

Women's Health Effects Study

Background: Woman abuse affects 1 in 3 Canadian women. Most women eventually separate from their abusive partners. Results from our qualitative research in NB and ON suggest that intrusion from a) health effects of violence on women and their children, b) ongoing abuse, c) 'costs' of getting informal and professional help, and d) changes in lifestyle after leaving interfere with women's ability to establish themselves separate from the abuser. Little is known about how women's health and resources change over time after leaving, or about the long term abuse-related health and social costs to the system or to women themselves.

Research Team: Judith Wuest RN PhD University of New Brunswick wuest@unb.ca
Marilyn Merritt-Gray RN MN University of New Brunswick mmerritt@unb.ca
Judith MacIntosh RN PhD University of New Brunswick
Marilyn Ford-Gilboe RN PhD University of Western Ontario
Colleen Varcoe RN PhD, University of British Columbia
Lorraine Davies PhD University of Western Ontario
Olena Hankivsky PhD Simon Fraser University

Funding : Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2003-2011

Objectives:

- To document patterns of women's mental and physical health in the early years after leaving an abusive relationship
- To describe changes in personal, social and economic resources during this time
- To see how changes in physical and mental health are affected by the severity of abuse and women's access to personal, social and economic resources
- To identify rates of health and social service use in the early years after leaving
- To estimate the costs associated with women's efforts to manage their life and health after leaving

Study Design: This is a longitudinal survey of a community sample of 309 English-speaking women from NB (110), ON (110) and BC (89) who had left abusive partners in the previous 3 years. Women over the age of 18 were recruited through media advertising and posters, and screened for woman abuse using a standardized screening tool. Data is being collected yearly for 5 years; we are currently in the final year and have retained more than 80% of the sample. Face-to-face, in-depth interviews and health assessments are conducted by RNs, measuring abuse history and health status, as well as demographics characteristics, service utilization and personal, social and economic resources.

Description of Sample: The average age of women in the study was 39 years (range 19 to 63), and they had been living apart from their abusive partners for an average of 20 months. Over half (57%) were mothering children under the age of 18. Only 16% had used a Transition House in the first 6 months after leaving. Women had an average of 13.4 years of education (range 6 to 22), and a median income of \$15,684. 45% were employed, 31% were receiving social assistance, and 10% were receiving a disability pension. 16.8% self-identified as a visible minority and 7.4% were aboriginal. English was the first language of 88% of participants. The majority (81%) had been abused as a child, and 40% had been sexually assaulted as an adult by someone other than their most recent abusive partner. 83% reported harassment by their partner after leaving. Geographically, 17% lived in small communities (< 4,999), 7% in small towns (5,000 to 19,999), 6% in small cities (20,000 to 44,999), 24% in medium cities, and 45% in large cities and metropolitan areas.

Publications:

- Wuest, J., Ford-Gilboe, M., Merritt-Gray, M., Varcoe, C., Lent, B., Wilks, P., & Campbell, J.C. (2009). Abuse-Related Injury and Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as Mechanisms of Chronic Pain in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence, *Pain Medicine*, 10(4), 739-747.
- Ford-Gilboe, M., Wuest, J., Varcoe, C., Davies, L., Merritt-Gray, M., Hammerton, J., Wilk, P., & Campbell, J. (2009). Modelling the Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Access to Resources on Women's Health in the Early Years after Leaving an Abusive Partner. *Social Science and Medicine*. 68, 1021-1029.
- Wuest, J., Merritt-Gray, M., Ford-Gilboe, M., Lent, B., Varcoe, C., & Campbell, J.C. (2008). Chronic pain in women survivors of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Pain*, 9(11), 1049-1057.
- Wuest, J., Merritt-Gray, M., Lent, B., Varcoe, C., Connors, A., & Ford-Gilboe, M. (2007). Patterns of medication use among women survivors of intimate partner violence. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 98(6), 460-464.