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Testimony of

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The Economic Downturn and Violence Against Women

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this morning on the important and yet complex question of the impact of the current economic downturn on violence against women.

My name is Richard J. Gelles. I currently hold the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence and am the Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. I have, for the last 40 years, conducted research on violence against women, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, and other forms of family violence. I co-directed two national studies of violence toward women and served as a member of the National Academy of Sciences panel that examined strategies to intervene and prevent family violence.

Because poverty, unemployment, and social stressors are factors strongly related to increased risk of violence against women^{1 2} it is reasonable to assume that a sharp economic downturn, such as the one that began in 2008, would impact the well-being of women, children, and families in the United States. Is violence against women rising as a consequence of the housing crisis, banking crisis, recession, and rising unemployment? At first, this appears to be an easy question to answer. First, as mentioned above, economic adversity is a risk factor for violence against women. Second, research that examined the effectiveness of arresting misdemeanor domestic violence offenders found that male offenders who were unemployed and living in communities with high rates of unemployment were not deterred by arrest and even escalated their violence after an arrest for domestic violence.³

Unfortunately, a definitive answer to the question of whether the economic downturn is increasing violence toward women is elusive. The most reliable trend data on criminal violence and violence victimization are collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The FBI collects data on homicide while the BJS collects information of crime victimization using that National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The reporting of FBI and BJS data are lagged by one year, thus the most recent data are for year 2008, the first year of the economic downturn.

¹ Gelles, R.J. and Straus, M.A. (1988). *Intimate Violence*. New York: Simon & Schuster

² Stith, et al., (2004). Risk factor analysis for spouse physical maltreatment: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 10, 65-98.

³ Sherman, L. W., & D. A. Smith (1992). Crime, punishment, and stake in conformity: Legal and informal control of domestic violence. *American Sociological Review*, 57, 680-690.

Changes in Risk Factors

Unemployment

Among the most prominent individual and community-level risk factors for violence against women are unemployment, under-employment, and poverty.^{4 5} Not surprisingly, the national unemployment rate rises during, and for some time after, recessions. Figure 1 presents data from the U.S. Department of Labor that identifies three recessions in the last two decades—1991-1992, 2001-2002, and the current recession that began in 2008. During and after the 1991-1992 recession, the unemployment rate rose from 5.5% in 1990 to 7.5% in 1992. The rate fell back to 5.5% in 1996. Unemployment was at 4% prior to the 2001 recession, rose to 4.5% during the recession, and peaked at 6% in 2004.

Poverty

The U.S. Census Bureau data (See Figure 2), illustrates that the overall rate of poverty rose during recessions and peaked two years after the 1991 recession. The poverty rate rose during the 2001 recession and continued to rise through the recession of 2008.

Past Recessions and Violence Against Women

Fatal Violence

FBI data on fatal violence toward women and men indicate that there was an increase in male-to-female domestic homicide after the 1990-1991 recession, but there was no increase

⁴ Gelles & Straus, 1988

⁵ See, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2008). *Intimate partner violence: Risk and protective factors.*

during or following the recession of 2000-2001. Of note, female –to-male homicide has declined consistently from 1976 to 2005, and the decline was not interrupted or enhanced during or after economic downturns (Figure 3).

Non-Fatal Violence

Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey only cover the 2000-2001 recession. There was no major change in the rate of domestic violence after the 2000-2001 recession. A more refined examination of NCVS data indicates that in the two years after the 2000-2001 recession there was an increase in the rate of female victimization by intimates among the most violent age group—males 20 to 24 years of age.

Data from Shelters

A recent report from Mary Kay, Inc. presented the results of a 2010 survey of 731 domestic violence shelters across the country⁶. Seventy-three percent of the respondents noted an increase in women with children seeking assistance from abuse, while 77 percent of the respondents stated they experienced an increase in the number of women seeking assistance from abuse. The shelters surveyed reported that of the women seeking services as a result of domestic violence 75 percent primarily attributed their abuse to financial issues, 54, 54 percent to job loss, and 41 percent to loss of their home or vehicle. Fifty-seven percent of the women reported difficulty finding a job, 27 percent had their wages cut, and 24 percent had lost their job due to the economy. More than half (51%) of the women who sought shelter

⁶ Mary Kay, Inc. (May, 2010). "Mary Kay's Truth About Abuse" Survey. National Findings from Second Survey of Domestic Violence Shelters in the United States. Retrieved May 1, 2010: www.marykay.com/content/company/2010survey.pdf

assistance reported their current abuse was more severe than before 2008. As is common across the non-profit sector, 41 percent of shelters surveyed reported decreasing their services due to the economy.

