

Press Release

Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland: Report on the National Study of Domestic Abuse

from the National Crime Council in association with the Economic and Social Research Institute

EMBARGOED TO 3 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 5th JULY, 2005

Today, the National Crime Council, in association with the Economic and Social Research Institute, published *the first ever large scale study undertaken to give an overview of the nature, extent and impact of domestic abuse against women and men in intimate partner relationships in Ireland*. The study was commissioned by the National Crime Council and based on a survey conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute of a nationally representative statistical sample of over 3,000 adult women and men, as well as focus group interviews with Traveller and immigrant women. The report is written by Dr. Dorothy Watson, Senior Researcher with the ESRI, Principal Investigator and Senior Author and Miss. Sara Parsons, Research Officer with the National Crime Council.

The study draws a distinction between **severe abuse**, defined as *a pattern of physical, emotional or sexual behaviour between partners in an intimate relationship that causes, or risks causing, significant negative consequences for the person affected* and isolated **minor incidents** that do not form a pattern of behaviour and do not have a severe impact. The two types of behaviour differ in their impact and in the profiles of those affected. The study focuses on severe abuse which is likely to call for an intervention from the Criminal Justice System and/or place demands on support services for victims.

The key findings were outlined by Dr. Watson:

- The report shows that *15 per cent of women (or about one in seven) and six per cent of men (or one in 16) have experienced severely abusive behaviour* of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from an intimate partner at some time in their lives.
- *While the risk to women is higher, domestic abuse is something that also affects a significant number of men*. The survey suggests that in the region of 213,000 women and 88,000 men in Ireland have been severely abused by a partner.

- Apart from the higher risk faced by women, the **risk** of having experienced abuse is also higher in couples where one partner (rather than both jointly) controls **decisions about money**, for those whose **parents were abusive** to each other, for **young adults** and for **those with children**.
- A number of findings in the report suggest an increased risk of abuse where the partners are **isolated from close family and neighbourhood supports**.
- In almost two out of five cases, the abusive behaviour had **no specific trigger** or was triggered by minor incidents. In about one third of cases, abuse is associated with the consumption of **alcohol**. However, in only one quarter of cases was alcohol consumption always involved.
- In terms of the **impact** of domestic abuse, about half of those experiencing severe abuse were **physically injured**. **Women's injuries tended to be more serious** – women are nearly twice as likely as men to require medical treatment for their injuries and ten times more likely to require a stay in hospital. However, respondents often identified **emotional abuse** or the **emotional consequences** of abuse – such as fear, distress and loss of confidence – as the ‘worst thing’ that they experienced. Domestic abuse is also associated with **poor health and disability**.
- **Most women and men who were abused had told someone** about it: almost half had confided in friends and about two in five had talked to family members.
- Only a minority (one in five) had **reported the behaviour to the Gardaí**, however, and men were less likely than women to report (5 per cent compared to 29 per cent of women among those severely abused). Women and men give similar reasons for not reporting the abuse, most often related to the seriousness of the behaviour, a preference for handling the situation themselves, and shame or embarrassment.
- There is evidence that people are **leaving abusive relationships**. There is a clear link between domestic abuse and **marital breakdown**. Also, almost three quarters of those who were ever severely abused were no longer in the abusive relationship and among those who lived with an abusive partner in the past, over half had moved out.
- **Informal supports** were important when someone left an abusive relationship. Of those who were living with an abusive partner and moved out, nine out of ten stayed with family or friends, and only 7 per cent stayed at either a homeless hostel, a refuge or on the street.
- The focus groups with **Traveller and immigrant women** indicated that they shared a broadly similar view of domestic abuse as the general population and had a similar tendency to rely on informal supports, but with some differences: immigrant women were very unlikely to consider marital rape to be ‘domestic abuse’ and were not well informed of the services available to women experiencing abuse. Both Traveller and immigrant women showed a strong aversion to approaching the ‘authorities’, such as the Gardaí and social workers, for help.

Speaking at the publication of the report the Chairman of the National Crime Council, Padraic White said that **“the National Study of Domestic Abuse was a pioneering**

one for Ireland in many ways – it covered physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; it included both women’s and men’s experiences of domestic abuse and it used the most modern techniques to analyse the data. The National Crime Council embarked on this momentous study to get the most accurate possible measure of the hidden crimes that occur behind closed doors and which have a traumatic impact on the victims”. He added “society must do all in its power to lift the veil of secrecy that surrounds domestic abuse. Collectively we must ensure that when a person discloses abusive behaviour - to a family member, a friend, the Gardaí, health professionals or others – that that call for help and assistance is met.”

He went on to outline the main recommendations put forward by the Council:

1. In relation to An Garda Síochána the Council recommends that recording practices, Garda policy and training around domestic abuse be examined to encourage increased reporting of domestic abuse;
2. When domestic abuse is a contributory factor in a crime a Court should consider such conduct as an aggravating factor for the purpose of sentencing;
3. Both the Criminal Courts and the Family Division of the Civil Courts should be provided with a wider range of disposal options, taking into account the safety of the complainant and the treatment and/or rehabilitation of the offender;
4. Judges sitting in the Family Law Courts should receive appropriate on-going training;
5. Regional Family Law Courts should be established;
6. The Courts Service should collect data on the gender, age group and available demographics of the parties appearing before the Courts;
7. A Working Group should be established by the Department of Health and Children to review the report’s findings and the HSE should take steps to raise awareness amongst health professionals of domestic abuse and provide information and appropriate supports for those disclosing abusive behaviour in a medical setting; and
8. The findings from the report should guide the future provision and financial support for culturally appropriate services for women and men experiencing domestic abuse.

Concluding Padraic White called on *“the Government, the National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women, and all other organisations dealing with women and men experiencing domestic abuse and perpetrating such abuse to give careful and urgent consideration to the findings.”*

5th July, 2005.