Suicide and Battered Women
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At the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, we have received a number of calls about cases involving a battered woman who obtains a weapon with the intent to kill herself, but the weapon is ultimately used in the homicide of her abusive partner. After receiving a number of such calls, we started looking into the connection between women’s experiences of being battered and attempting suicide.

We conducted a review of the literature on battering and suicide. We found that a significant number of battered women charged with crimes had attempted suicide at least once prior to being charged with a crime. Grossman’s (1985) survey of incarcerated women at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in NY revealed that 47% of the incarcerated women who reported ever experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse had attempted suicide, compared with 14% of incarcerated women who did not report experiencing such abuse. Similarly, Browne (1987) found that 48% of the battered women who were charged with a crime in her Colorado study had talked about killing themselves before they were arrested.

The correlation between being battered and attempting suicide is also strong among battered women who are not charged with crimes. For example, a 1995 study of hospital patients in Denver found that 26% of the women who had experienced intimate partner violence reported previous suicide attempts, compared to only 8% of the women who had not experienced intimate partner violence (Abbott, Johnson, Koziol-McLain et al., 1995). In another study, female primary care patients who reported either childhood abuse or adult abuse were nearly four times more likely to report having attempted suicide than patients who had never been abused (McCaulley, Kern, Kolodner, et al., 1997). Similar figures have been found among non-hospital samples: In a study of 537 community-residing women, those who reported experiencing intimate partner violence were four times more likely to have attempted suicide than women who reported no intimate partner violence (Seedat, Stein, & Forde, 2005).

We also wanted to know how many women who attempt suicide have been battered. A study of women receiving routine gynecological care found that 93% of the women who reported having attempted suicide also reported having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse (Weiderman, Sansone & Sansone, 1998). Further, the Denver study of hospital patients found that 81% of women sampled with a history of suicide attempts had experienced intimate partner violence at some time in their lives (Abbott, et al., 1995). These studies suggest that most women who attempt suicide have experienced physical or sexual abuse, either as adults or as children. We have excerpted relevant data from these and other studies on the following pages. As the research suggests, women who experience physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse as adults and/or as children are at greater risk for attempting suicide. These findings are not surprising

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1 The literature we found about suicide attempts among charged and incarcerated women were all from the 1980s. We wish there were more recent studies to cite. If you know of any, please let us know.
given the overwhelming empirical evidence that indicates a significant relationship between intimate partner violence and myriad negative mental health conditions, such as depression, PTSD, and low self-esteem (for a review, see Golding, 1999).

When encountering women who state they intended to commit suicide when the incident for which they were charged occurred, it is important that attorneys and/or experts ask in-depth questions about history of abuse, including of all forms of childhood abuse and adult physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (including rape by a current or former intimate partner).

How many battered women charged with crimes attempt suicide?

- In a study of 20 women serving sentences in Louisiana for killing their abusers, Davidson, Jenkins, & del Rio (1989) found that 16 of the women seriously considered suicide prior to their incarceration, and 11 of them had made at least one attempt.

- In a 1985 survey of 320 incarcerated women at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, Grossman (1985) found that 60% of the respondents reported that they had been abused physically, sexually, and/or emotionally. Of those abused, 47% reported that they had ever attempted suicide, whereas 14% of those who had not been abused had attempted suicide. In all, 34% of the total respondents reported having attempted suicide.

- Browne’s (1987) study of 42 battered women who were charged with a crime in the death or serious injury of their partners revealed that 48% of the women talked about suicide. Further, 31% of the comparison group of women (n=205) who had been abused by a partner but who did not take lethal action against that partner had also attempted suicide.

- Holsinger & Holsinger (2005) surveyed 137 incarcerated female youth about their suicide attempts and self-harming behaviors. They found, “The experience of abuse [measured as history of physical and sexual violence by a family member or other person] appears to significantly increase the likelihood that the two groups under consideration—African American girls, and White girls—attempted suicide” (p.230).

How many battered women (not charged with crimes) attempt suicide?

- In a study of 107 female psychiatric inpatients, Sansone, Chu, & Wiederman (2007) found a significant relationship between domestic violence and suicide attempts: “Women who did not report a history of attempted suicide [n=34] reported less domestic violence compared to women who reported a history of attempted suicide [n=73].” The authors concluded: “among women psychiatric inpatients who report past suicide attempts, clinicians need to consistently screen for the presence or not of domestic or intimate partner violence” (p. 164-165).

- Pico-Alfonso and colleagues (2006) recruited women from Spain who fell into one of three categories – physically and psychologically abused (n=75), psychologically abused
(n=55), or non-abused (n=52) – to explore the impact of abuse on mental health. Women in the physical/psychological abuse group were significantly more likely than those in the psychological-only and no-abuse group to have had suicidal thoughts (58.7% vs. 43.6% and 7.7%, respectively) and attempts (34.7% vs. 12.7% and 7.7%, respectively).

