

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

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In July, 2005 the National Crime Council (NCC), in association with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 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 NCC and based on a survey conducted by the ESRI 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 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 are outlined below.

- 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 suggests 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 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
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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.

- 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 Garda. 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.
- 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. Both Traveller and immigrant women showed a strong aversion to approaching the 'authorities', such as the Garda and social workers, for help.

In the Foreword to the report, the NCC acknowledged that whilst many of the behaviours which form part of domestic abuse are criminal, there is currently no criminal offence of 'domestic abuse' per se in Ireland. Given the numerous provisions in current legislation which may be utilised to address most forms of abusive behaviour, the Council does not believe it is necessary to create a new criminal offence of 'domestic abuse'.

Future policy formulation must reflect the fact that both women and men experience severe domestic abuse, albeit men to a far lesser extent than women. The NCC made numerous recommendations based upon the study findings. Some of those with most relevance to the Criminal Justice System include:

- 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.
  - 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.
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- 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.
- Judges sitting in the Family Law Courts should receive appropriate on-going training. Regional Family Law Courts should be established.
- The Courts Service should collect data on the gender, age group and available demographics of the parties appearing before the Courts.

Copies of the report are available free of charge by telephoning the National Crime Council on +353-(0)1-4760047, by email request to [info@crimencouncil.gov.ie](mailto:info@crimencouncil.gov.ie) and also by download from the Council's website, [www.crimencouncil.ie](http://www.crimencouncil.ie).

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