

New research examines gun use, injury and fear in domestic violence

February 17 2017, by Michele W. Berger

A weapon, whether a body part such as hands, fists and feet or an external instrument like a gun, often accompanies intimate-partner violence. Susan B. Sorenson of the University of Pennsylvania wanted to better understand just how frequently each type generally, and guns specifically, appeared in these cases.

In collaboration with the Philadelphia Police Department, she studied more than 35,000 domestic-violence incidents from 2013. She found that assailants used hands, fists or feet to attack in about 6,500 of them, and in nearly 1,900 used external weapons such as knives, scissors or baseball bats. About one-third of events with external weapons involved a gun, and 80 percent of such incidents were male-on-female.

Knowing this breakdown provides an important comparison, said Sorenson, a professor of [social policy](#) in Penn's School of Social Policy & Practice and director of The Evelyn Jacobs Ortner Center on Family Violence. "We need to know how guns are used compared to other weapons and how all weapons are used against women," Sorenson said.

This research is part of her broader effort to study intimate-partner violence from many different angles.

"A lot of the policies that are laid out about guns and domestic violence focus on preventing homicides, which is really important," she said. "But there has been less attention on what it means for the women who are alive and not just as a risk factor for their death."

To that end, Sorenson began working with the Philadelphia police, which gave her access to an entire year of department-mandated paperwork on 911 calls related to domestic violence, regardless of whether an arrest took place. That form included information about what the responding officer saw and did at the scene, as well as a body map to indicate injuries and a place for what Sorenson described as the "narrative," where officers write in their own words what the victim described.

In addition to revealing what percentage of the time a gun became part of a domestic incident, the data showed that in most such events, males attacked females and that gun use in domestic disputes actually equated to fewer injuries.

Sorenson posited that's true because, when a gun enters a situation, women are more likely to back down than fight back. Study findings show that when an assailant uses a gun rather than another kind of weapon, a woman is less likely to incur injury but substantially more likely to be frightened.

"When faced with another form of weapon, she might try and defend herself, whereas when there's a gun, the weapon is, by definition, lethal," she said.

This underscores the idea of coercive control, in which an abuser doesn't necessarily want to physically hurt a victim but rather cement the power dynamic between the two by brandishing a gun, thus increasing the intimidation factor. "They get what they want without causing physical harm," Sorenson said.

Though such research provides important context, it's likely only part of the larger picture about firearms in [domestic violence](#). The National Crime Victimization Survey, conducted since 1973 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, showed that from 2002 to 2011 guns appeared 5

percent of the time at such incidents. That analysis includes any event with a firearm, not just those the police learn about, meaning there's likely even more gun use than is reported.

Understanding this can better prepare those who encounter victims immediately following an incident.

"Even when the person is not presenting in the emergency department with a gunshot wound or having been pistol-whipped, it's important for health-care professionals to ask about guns," Sorenson said. "If a gun is used and there is increased fear, the person is less likely to leave the relationship."

The same goes for law enforcement, she said.

"Police officers are first responders. They're going to see these incidents when the people want intervention and are calling and asking for help. Police can be really good partners in preventing a situation from escalating."

More information: Susan B. Sorenson, Guns in Intimate Partner Violence: Comparing Incidents by Type of Weapon, *Journal of Women's Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1089/jwh.2016.5832](https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2016.5832)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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