- Kernic, Wolf, and Holt (2000) compared hospitalization records of women who had filed for protection orders against a partner (n=1,355) to those of women who had not filed for protection orders (n = 36,532). Women who filed for an order were almost four times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year. The abused women in their sample also were at higher risk for hospitalization due to assault, mental disorders, injury, poisoning, and diseases of the digestive system.

- Kaslow and colleagues (1998) examined whether African American women who attempt suicide are more likely to have experienced partner abuse than demographically similar non-attempters. They surveyed 148 attempters and 137 non-attempters who presented for care at an urban public health care system. Results revealed significantly higher levels of both physical and non-physical partner abuse [“non-physical” abuse not defined in the study] among suicide attempters than among non-attempters. Further, the authors found that women who attempted suicide reported significantly higher levels of childhood maltreatment than did non-attempters.

- McCauley, Kern, & Kolodner (1997) surveyed 1,931 women seeking services at one of four primary care internal medicine practices. Of these patients, 22% reported childhood physical and/or sexual abuse before age 18; 10.7% reported both childhood and adult abuse; and 10.5% reported being abused only as adults. Childhood-only abuse survivors were nearly four times more likely to report having attempted suicide as compared to patients who had never been abused. Childhood-only and adult-only abuse survivors were similar in their number of suicide attempts.

- In a 1995 study of 648 female patients in five Denver hospitals, researchers found that 26% of the women who had experienced intimate partner violence also reported previous suicide attempts, compared to only 8% of women with no intimate partner violence (Abbott, Johnson, Koziol-McLain, & Lowenstein, 1995).

- In a 1991 study of 117 battered women at an emergency department in Sweden, researchers reviewed the women’s medical records over 16 years (1973-1990) for suicide attempts (Bergman & Brismar, 1991). Of the 117 battered women studied, 22 (19%) had made at least one suicide attempt resulting in inpatient care. A control group of 117 women from the general population found only two suicide attempts requiring inpatient care during the same period. Further, in comparison to all men and women aged 15 and older who entered the hospital for suicide attempts during 1988-1989, the corresponding incidence rate per year for battered women was 8 times higher.

Of the women who attempt suicide, how many have been battered?
• Weiderman, Sansone, and Sansone (1998) surveyed women receiving routine gynecological care and found that 15 of the 151 women had attempted suicide (9.9%). Of those who had attempted suicide, two had experienced sexual abuse (13.3%), four had experienced physical abuse (26.7%), and eight had experienced both physical and sexual abuse (53.3%). Thus, 14 of the 15 women (93.3%) who reported having attempted suicide also reported experiencing either physical or sexual abuse, or both.

• Findings from a 1995 study of 648 female patients in five Denver hospitals revealed that 81% of women sampled with a history of suicide attempts had experienced intimate partner violence at some time (Abbott, Johnson, Koziol-McLain, & Lowenstein, 1995).

• Stark and Flitcraft (1996) reviewed medical records of 176 women over one year who presented to an emergency department for attempting suicide. Of these, 29.5% showed evidence of being battered. Black women who attempted suicide were more likely than white women to have been battered (48.8% vs. 22.2%). Of the 16 women who were pregnant at the time of their suicide attempt, 62.5% had been battered.

• Grossman (1985) surveyed 320 incarcerated women at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York and found that 83.3% of respondents who reported ever having attempted suicide had been abused physically, sexually, and/or emotionally [percentages derived from data reported in the study].

Are women who are battered as adults at greater or lesser risk of attempting suicide than women abused as children?

• McCauley, Kern, Kolodner (1997) surveyed 1,931 women seeking services at one of four primary care internal medicine practices. Of these patients, 22% reported childhood physical and/or sexual abuse before age 18; 10.7% reported both childhood and adult abuse; and 10.5% reported abused only as adults. Childhood-only abuse survivors were nearly four times more likely to report having attempted suicide as compared to patients who had never been abused. Childhood-only and adult-only abuse survivors were similar in the number of suicide attempts.

What distinguishes battered women who attempt suicide from those who do not?

• Research indicates that the presence of multiple co-occurring conditions may put battered women at higher risk for suicide attempts. In a study of 200 African American women, all of whom had experienced recent intimate partner violence, Thompson, Kaslow, and Klingree (2002) found significant differences between abused women who had attempted suicide (n=100) and abused women who had not (n=100). Suicide attempters “were four times more likely [than non-attempters] to report depressive symptoms, three times more likely to report high levels of drug use, and at least twice as likely to report high levels of hopelessness and a history of childhood abuse and neglect” (p. 291).
Extending the work of Thompson et al. (2002) mentioned above, Reviere and colleagues (2007) selected a subset of the 200 participants (20 attempters and 20 non-attempters) and conducted in-depth interviews to further explore connections between intimate partner violence and suicide. Differences emerged regarding coping strategies. The attempters,

Focused on placating or changing the perpetrator (e.g., “I don’t make him mad . . . try not to argue back.” “Play it safe . . . made him think he was so important in order to shield myself.” “I tried doing things his way or the way he said was right.”). Attempters were also more likely than their non-attempter counterparts to use avoidance strategies. … Not surprisingly, the attempters acknowledged more use of self-injurious or suicidal behaviors (e.g., “I cut myself for him.” “Kill myself. That’s the only thing I know how to do right now.”) than did controls. Consistent with this, attempters responded to the IPV [intimate partner violence] with helplessness to queries of how they coped (e.g., “Nothing! I just let [him] beat me.” “Nothing. I just cried.” “I haven’t coped with it. . . . I didn’t know how to deal with it.”) (p. 1124).