The 2010 “Mary Kay Truth About Abuse” survey is suggestive of an increase in demand for services provided by shelters and that the increase in demand is related to the economic downturn. However, the results are based on 12 questions asked of respondents from more than 700 shelters. The precise demand for an increase in either numbers or percentages was not reported.

What to Do

Assuming, even with the lack of empirical data, that there is an increase in violence against women, the question is: “What should be done?” Any real or perceived increase in the incidence and/or severity of a social problem is usually met with a call for more resources. (Conversely, any decrease in the incidence of a social problem, such as the decrease in the rate of intimate violence, is never accompanied by the suggestion that less money should be spent or fewer resources should be provided. It is difficult to determine with precise accuracy where monies and resources should be directed in reference to violence against women or family violence in general. Shelters, ~~while,~~ while an important first-line of protection, serve a relatively small percentage of women who experience violence and abuse⁷ and are not the first service choice for the majority of female victims.⁸

⁷ Gelles and Straus, 1988.

⁸ Gelles and Straus, 1988; Bowker, L. (1983). *Beating wife beating*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

With the exception of numerous studies on the effectiveness of arrest as a deterrent to future domestic assault—and these studies do not generally support the theory that arrest deters domestic violence-- and evaluations of batterer intervention programs, there are few quality evaluations studies that indicate which intervention and prevention programs are actually effective.⁹

The Impact of the Violence against Women Act of 1994

There is little disagreement that the Violence against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 (PL 103-322) was landmark legislation. It constituted the first significant federal recognition of intimate partner violence, established a federal office in the Department of Justice, and allocated federal monies for the protection of female victims of intimate partner violence.

If there was vocal criticism of VAWA it came from men's groups who argued that the legislation ignored the victimization of men at the hands of female intimate partners.

A broader assessment of VAWA is that not only did VAWA ignore services and resources for male victims of intimate partner violence but the law is unique in terms of federal legislation aimed at the problem of violence and abuse in families. No other federal legislation dealing

⁹National Research Council. (1998). *Violence in families: Assessing prevention and treatment programs*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Sherman, L. W., Smith, D. A., Schmidt, J.D., & Rogan, D.P. (1992). Crime, punishment, and stake in conformity: Legal and informal control of domestic violence. *American Sociological Review*, 57, 680–690; Gondolf, E. W. (2002). *Batterer intervention systems: Issues, outcomes, and recommendations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Babcock, J. C., Green, C. E., & Robie, C. (2004). Does batterers' treatment work? A meta-analytic review of domestic violence treatment. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 23, 1023–1053.

with an aspect of family violence, including child maltreatment, sexual abuse, and elder abuse, singularly focuses on one sex. Even though females are much more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than males, federal legislation on various aspects of sexual abuse does not limit programs, funding, and protection to only females.

The intent and focus of VAWA further limits the scope and impact of the legislation. Overall, funds authorized under VAWA are primarily directed toward the protection of female victims. Funds are authorized to fund local shelters and specific funds were authorized to establish a national domestic violence hotline. Although funding was allocated to encourage arrest of offenders, no specific funding was authorized for treatment programs aimed at offenders, nor were funds authorized for research on effective methods of preventing intimate partner violence. This is concerning considering that current evidence raises serious doubts about the effectiveness of treatment programs for offenders in reducing re-assaults.¹⁰

While VAWA focused on the protective needs and support services for female victims of domestic violence, it overlooked or did not specify a broader continuum of programs and interventions that would include and address the spectrum of types and circumstances of family violence.

Conclusions

Common sense, as well as empirical support, would suggest that economic adversity would increase the incidence and perhaps the severity of intimate partner violence. However,

there is not yet solid empirical evidence that such an increase has or will occur. The last two recessions did not produce spikes in either non-fatal or fatal domestic violence.

Past recessions may not be an accurate guide in predicting the impact of the current economic downturn as the current recession is more severe in terms of job loss and housing crises than the recessions of 1990-1991 or 2000-2001.

It is indeed unfortunate that one predictable consequence of economic downturns is the reduction of public and philanthropic funding for social service agencies and programs. In an ideal scenario, agencies that provide services and protection to those most vulnerable in an economic downturn would not face funding cuts. Finally, if a primary concern, in the current economic downturn, is to revisit VAWA and VAWA authorized funding, this would also be a moment to seriously consider the narrow scope and mandate offered by VAWA. While funding and regulations from VAWA may well protect a portion of victims of intimate partner violence, current funding and programs fail to provide the appropriate spectrum of care for all victims of family violence, and the necessary resources to investigate effective interventions for specific types of violent offenders. Ignoring the need for effective, targeted offender treatment programs can place victims and their children at a heightened risk for further violence and abuse.

