

Domestic violence reaches record low

ABUSE RATE OF INTIMATE PARTNERS FALLS 65 PERCENT FROM 1993 TO 2005

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WASHINGTON - Criminal violence against intimate partners fell by nearly two-thirds in recent years and has reached a record low, according to preliminary government figures.

The declines were greatest for non-fatal attacks, which fell about 65 percent from 1993 to 2005, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. Homicides among intimate partners dropped by roughly one-third.

The figures are based on the annual National Crime Victimization Survey, which counts criminal abuse against spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends and former spouses, whether it's been reported to police or not. The information, collected in thousands of confidential interviews, is the most widely used instrument for charting U.S. crime trends.

'Very good news'

Because non-fatal attacks are hundreds of times more common than fatal ones, the overall drop in U.S. criminal abuse of intimate partners approaches two-thirds. That's the lowest abuse rate since the crime survey began in 1973.

"It's very good news," said Frank Zimring, a criminologist at Boalt Hall, the law school of the University of California-Berkeley.

"There's no way to apportion the credit precisely," Zimring added, but the decline began in 1994 as states and the federal government launched major efforts against intimate abuse.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, legislatures have passed at least 660 measures aimed at curbing domestic violence since then. In 1994, the federal Violence Against Women Act authorized massive new aid from Washington for shelters, treatment, new police initiatives and research. To date, that's totaled \$5.6 billion.

The effectiveness of the effort shows most clearly, analysts said, in a sharp drop in the number and proportion of men killed by female partners. Thirty years ago,

women and men were killed by intimates in nearly equal numbers. By 2004, however, 1,159 women were killed by intimates but only 385 men were. The imbalance persists in 2005 figures, due out next month, according to statistician Marianne Zawitz of the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The disproportion in fatalities, while seemingly adverse to women, reflects a major gain, said Richard Gelles, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice: Abusive men are killed less often now because women can get free of them more easily.

"We've eliminated a good deal of defensive homicide by giving women easier access to shelters and ERs and by measures such as mandatory arrest laws" that restrain or punish abusive spouses, Gelles said.

Steady drop

Easier escape from abusive partners also helps explain the drop in non-lethal violence, analysts said. It's a category that includes rape and robbery but consists mainly of aggravated and simple assault. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the 1993 rate was 5.8 per 1,000 people age 12 and older. Preliminary figures for 2005 put the rate at 2.0.

Nearly all that decline was among female victims, according to Janet Lauritsen, a criminologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis who's analyzed the numbers by gender. She and co-author Karen Heimer reported the disproportionate drop in a paper delivered last month at the American Association for the Advancement of Science convention in San Francisco.

The survey is based on interviews by female pollsters of a nationally representative sample of 77,200 households comprising nearly 134,000 people.

Among other factors that experts said helped to explain the decline:

More divorces and fewer and later marriages. Fewer intimate relationships mean fewer opportunities for intimate violence, criminologists reason.

More working women. Independent incomes make it easier to escape abuse.

More assertive women. In the mid-'90s, only half who reported criminal levels of abuse to victimization-survey interviewers said they'd reported it to police. These days, nearly two-thirds do.

Declines in all kinds of violent crime in the mid-through-late '90s. Intimate violence was swept along in the trend, according to analysts.

More imprisonment of men. It took many who'd been abusive off the streets.