Research also indicates that particular types of intimate partner violence are more strongly associated with suicide and suicidal ideation. Weaver and colleagues (2007) interviewed 50 domestic violence shelter residents and found that, of the women who experienced suicidal ideation, nearly half (48%) reported their partner had raped them compared to only 14% of those with physical (non-sexual) abuse only. Similar findings regarding the relationship between sexual abuse and suicide attempts also have been found in populations outside the U.S. (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006).

In addition to type of violence, severity and lethality are also associated with suicide attempts. Sato-DiSanto and Sharps (2007) reviewed records of 177 female domestic violence shelter residents and found that women who scored higher on the Danger Assessment Scale (a clinical assessment tool designed to gauge women’s risk for intimate murder based on risk factors that have been tested and established in the empirical literature) were more likely to have attempted suicide than women with lower Danger Assessment scores.

Why might battered women think about, attempt, or commit suicide?

Williamson (2010) interviewed battered women who experienced coercive control from partners. As a result, the women engaged in what she called self-harming behaviors and “para-suicide” (i.e., suicide attempts that may not indicate wanting to die but wanting to resist abuse). “Attempting suicide was, for some of these women, a release valve with which to expel the very negative feelings they had about themselves as a result of the abuse. Para-suicide was also an important, albeit dangerous tool, with which women could negotiate their own recovery and begin to negotiate the major contradictions they had previously internalized in the form of negative self-worth” (p. 1420).
• Hart (2010) compiled information from several Domestic Violence Fatality Review Teams about battered women who had committed suicide. Although the available information cannot provide the exact reason(s) for the suicides, it does shed light on experiences that may have contributed to their decision. The women’s stories indicate that suicide occurred shortly after women did one of the following: expressed an inability to erase the traumatic memories of abuse, learned an abusive partner was to be released from prison, purchased a weapon intended for self-protection, expressed being unable to “take it anymore”, or withdrew from loved ones and school/work obligations. Taken together, the stories suggest that suicide is an act of desperation in the context of what victims see as an impossible situation.

• In Reviere and colleagues’ (2007) qualitative study on abused African American women (described previously), authors explored women’s reasons for attempting suicide:
  To the query of why they attempted, suicide attempters often articulated themes of fear, helplessness, isolation, disempowered wish for escape, and internalization of the abusive dynamics in the form of self-blame (e.g., “I’m better off dead. . . . I can’t never seem to make nobody happy.” “All this pressure . . . I couldn’t take it anymore. I was trying to get out of here the easy way.” “I got tired of being hurt. So I figured if anybody was going to hurt me it was going to be me.”) (p. 1124).

Battering and suicide among women of color

• Leiner, Compton, Houry, & Kaslow (2008) investigated the relationship between intimate partner violence and suicide in African American women, given their higher rates of suicidal behaviors and depressive symptoms. The authors interviewed 323 abused African American women seeking treatment at an emergency department and found that “abused African American women are at increased risk for a range of suicidal behaviors, including ideation and attempts.” Moreover, “abused women with elevated depressive symptoms demonstrated higher levels of suicidal thinking. In other words, IPV presumably caused depressive symptoms, which in turn presumably caused suicidal ideation.” (Leiner, at al., 2008, p. 477-478).

• Maselko and Patel (2007) studied risk factors for attempted suicide among 2,318 women living in Goa, India. The risk factor with the largest magnitude was exposure to violence (other significant factors included physical illness, young age at marriage, and migrant ethnicity) increasing women’s risk of attempted suicide fivefold.

• Haar (2010) conducted individual and group interviews with 400 women in Tajikistan and found:
  Women who were currently being hit or beaten by their husbands were at greater risk of suicidal thoughts (36.2%) and attempts (10.6%), particularly in comparison to

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2 In one of the cases, several of the victim’s friends thought the death was not a suicide but was instead due to the abusive partner’s actions.
women who were not physically abused by their husbands during the 12 months prior to the interview (6.1% and 1.5%, respectively) (p. 776).
Similar results were found when comparisons were made regarding sexual abuse and the combination of physical and sexual abuse. Data from the focus groups revealed that, Men and women agreed that a battered woman would rather die than live in a marriage with physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence from her husband or in-laws, or both. … “The only escape from such a life [referring to a life of being battered] is suicide for her” (p. 776).
References


