

Research addresses impact of violence against women

December 9 2013, by Tom Mclaughlin

As Courtenay Cavanaugh explains, physical and sexual violence against women is nothing short of an epidemic.

"It is a significant public health problem that affects one in three [women](#) in the United States," says Cavanaugh, an assistant professor of psychology at Rutgers–Camden. "It can lead to numerous health problems across one's lifespan and is associated with women's risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Abused women are at risk for contracting HIV because abusive partners force or coerce them into sex, and because they engage in risky behaviors that are consensual."

Underscoring this significance, Cavanaugh dedicates her research to examining the impact of violence on women and children's health and development, including risk and resilience for psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The Philadelphia resident recently co-authored a new study that sheds light on this critical health issue: "Intimate partner [sexual violence](#): A comparison of foreign-born versus U.S.-born physically abused Latinas," published online ahead of print in the *Journal of Urban Health*.

This study examined the prevalence of recent [intimate partner](#) sexual violence occurring against 555 physically abused Latinas, and compared the relationship of this sexual violence to women's nativity. The women in the study, all of whom were seeking help for [intimate partner violence](#)

, were asked if their partners had physically forced them to have sex or made them have sex without a condom within the previous six months.

Thirty-eight percent of the physically abused Latinas reported recent intimate partner sexual violence and, of those, 51 percent reported that they were made to have unprotected sex six or more times in the previous six months. The study also found that physically abused Latinas who were foreign born were two times more likely to have experienced recent intimate partner sexual violence than the physically abused Latinas born in the United States.

"We think that these findings have several implications in terms of HIV risk," says Cavanaugh, a 2012 Civic Engagement Faculty Fellow at Rutgers–Camden. "However, we are still learning why Latinas who are foreign born have greater risk for intimate partner sexual violence. We need to know more about the perpetrators of sexual violence against these Latinas since they are forcing and coercing these women into sex. For example, we weren't able to determine the nativity of the perpetrators in the study that we conducted."

A clinical psychologist by training, Cavanaugh is ultimately focused on developing intervention strategies that benefit the victims as well as ensure that future generations are at a reduced risk for these same problems. "We know that a lot of these issues replicate themselves across generations," she says.

As Cavanaugh recalls, the impetus for her research was the well-timed culmination of her academic and clinical training. As an undergraduate at the University of Oregon, she had taken a course on the domestic assault of women, examining how it impacts victims' health and well-being.

Upon graduating with bachelor's degrees in psychology and Spanish in

1996, she obtained a position in a psychiatric hospital in Kirkland, Wash., where she worked on the adolescent girls unit. With a fresh lens of understanding, she became immediately aware of the violence exposure among the female patients.

"It was just blatant; I could read the chart of any girl on the unit, and could see that the majority of them had pretty significant histories of violence and abuse," she says, adding that she couldn't help but contemplate how their histories of violence contributed to their psychiatric problems and wonder what types of trauma-informed treatments may improve these young women's mental health. She also noticed that the adolescent girls were engaging in risky sexual behaviors that put them at risk for unwanted pregnancies and [sexually transmitted infections](#). So she initiated that the programming for the girls include a sexual education and risk reduction group that was led by Planned Parenthood.

Cavanaugh subsequently earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Alliant International University in 2005. During her doctoral training, she worked at Stanford University as a research interviewer and project coordinator for a randomized trial of group therapy for adult survivors of [childhood sexual abuse](#) who were at risk for HIV. The project resulted in her dissertation, titled "Psychological Resilience of Adult Female Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Group Psychotherapy Outcome Study." She then completed postdoctoral research fellowships in the respective departments of psychiatry and public health at Yale University and Johns Hopkins University.

Cavanaugh recently received a NIH-funded pilot grant from the Center for Prevention Implementation Methodology For Drug Abuse and Sexual Risk Behavior to adapt an evidenced-based HIV-prevention intervention for women in domestic-violence shelters.

More information: [www.unboundmedicine.com/medlin ...
ally Abused Latinas](http://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/plus/article/Abused-Latinas)

Provided by Rutgers University

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