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New data on intimate partner violence and intimate relationships: Implications for gun laws and federal data collection

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ABSTRACT

Age at first marriage has risen substantially and birth rates are at a record low; people are spending more time in relationships that, by comparison, have fewer emotional, financial, and legal commitments. Little research has examined intimate partner violence (IPV) prevalence in current and former adult (vs. adolescent) dating relationships. Such information is relevant to federal firearms policies that are based on the nature of an intimate relationship. We examined assaultive behaviors by the type and status of the relationship – current spouse, former spouse, current boyfriend or girlfriend, and former boyfriend or girlfriend – in 31,206 IPV incidents responded to by Philadelphia police in 2013. Over 80% of the IPV incidents involved individuals in non-marital relationships. Incidents involving current boyfriends or girlfriends had the highest percentage of violent behaviors (e.g., punch, strangle). They also were more likely than current spouses to use bodily weapons (hands, fists, or feet) or non-gun weapons (knives, bats, etc.) (AOR = 1.19 and 1.43, respectively), to injure their victims (AOR = 1.37), and to be arrested (AOR = 1.46). Former unmarried partners had the highest odds of stalking their intimate (AOR = 3.37) and violating a restraining order (AOR = 2.61). Gun use was similar across relationship type. A growing portion of the population is not protected by federal policies designed to keep guns out of the hands of abusers. Current boyfriends and girlfriends are a risk to their intimates. Federal data collection practices and firearm policies merit updating to more fully take into account dating, same-sex marriage, and other partnerships.

1. Introduction

U.S. marriage patterns have changed dramatically in the past 40 years. Most marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, and cohabiting couples are less likely than ever to transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2014). Age at first marriage has increased substantially: From 1970 to 2009, the median age at first marriage rose from 22.5 to 28.1 years for men and from 20.1 to 25.9 years for women (Lee and Payne, 2010). At the same time, divorce rates among individuals over the age of 35 doubled (Kennedy and Ruggles, 2014).

Recognizing these trends, intimate partner violence (IPV) researchers changed how they conceptualized intimate relationships. The first studies of IPV prevalence treated married and “common-law married” persons as being in comparable relationships (Straus, 1977). By the late 1990s, with greater recognition that living together was not necessarily analogous to common-law marriage, researchers began to compare IPV rates among people who were cohabiting to those who were married (Aldarondo, 1996; Schafer et al., 1998; Zlotnick et al., 1998), a trend that continued into the new millennium (Anderson,

2002; Anderson, 2007; Brownridge, 2004a; Brownridge, 2004b; Field and Raul, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Murty et al., 2003; Zlotnick et al., 2006). Although early studies found higher rates of violence in cohabiting (vs. married) couples, later reports did not.

The few studies that examined IPV prevalence in representative samples of adults that included dating persons came to different conclusions. Among the 18,415 adult women who participated in the 1995–1996 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, independent of age, single and divorced or separated women reported higher rates of IPV than did married persons (Vest et al., 2002). Among the 3295 18–28 year olds who were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health study and who were in an exclusive dating, cohabiting, or married relationship in 2001–2002, daters were less likely to report IPV and cohabiters reported levels of IPV similar to or higher than those reported by married persons (Brown and Bulanda, 2008). These findings, based on data from 15 to 20 years ago, merit updating.

Boyfriends and girlfriends are common perpetrators of fatal IPV. Indeed, about half of the intimate partner homicides in the U.S. are

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perpetrated by an unmarried partner: 2.5% of the 10,608 men murdered in the U.S. in 2015 were husbands ($n = 113$) or boyfriends ($n = 152$) killed by an intimate partner, whereas 35.8% of the 2818 murdered women were wives ($n = 509$) or girlfriends ($n = 496$) killed by an intimate partner (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017a). And, as discussed later, there likely are more such homicides.

The lack of information about violence by current and former non-marital partners has differential impact because marriage patterns differ by race in the U.S. Blacks, who are least likely to marry (Chambers and Kravitz, 2011), can be expected to have a higher percentage of non-marital relationships than whites. This pattern can be observed in intimate partner homicide data: Black women are four times more likely than white women to be murdered by an unmarried partner (Catalano et al., 2009).

Multiple federal and state policies take into consideration the couple's relationship. One such policy is the firearm purchase and possession restrictions placed on certain persons convicted of a misdemeanor domestic violence offense or under certain domestic violence restraining orders. The policy has prevention implications because the most common weapon used in the intimate partner homicide of both women and men is a firearm.

Herein we present some of the first, to our knowledge, data about firearms use in nonfatal IPV by type of relationship. We use law enforcement records because over half of all IPV incidents are reported to police (Reaves, 2017) and because the records include threats with a gun, the most common form of gun use against an intimate partner (Sorenson, 2017). As such, they provide the most complete on-going administrative data available by which to examine IPV-related gun use. Moreover, law enforcement intervention is sometimes necessary, albeit not sufficient, to trigger DV-related federal gun prohibitions. The primary variable of interest is relationship status, that is, whether the victim and offender were currently married, formerly married, currently in a non-marital relationship, or formerly in a non-marital relationship. These categories, not directly comparable to those used in federal IPV gun restriction statutes that were enacted nearly a generation ago, are believed to better reflect current patterns of coupling.

