



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Intimate partner violence: Down but far from out

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A [new report](#) released this week by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) documents a long-term decline in intimate partner violence. Specifically, according to the BJS analysis, the overall rate of violence involving spouses, former spouses and boyfriends/girlfriends declined by 64% nationally from 1994 to 2010. This is surely welcomed news for victim advocates and service providers who have long struggled to increase awareness of the plight of women and sometime men who are trapped in an abusive relationship.

Note, however, that the BJS figures arise from the agency's annual household survey of personal victimization. Thus, homicide -- the most serious form of relationship violence and the type that tends to generate the most disturbing headlines -- is excluded from the BJS definition of intimate-partner violence.

This is not to suggest, of course, that BJS is unconcerned about violence that reaches lethal proportions. However, the only source of information on homicide having this level of specificity comes from the Supplementary Homicide Reporting program of the FBI, a different division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

So how do trends in lethal violence among intimate partners compare to those pertaining to non-lethal forms of aggression? The good news is that episodes in which an intimate-partner relationship turns deadly have also grown fewer in number over the past three decades, despite the all-too-frequent cases where cupid's arrow is laced with poison. As shown in the figure below, the number of intimate partner homicides has dropped from nearly 3,500 in 1980 to about 2,000 in 2010.



Some critics have suggested that the downturn in intimate partner homicide is little more than a demographic artifact, resulting from changes in domesticity -- or living arrangements -- rather than any real progress in reducing violence between marital partners. By this theory, as divorce rates have risen and rates of marriage have declined, fewer men and women are eligible to be murdered by their spouses. As some support for this view, the number of unmarried women murdered by boyfriends has increased over the past few decades, from about 400 in 1980 to almost 600 in 2010. Although this growth is consistent with the expanded number of unmarried women in the population, it does suggest that non-marriage as well as divorce have put fewer women at risk, at least for spousal homicide.

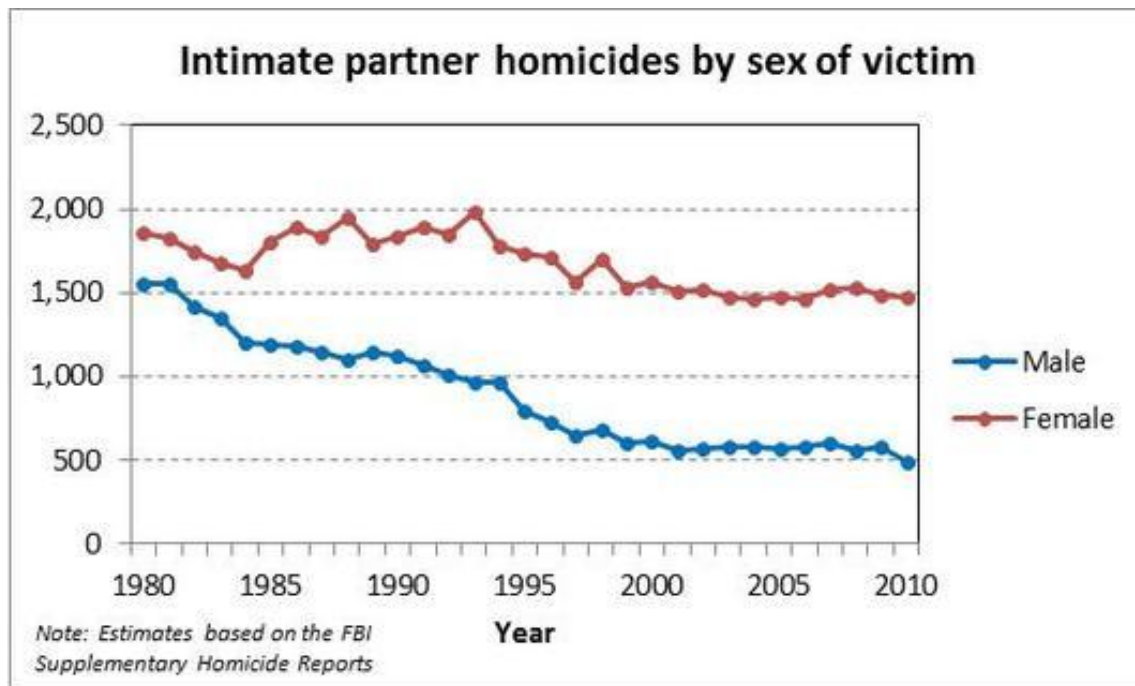
Over the latter half of the 20th century, divorce laws were liberalized. By contrast to an earlier era when the marital ties could not be easily broken without proof of cause, such as mental or physical cruelty or adultery, no-fault divorce laws have permitted couples to split before the level of discord reaches the extreme. Yet for relationships in which violence is indeed a form of control, the easy availability of divorce can be a cruel illusion. The if I can't have you, no one can threat would generally prohibit an amicable no-fault divorce. Fortunately, improvement in the economic status of women has eroded the control men have historically had over their spouses.