Figure 1 - Rates of National Unemployment

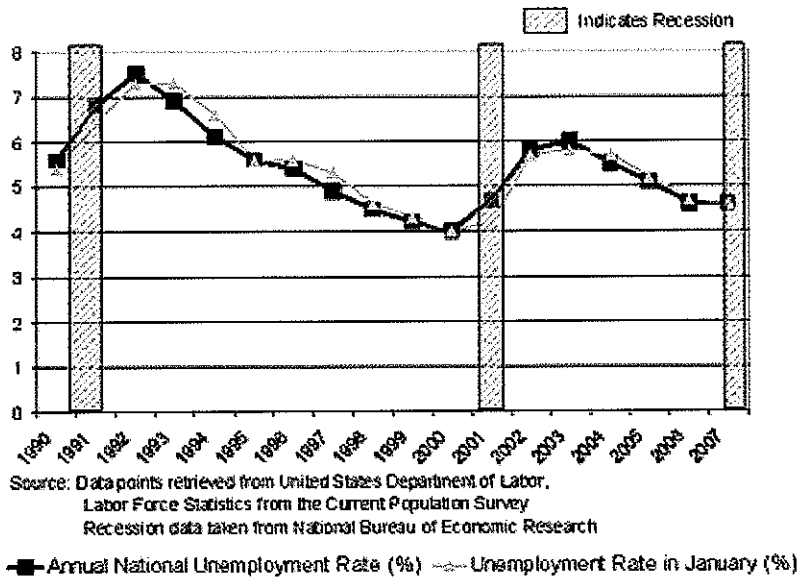


Figure 2 - Rate and Number in Poverty

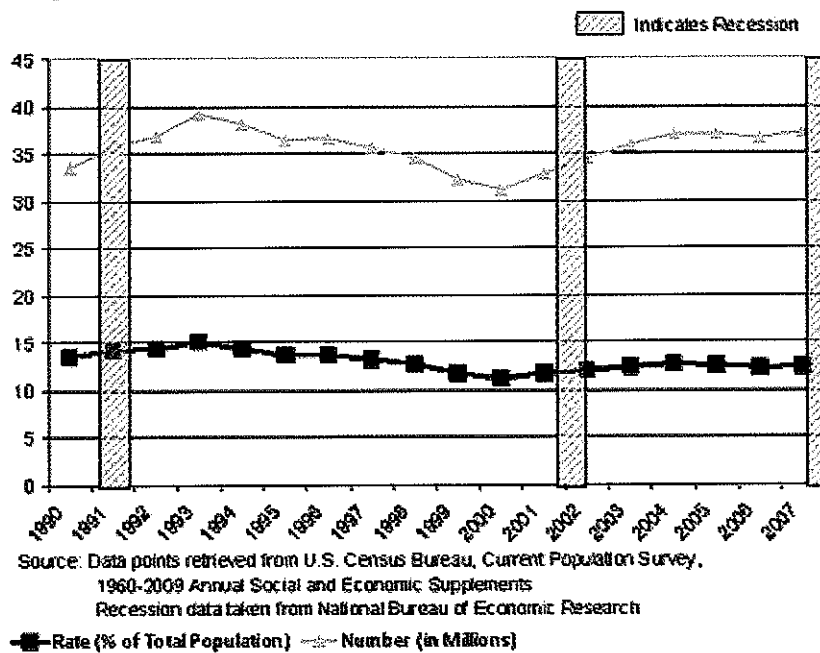


Figure 3: Homicide of Intimates

