

**INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AGAINST ATHABASKAN WOMEN RESIDING IN INTERIOR ALASKA:
RESULTS OF A VICTIMIZATION SURVEY**

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ABSTRACT

A survey instrument mirroring that used in the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) was used to examine the frequency, severity, and consequences of intimate partner violence against an availability sample of Athabaskan women (n = 91) residing in the interior of Alaska. Data about victimization experiences were gathered in face-to-face interviews conducted in the region in 2003. Slightly less than two-thirds of respondents (63.7%) reported a violent victimization perpetrated by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime. More than a sixth of women surveyed (18%) reported that they had been physically assaulted by an intimate partner in the 12 months preceding the survey. Intimate partner assault victimization is more prevalent and is considerably more frequent for the respondents to our survey when compared to what has been reported for American women in general (as measured by the NVAWS).

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INTRODUCTION

This research note reports the results of a victimization survey designed to measure the incidence and prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among a sample of Alaska Native women residing in the state's interior. The survey was conducted as a part of an assessment to determine the need for a regional women's shelter. Using questions originally employed in the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) to measure assault victimization, the present study also allowed for comparisons between the IPV experiences of the Athabaskan women of interior Alaska with the experiences of women on a national basis.

Indigenous women from places outside of the US are more likely than their non-indigenous counterparts to be the victim of a violent crime committed by an intimate partner (AuCoin, 2005; Blagg, 2000; Morris & Reilly, 2003; Weinrath, 2000). A similar pattern holds true in the US on a national basis. An analysis of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data for the years 1992 through 1996 indicated that American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) women were about twice as likely as women from other races to have been the victim of intimate partner violence (annual rates of 11.0 per 1,000 vs. 5.4 per 1,000, respectively) (Greenfeld & Smith, 1999). Measures of IPV generated by the NVAWS allow for a similar conclusion: the lifetime prevalence of IPV among AI/AN women at 37.5 percent was one-and-a-half times greater than the rate for all races at 25.5 percent (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Although the results of national surveys in the US are in line with findings from comparable nations, the extent to which those findings can be extrapolated to specific groups of AI/AN women is questionable. With the broad geographic, economic, and cultural diversity of indigenous peoples in the US, we would expect considerable variation in rates of IPV. If the national patterns from the NCVS and NVAWS were to hold true for the rural Alaska Native sample we surveyed, then we might expect that they would be less likely than average to be the victim of IPV because rural AI/AN have lower rates of IPV on a national basis compared to their more urbanized counterparts (Greenfeld & Smith, 1999). On the other hand, if the patterns of IPV in rural Alaska are much like those from Arctic jurisdictions in Canada where rates of spousal violence are many times those found nationally (Griffiths, Zellerer, Wood, & Saville,

1995; Sauvé, 2005, Yukon Women's Directorate, 2004), we might expect that the incidence and prevalence of IPV in our sample will be much higher than what is found elsewhere.

METHODS

In order to allow for a basis for comparison with national figures, the survey instrument used in our study was patterned off of the instrument employed in the NVAWS (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Screen questions based on a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) were first asked of all respondents. Detailed incident reports were then taken from those respondents reporting victimization for each perpetrator of abuse. Questions in the incident reports served many purposes including the classification of instances of assault according to date, place, and victim/offender relationship.

Although the survey instrument used in the present study was modeled after the NVAWS, we did not administer the survey by telephone as was done nationally. Telephone administration methods were not used (1) because local government officials in the villages we studied felt that phone surveys were disrespectful and (2) because of relatively low levels of telephone penetration in the respondent population (only 84 percent of Alaska Native households in the region had telephones in 2000) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Given that surveys administered by mail have notoriously low response rates and are inappropriate when administering complex survey instruments (Fowler, 2002), it was necessary to instead administer the survey in an face-to-face fashion in the villages across the region. Rather than going to the homes of the respondents to administer the survey as we originally intended, our university IRB decided that respondents might feel coerced into participation (see Philips, Woodward, Collins, & O'Connor, 2002 for evidence that some respondents do feel forced to complete surveys when faced with an interviewer at home) and so surveys were conducted in a centrally located office in each village.

We intended to survey the population of all adult Athabaskan women aged 18 and over that resided in one of eight interior Athabaskan villages. Extrapolating figures from the 2000 U.S. Census to 2003 and assuming a stable population, we estimated that there were approximately 216 women 18 years or older who were wholly or partly Athabaskan residing in the 8 villages we studied. Two different techniques were used to identify potential respondents to the survey. First of all, 185 potential respondents were identified using a list of shareholders

of the local Alaska Native regional corporation. The remaining women were identified in a “snowball” fashion with the assistance of local village government officials as well as respondents that had completed the survey. Potential respondents were sent consent forms and personal letters inviting them to participate in the study. In the weeks following the initial mailing potential respondents were contacted by project staff to arrange for survey administration. Respondents were paid \$25 for participation.