Another factor behind the decline in intimate homicide is that the social stigma associated with being an abused spouse (as well as a divorcee) has greatly diminished. During a less enlightened era, victims of domestic abuse often internalized blame and guilt for their own victimization. If only I were a better wife, a better cook, a better lover, he wouldn't get mad and beat me. Today, as the topic of domestic violence has been brought more into the open, victims are less likely to feel responsible for their plight and thus more likely to make a move to exit the relationship.

Besides divorce, more immediate legal and social interventions -- such as restraining orders, mandatory police arrest procedures, abuse hotlines, shelters for battered women, and support groups and counseling for victims of domestic violence -- have helped provide some abused women with a viable escape route. More than ever, a woman has alternatives to picking up a loaded gun and shooting her loaded husband.

Notwithstanding all the positive indicators of change, the good news is tempered when distinguishing intimate partner homicides by sex of the victim. As shown in the figure below, it is ironically the men who have benefited the most from intervention strategies designed to protect women. The steepest decline in

intimate homicides has been in women killing their partners (husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends), down from about 1,500 in 1980 to about 500 in 2010, a remarkable two-thirds decline. Given the expanding array of legal and social interventions, murder is less often the only or last resort for a woman to protect herself from a current or former intimate who abuses or stalks her.



By contrast, the improvement in the number of women killed by their intimates has been far more modest and relatively recent. From 1980 to 1993, the incidents of women killed by intimates increased from about 1,800 to 2,000 per year. Apparently, men were unconcerned about the increasing array of interventions available to victims of domestic violence. In fact, some men were inspired in a decidedly violent way in the face of restraining orders and other initiatives by their wives or girlfriends to escape.

It is only in the past several years, since 1993, that the number of men killing wives and girlfriends has declined as well, from about 2,000 in 1993 to around 1,500 in 2010. The year 1993 was a pivotal time just prior to the passage of both the Violence Against Women Act and the Brady Law that placed restrictions on gun purchases by those with a record of domestic violence. It is difficult, of course, to assign cause and effect with aggregate trend data like these. Still, it is certainly noteworthy that virtually the entire decline (about 90 percent) in women murdered by their partners since 1993 has been in gun-related incidents.

In the final analysis, a few people naively wonder in cases of cold-blooded spousal homicide, Why didn't he just get a divorce? For some killers, lethal dissolution of their marriage has far greater benefits -- monetary and otherwise -- than the legal alternative in divorce court. Clearly, some estranged husbands and wives are motivated to keep all of the marital assets, leaving aside any extra profit from life insurance. Sometimes too, one such "asset" is to enjoy full custody of the children while not having to share parenting with an undeserving former spouse. And, of course, there are some selfish sociopaths who chose to play the sympathetic role of grieving widow/widower rather than to be seen as a heartless deserter, especially if children are involved.

Thus, despite the improvements in the rate of domestic violence, non-lethal and lethal, far too many victims continue to suffer in abusive relationships. As a society, we have a long way to go before we can claim mission accomplished in our efforts to prevent intimate partner violence.