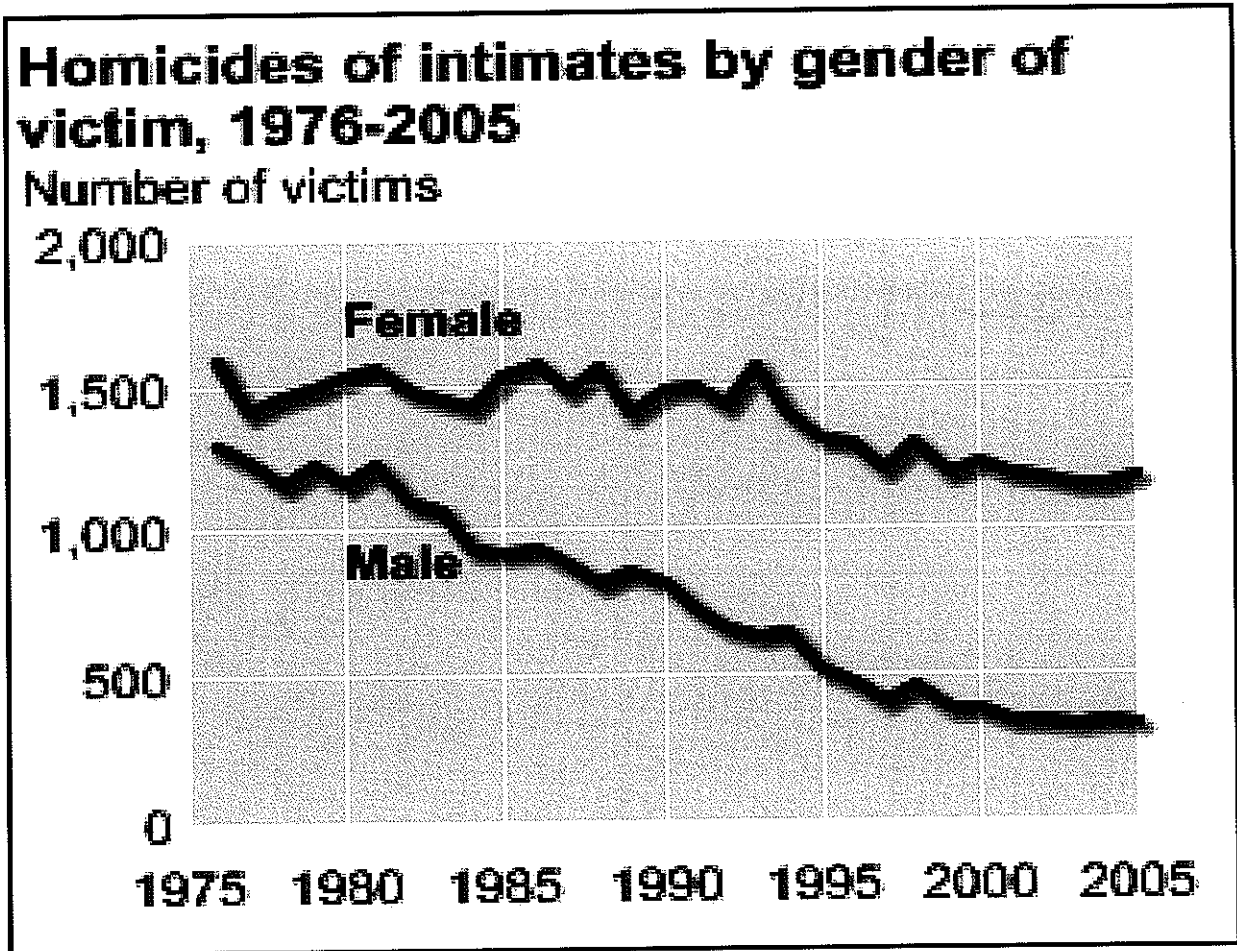


Figure 4

Nonfatal intimate partner victimization rate, 1993 - 2005

Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older

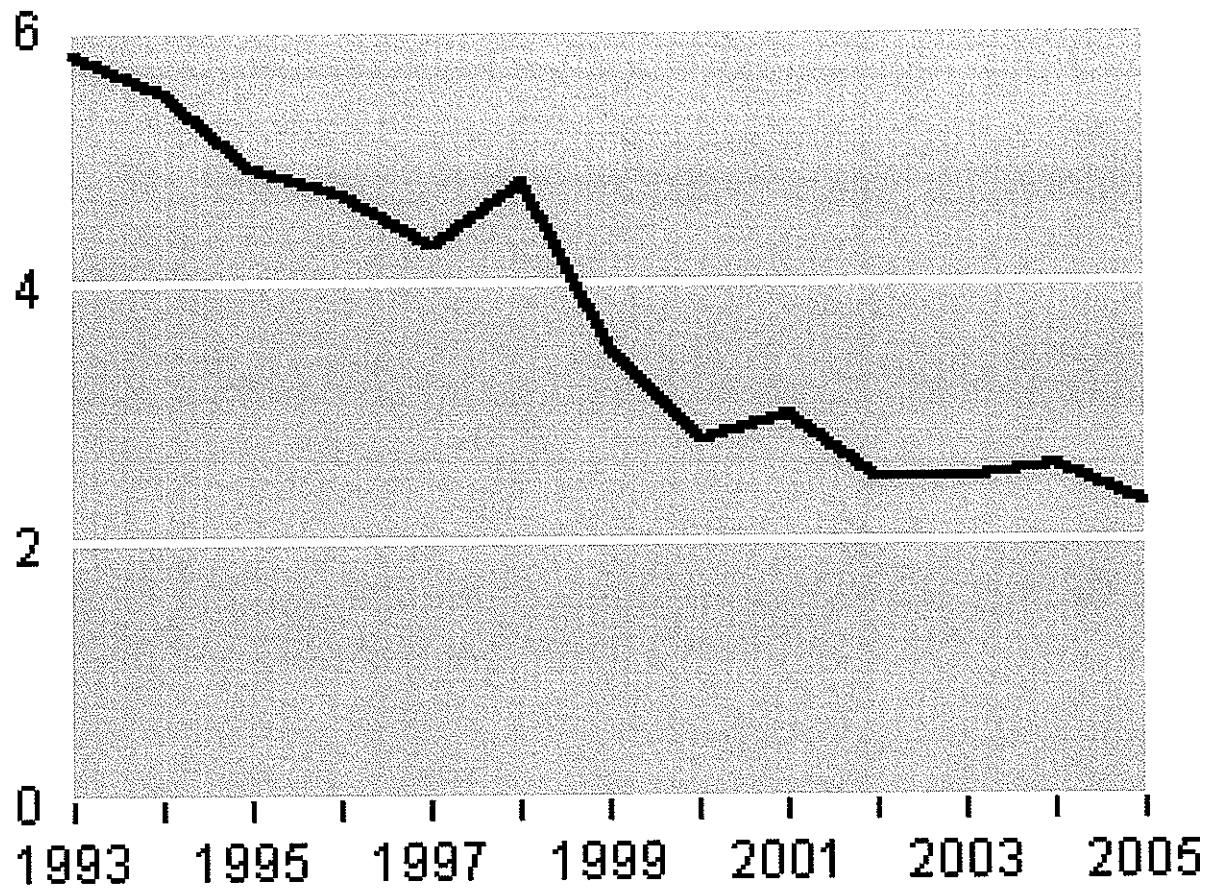