Interviews were conducted with 91 out of the 216 potential respondents in 2003 for a response rate of 42 percent. A comparison of responses to demographic questions asked of survey respondents with responses to similar questions from the 2000 U.S. Census indicates that there were some differences between the group of women completing the victimization survey and the women in the population from which they were drawn. Respondents to the victimization survey were younger, more likely to be single, more likely to have been employed in the prior 12 months, and more likely to have smaller incomes than the Athabaskan women in the region who responded to the U.S. Census in 2000 (see Table 1). The group of survey respondents was similar to those responding to the 2000 U.S. census in terms of residential mobility and levels of education. Given the differences between the eventual survey respondents and the population from which they were drawn, and because of the potential for non-response bias (which could inflate or deflate indicators of IPV victimization), the findings presented below should be considered suggestive rather than definitive.

RESULTS

We first considered the survey results in terms of incidence rates standardized for the population. Incidence rates are calculated by dividing the total number of separate instances of victimization by the total number of people studied. Of the 91 women questioned, 16 had been the victim of physical assault at the hands of an intimate partner in the 12 months prior to the survey (see Table 2). Based upon the 44 total physical assaults among those 16 women, the *annual* rate of IPV assault victimization for the sample was 484 per 1,000 women. The annual incidence rate for IPV assault was greater than the incidence of assault at the hands of acquaintances or of non-intimate family members.

The lifetime prevalence of assault victimization by an intimate partner among survey respondents was also considered. We used an approach employed by Straus, et al. (1996), by

means of their Conflict Tactics Scale, to examine the frequency of victimization of various assaultive behaviors and to determine how many women had been an IPV assault victim at sometime during their lives. As is shown in Table 3, almost two-thirds (63.7%) of the women surveyed reported being the victim of at least one specific violent act at the hands of an intimate since becoming an adult. More than half the women surveyed indicated that an intimate partner had pushed, grabbed, shoved, or slapped or hit her. Roughly one out of every six women (18.7%) said that an intimate partner had threatened her with a gun.

In order to put the survey results into context, we next compared the lifetime prevalence and the annual incidence of intimate partner assault victimization among Athabaskan women with figures from the NVAWS. In that national survey there were statistically significant differences in rates of reported IPV victimization when AI/AN women were compared with women from other racial and ethnic groups. For instance, the lifetime physical assault victimization rate of 30.7 percent for AI/AN women was nearly one-and-a-half times as great as the rate of 21.3 percent for Caucasian women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 26). As is shown in Figure 1, the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner physical assault against Athabaskan women from the state's interior at 63.7 percent was nearly triple the rate for all American women.

The differences in the annual incidence of IPV are even more astounding. In the NVAWS there were 44 instances of intimate partner physical assault victimization per 1,000 women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, p. 10). Among the Athabaskan women surveyed for this study, the comparable rate was 484 instances of intimate partner physical assault per 1,000 women. Taking into account confidence intervals, the annual incidence of intimate partner physical assault rate for the Athabaskan women we surveyed was somewhere between 8 to 12 times that of the rate for American women as a whole (see Figure 2).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By all accounts, victimization by intimate partner violence is widespread among the Athabaskan women surveyed for this study. The relatively high incidence and prevalence rates indicate that it is a commonly shared experience of Athabaskan women residing in the state's rural interior. The results of our survey show that an overwhelming majority of women surveyed were assaulted by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetimes. Within a given year,

roughly one out of six women experienced at least one act of assault committed by an intimate partner.

The fact that Athabaskan women suffer from substantially high rates of IPV becomes apparent when considered in a comparative perspective. In a given year, they were at least eight times more likely than women in the U.S. to have been the victim of an assault committed by an intimate. Compared with AI/AN women and with American women in general, Athabaskan women were twice as likely and nearly three times as likely, respectfully, to be assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their adult lifetimes. The finding of comparatively high rates of IPV in this sample of rural AI/AN women contradicts the results of NCVS surveys which have shown that rural AI/AN women experience relatively lower levels of spousal violence (Greenfeld & Smith, 1999). In this regard, the experiences of Athabaskan women in Alaska's interior are similar to their Aboriginal counterparts in the Canadian north whose rates of IPV are also much higher than that which is found for women residing to their south. This suggests that researchers and policy makers should be cautious in generalizing U.S. national survey data on IPV (or other social problems) to Alaska Native groups. Furthermore, given the cultural and geographic diversity of the 561 Indian Tribes across the nation, understanding IPV among any one group of AI/AN women requires research conducted at the local level.

