway, 2006). The authors of the study suggest that this notably low percentage may be due to the successful implementation of Massachusetts' relatively restrictive gun laws (Rothman, et al., 2006).

Frequency and types of domestic violence firearm use

Firearms are used in different ways during the course of non-fatal domestic violence. These include the following:

- Threatening to shoot (with or without displaying the gun)
- Intimidating the victim
- Brandishing the gun
- Pistol-whipping
- Shooting the gun (with or without hitting the victim)
- Having the gun present but not used in the violence

Much like access to firearms, the frequency of firearm use that research finds may depend on the sample of domestic violence cases under study, with population-based samples expected to have a lower percentage of firearm-related domestic violence than samples drawn from those who have sought assistance for domestic violence. This is because help-seeking groups are thought to have a higher percentage of cases that are characterized by more severe violence than the general population of cases.

Data from the 2003-2012 National Crime Victimization Surveys, a large and nationally representative survey of the United States, found that 3.4 percent of

victims of domestic violence reported gun use during the violence (Truman & Morgan, 2014). Data from an earlier nationally representative study, the National Violence Against Women Survey, suggest that 3.5 percent of American women have been threatened with a gun by an intimate partner in their lifetimes while 0.7 percent of women had a gun used against them by an intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Given population estimates, this amounts to 4.5 million women being threatened and 900,000 women having a gun used against them in their lifetimes in the United States (Sorenson, 2017). The same survey estimates that 0.4 percent of American men were threatened with a gun and 0.1 percent of men had a gun used against them by an intimate partner in their lifetimes (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). This theme of firearms being used against female intimate partners with a greater frequency than against male intimate partners is consistently found throughout the literature.

Multiple studies of domestic violence incidents that rely on police reports for data have been conducted. It is estimated that roughly 56 percent of all domestic violence victimizations are reported to the police (Reaves, 2017). A study of a random sample of police-reported cases of domestic violence in San Diego County uncovered that 0.8 percent of victims had a firearm used on them (Kernsmith & Craun, 2008). This percentage is low in comparison with population-based studies and other studies of police report data.

One such study of all police reports of domestic violence in Philadelphia, PA found that of incidents that involved weapons (which was broadly defined to include bodily weapons such as hands), 6.8 percent involved guns (Sorenson, 2017). Most commonly, firearms were used to threaten and intimidate victims. In 10 percent of cases involving guns, the firearm was shot, and in roughly 43 percent of those cases, the bullet hit the victim. This study examined events by gender and found that eighty percent of the calls that involved guns had male offenders and female victims (Sorenson, 2017). Additionally, compared to incidents that did not involve a weapon, incidents that involved guns were more likely to have offenders who had a history of substance use or were on probation. They were also more likely to involve non-Hispanic Black or Hispanic victims and to occur after a relationship had ended. Interestingly, gun use was more common when the parties had a history of domestic violence, but less common if a domestic violence restraining order had ever been issued (Sorenson, 2017).

A third study that utilized police report data, through the 2008 National Incident-Based Reporting System (which, while large, did not cover a representative sample of the United States), limited the sample of domestic violence cases studied to aggravated assaults only. Roughly 9 percent of these aggravated assaults involved firearms (Addington & Perumean-Chaney, 2014). When examined by gender, 10.9 percent of cases with female victims and 5 percent of cases with male victims involved firearms, a statistically significant difference.

Nationally, roughly 39 percent of police reported domestic violence result in arrest or criminal charges against the offender (Reaves, 2017). The sample of domestic violence offenders who are arrested or criminally charged are more likely to have seriously injured their victims than those who are not arrested or charged (Reaves, 2017). Sullivan and Weiss (2017) interviewed a sample of women involved in criminal cases of domestic violence against their abusive intimate partners and found that 24 percent were threatened with firearms during the relationship, and 13 percent were afraid their partners would use a gun against them.

Researchers have also looked at domestic violence restraining order petitions and petitioners as sources of information on firearms and domestic violence. Of women who file for restraining orders against their violent partners, more than half have suffered severe physical abuse and/or stalking (Keilitz, Hannaford, & Efkeman, 1997; Logan & Walker, 2010; Moracco, et al., 2006), making this a particularly high-risk group for future severe violence. In North Carolina, it was found that 23 percent of petitioners "experienced firearm-related [domestic violence] in the 12 months prior to filing" for the restraining order (Moracco, et al., 2006, p. 3). In a study in California, 16 percent of domestic violence restraining order applications had explicit mentions of firearms in their descriptions of abuse (Vittes & Sorenson, 2006).

Sorenson and Wiebe (2004) studied women in battered women shelters in California and found that roughly 16 percent of batterers had used a long gun and 32 percent of batterers had used a handgun against their partners. This is the only study reported here that analyzed the nonfatal use of handguns and long guns separately. Roughly two-thirds of women who reported a gun was kept in their home reported that their partners used the gun to scare, threaten, or harm them. The most common use of a gun by a batterer was to threaten to shoot the victim, with 5 percent of batterers actually shooting at the victim. Additionally, 3 percent of batterers made firearm threats against the children (Sorenson & Wiebe, 2004).