2. Methods

A retrospective cohort study drew upon the 54,456 department-mandated forms completed by Philadelphia Police Department officers when they responded to a call for assistance to a domestic violence incident. The forms, all gathered in calendar year 2013, include a narrative section in which officers write a description of the event as well as a series of checkboxes about the victim-offender relationship and the behavior of the victim, offender, and officer. The form, based on information gathered at the scene when the officer determines that the incident involves IPV, is completed regardless of whether an arrest is made.

A total of 35,413 of the incidents were for IPV, and the incident was the unit of analysis. A total of 4207 cases were excluded from analysis because the relationship status of the couple was missing, could not be ascertained from information provided on the form, or did not fit into any of the categories used for the checkboxes.

Variables are based on the checkboxes on the form and the section in which officers provided a description of the incident. Quality controls implemented during the creation of the latter variables are described elsewhere (Sorenson, 2017).

For ease of exposition, we refer to the married partners as spouses or husbands/wives and the non-marital partners as boy/girlfriends. The latter category comprises a wide range of relationships including traditional romantic and dating relationships as well as sexual relationships with limited emotional attachment. Gun use was defined as physically using the weapon in the incident: brandishing a gun, pistol whipping, and shooting or shooting at the victim.

Simple descriptive statistics were used to examine the association

between relationship type and victim, offender, and officer behaviors. A series of multivariate logistic regressions took into account variables associated with relationship type and the outcome of interest: victim characteristics (gender, race and ethnicity, age), offender characteristics (gender, race and ethnicity, age, on probation, history of substance abuse), whether witnesses were present (any, children), history of domestic violence (prior history, prior police reports, ever had a restraining order), and, to take missing data into account, a “not ascertained” category for each covariate. All comparisons are to “currently married.”

Diagnostic statistics included correlations and Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs), which were acceptable (i.e., < 5.0). Given that we have the population of cases, some might question the utility of statistical tests. We include them using a Bonferroni correction for multiple statistical tests; adjusted odds ratios with a corrected p -level $< .0012$ are reported in the text.

3. Results

Over 80% of the 31,206 incidents involved non-marital relationships: 13,824 (44.3%) involved current boy/girlfriends, 11,801 (37.8%) involved former boy/girlfriends, 4505 (14.4%) involved current spouses, and 1076 (3.5%) involved ex-spouses. Most of the incidents (68.1%) were labeled as “verbal only.” When it came to physical violence, incidents involving current boy/girlfriends had the highest percentage of physical violence (i.e., pushing and shoving, grabbing, hair pulling, slapping, punching, kicking, biting, strangling, and throwing objects. Incidents involving former boy/girlfriends, by contrast, had the highest percentage of stalking-related behavior (i.e., stalking, threatening the victim, breaking into the victim's residence, and violating the terms of a protection from abuse [PFA] order). (See Table 1.) Current boy/girlfriends had the highest percentage of using bodily weapons (hands, fists, and feet) and non-gun external weapons (knives, bats, etc.). Gun use was low for each group and consisted of brandishing (67.6%) and shooting at (11.1%), pistol whipping (9.5%), and shooting (5.4%) the intimate.

When several demographic and contextual factors were taken into account in multivariate analyses, current boy/girlfriend offenders stood out in terms of their violent behavior: compared to current husband/wife offenders: they had higher odds of pushing or shoving, grabbing, punching, and strangling their partners (AORs = 1.25, 1.33, 1.38, and 1.48, respectively). Other violent behaviors did not differ by type of relationship (i.e., pulling hair, slapping, kicking, biting, stabbing, sexually assaulting, imprisoning, or injuring children [data not tabled] and using a gun) in part because the base rate typically was low (i.e., in the single digits). Current boy/girlfriends were more likely than current spouses to use bodily weapons and non-gun external weapons (AOR = 1.19 and 1.43).

Offenders in former partnerships were less likely than current spouses to display certain violent behaviors, and ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends were more likely to engage in stalking-associated behavior. Former partners (both married and not married) had lower odds (vs. current spouses) of pushing and shoving, grabbing, punching, strangling, and throwing objects (AORs = 0.37 and 0.69, 0.33 and 0.74, 0.37 and 0.80, 0.41 and 0.80, and 0.48 and 0.70, respectively). Former partners also were less likely to use bodily weapons and non-gun external weapons (formerly married: AOR = 0.61 and 0.35; former unmarried: AOR = 0.76 and 0.65). One could reasonably expect former partners to be more likely than current spouses to engage in stalking and associated behaviors and that was true for former boy/girlfriends, but not former husbands/wives. Ex-boy/girlfriends were more likely to stalk, threaten the ex-partner, and break in to the victim's residence (AORs = 2.21, 1.74, and 2.81, respectively). They also had a higher odds than currently married offenders of violating the terms of a protection from abuse (PFA) order in the incident as did ex-spouses (AORs = 2.61 and 1.78, respectively).

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