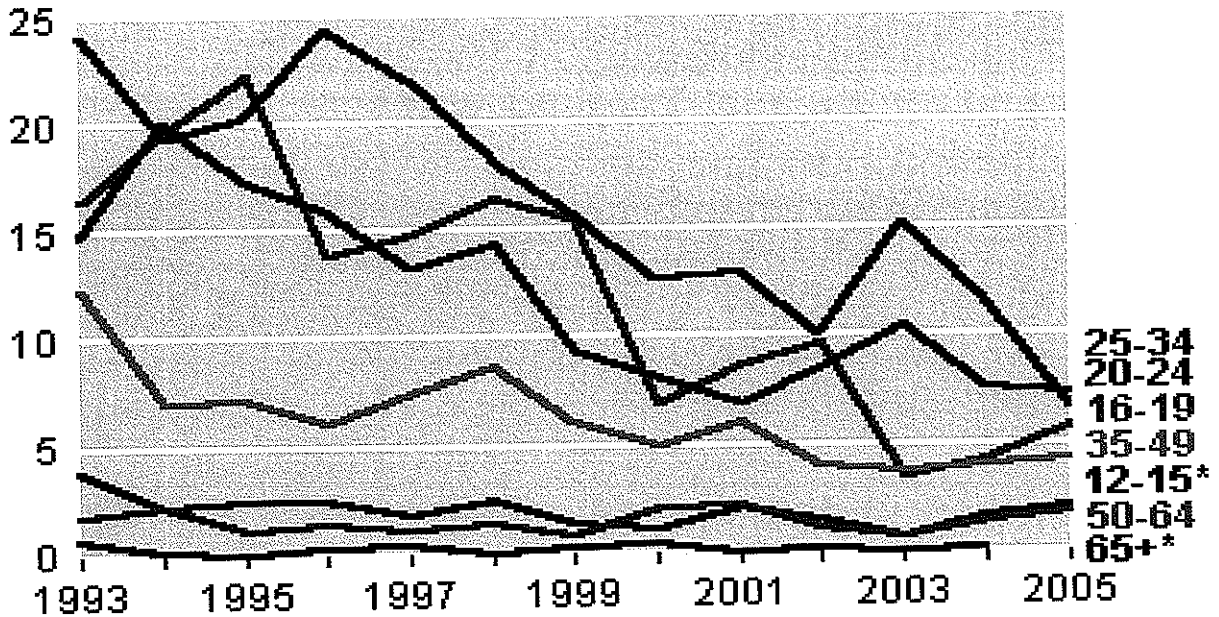


Figure 5

Nonfatal intimate partner victimization rates for females, by age, 1993 - 2005

Rate per 1,000 females in age group



*Based on 10 or fewer sample cases