Most of the data on firearm use in domestic violence come from police reports, restraining orders, or victim interviews or surveys. However, Rothman and colleagues (2005) asked batterers enrolled in batterer intervention programs in Massachusetts to self-report on their use of firearms in domestic violence. In a study of 8,529 batterer intervention program participants, 2.8 percent reported that they had made a gun threat (with or without displaying a gun) against their partners. However, among the 7 percent who admitted to owning a gun in the past 3 years, 11.8 percent reported they had made a gun threat against their partners. Common firearm uses were to threaten or intimidate victims, with 6.9 percent of gun owners reporting that they "handled, cleaned, loaded, or displayed a firearm during an argument" (Rothman, et al., 2005, p. 63). Just over 4 percent of gun owning batterers reported shooting a gun while arguing with their partners.

In addition to using firearms to threaten and shoot at their partners, batterers use them as blunt weapons to pistol-whip their partners. A study of penetrating and non-penetrating (ie, blunt) firearm injuries presenting at hospitals found that women were 3.6 times more likely than men to be shot and 3.9 times more likely than men to be struck with a gun by a current or former spouse than by a stranger (Wiebe, 2003). That same study found that as age increases, the differences by gender decrease; for example women aged 15 to 29 years were 8.9 times more likely than men aged 15 to 29 years to have been shot by a current or former spouse than by a stranger, while women over 40 years old were 1.8 times more likely (Wiebe, 2003).

Outcomes of gun access and use in domestic violence

While outcomes of a batterer's use of a gun can be severe, access to a gun, in and of itself, may also have severe consequences. An offender simply having access to a gun can result in a victim being afraid and feeling less safe (Folkes, Hilton, & Harris, 2013; Lynch & Logan, 2015; Sorenson, 2017; Sorenson & Wiebe, 2004). This is because the gun "could be used on them at any time" (Lynch & Logan, 2015, p. 8). In fact, the majority of women whose abusive partners had access to guns in Sorenson & Wiebe's (2004) study of women in battered women's shelters in California reported that it made them feel less safe.

Relatedly, batterers who have access to guns may be more violent than those who do not (Sorenson & Wiebe, 2004; Zeoli, Malinski, & Turchan, 2016). Researchers have found that simply having access to a firearm is associated with a batterer's use of one or more controlling behaviors versus no controlling behaviors against his partner (Frye, et al., 2006). Additionally, in a study of police reports of domestic violence offenders, those who had access to firearms committed more severe assaults than those who did not (Folkes, et al., 2013). Interestingly, this was not due to firearm use in the assault (which occurred in only 3 of 1,421 cases).

Three additional studies support the hypothesis that batterers who have access to guns are more violent than those who do not. Using data gathered from survivors, Sorenson and Wiebe (2004) found that gun use among domestic violence offenders was associated with use of a greater number of other weapons against intimate partners as well. Similarly, batterer self-reports reveal that firearm threats are associated with using a knife against an intimate partner, and attempted homicide of a partner or other person (Rothman, et al., 2005). Finally, in a study of domestic violence restraining order applications in California, firearms were more likely to be mentioned in applications that also mentioned that the abusive partner made threats to harm or kill the applicants, threats to others, threats of suicide, and stalking (Vittes & Sorenson, 2006).

However, domestic violence that involves guns may be less likely to result in visible injuries to victims than domestic violence that involves other weapons, including bodily weapons (Sorenson, 2017). This may, counterintuitively, be due to the lethal capacity of firearms: they need not be fired to cause victims to fear for their lives. Indeed, victims of firearm-related domestic violence were found to be more likely to be frightened than those against whom firearms were not used. This led Sorenson to conclude that

> "(1) persons who use a gun against their intimate partners are less intent on inflicting physical harm than are those who use another type of weapon; (2) intimates use a gun to intimidate and coerce (ie, to increase victim compliance during an assault), which results in fewer visible injuries and greater victim fear; or (3) some combination of the two." (Sorenson, 2017, p. 255)

A batterer who uses a gun does not need to inflict physical injuries to severely harm the victim. Psychological trauma may occur when threats of gun violence are made. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is experienced by people exposed to traumatic events, such wars, kidnappings, and physical assaults. Importantly, a person can develop PTSD in response to threats of violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Gun threats and fear of gun violence among a sample of women involved in criminal cases of domestic violence against their abusive partners were significant predictors of greater severity of PTSD symptoms (Sullivan & Weiss, 2017). Symptoms can include re-experiencing the traumatic event in flashbacks, hyper-arousal, and sleep disruptions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Conclusion

Batterers use firearms in nonfatal domestic violence to control their partners. Estimates vary regarding the frequency of firearm use, but national estimates suggest that 4.5 million women are threatened and 900,000 women have a gun used against them in their lifetimes in the United States (Sorenson, 2017; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Firearm uses range from threats to shootings, but all uses are associated with negative health outcomes or fear. There are interventions to reduce domestic violence offenders' access to firearms, discussed in this reading www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20363814, which have been associated with decreases in intimate partner homicide (Vigdor & Mercy, 2006; Zeoli & Webster, 2010), but thus far none have been tested to determine if they are associated with reductions in nonfatal firearm uses in domestic violence. Given the number of people domestic violence affects, more research is needed.

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