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Table 1: Comparison of 2003 Interior Alaska Native Survey Respondents and 2000 Census Sample of Athabaskan Women 18 Years of Age and Older Residing in Area Alaska Native Regional Corporation Villages.

Attribute	2000 Census	2003 Survey	significance test	p
Mean age	44.1	38.7	t = 2.61	.009
Percent married and living with husband	41.4	27.5	$\chi^2 = 5.40$.020
Percent with less than \$30,000 in household income	49.4	66.2	$\chi^2 = 6.50$.011
Percent with at least a high school degree	73.7	78.4	$\chi^2 = 0.75$.386
Percent who lived in village 5 years ago*	29.7	24.2	$\chi^2 = 1.20$.274
Percent who worked in past year**	59.3	76.9	$\chi^2 = 9.05$.003

* 2000 Census figures are for the total Alaska Native population age 5 and up.

** 2000 Census figures are for Alaska Native females age 16 and up.

Table 2: Annual Incidence of Physical Assault Against Interior Athabaskan Women by Victim/Offender Relationship(n = 91).

Outcome	Victim/Offender Relationship		
	Intimate Partners	Non-Intimate Family Members	Acquaintances
Number of victims	16	12	8
Percentage of women victimized	17.6	13.2	8.8
Average number of victimizations per victim	2.8	1.4	2.9
Total number of victimizations	44*	17	23
Annual rate of victimization per 1,000 women	484*	187	253
95% confidence interval of victimization rate	351 to 649	109 to 299	160 to 379

*Excludes one outlying case that reported 90 instances of assault in the prior year. Use of that case in the analysis raises the total number of victimizations to 134 and the rate per 1,000 women to 1473.

Table 3: Lifetime Prevalence of Physical Assault by an Intimate Partner Against Interior Athabaskan Women (n = 91).

Type of Assault	Number of Women Physically Assaulted	Percent of Women Physically Assaulted
Threw something that could hurt	31	34.1
Pushed, grabbed, shoved	52	57.1
Pulled hair	35	38.5
Slapped, hit	51	56.0
Kicked, bit	29	31.9
Choked, tried to drown	35	38.5
Hit with object	22	24.2
Beat up	38	41.8
Threatened with gun	17	18.7
Threatened with knife	11	12.1
Used gun	7	7.7
Used knife	8	8.8
Total intimate partner violence victims	58	63.7

Figure 1: Lifetime Prevalence of Physical Assault by an Intimate Partner Against Interior Athabaskan Women in 2003 (n = 91) and a Nationally Representative Sample of US Women, 1995-6.

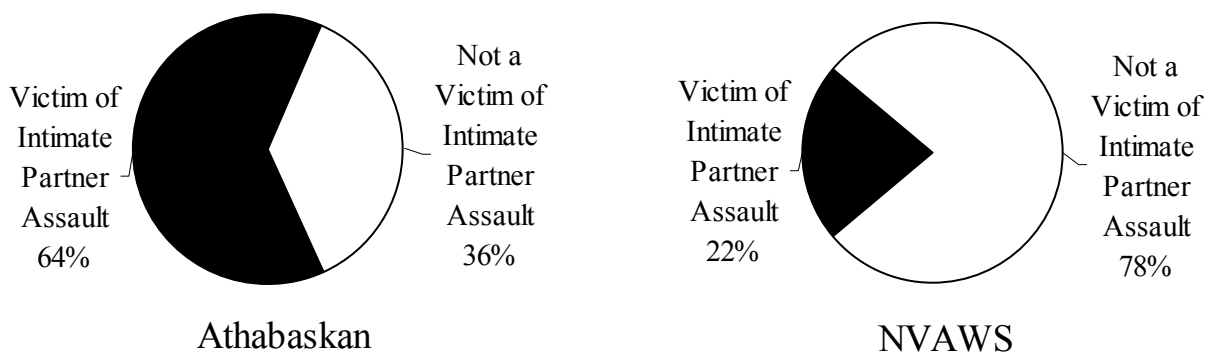


Figure 2: Annual Incidence of Physical Assault by an Intimate Partner Against Interior Athabaskan Women in 2003 (n = 91) and a Nationally Representative Sample of US Women, 1995-6.

