

Are New Zealand Men Really So Violent?

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This paper comments on a major survey on domestic abuse by men in New Zealand, commissioned by the Department of Justice in 1995. The report created controversy with the claim that up to 60% of New Zealand men were abusive to women. This prompted criticism that the research grossly exaggerated the extent of abuse. Central to this debate was the definition of abuse. After a careful analysis of the report, the following conclusions are offered in this paper: The results of the study it reports are presented in a way that emphasises abuse and the study's inflated estimates of it; given the nature of the study's "findings", the media's uncritical acceptance and dissemination of them was predictable. Thus it is difficult to escape the conclusion that domestic abuse was defined in this study so that high reported levels of it were inevitable and, that having achieved this, the findings were reported in a way that highlighted this "fact" and guaranteed the maximum possible publicity for it. Domestic abuse is a problem in our society and no-one can condone the behaviour of violent men, but that is not sufficient reason for exaggerating the extent of the problem by redefining "violence" in such a way that grievous bodily harm and an insult in an argument are indistinguishable. The risk of doing so is that serious abuse is trivialised, and that false ideas about men's violence will lead to bad public policy and poor legislation.

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Introduction

In 1995, the Department of Justice commissioned a major survey on domestic abuse by men in New Zealand. The results were published in a report called *Hitting Home. Men speak about abuse of women partners* (Leibrich, Paulin & Ransom 1995). Though the study covered a wide range of issues, one of its major claims was that it was the first to present prevalence rates of the abuse of women by New Zealand men. Predictably, the report created controversy. In particular, the claim that up to 60% of New Zealand men were abusive to women prompted criticism that the research grossly exaggerated the extent of abuse. Greg Newbold, a Sociologist at Canterbury University, was scathing in his condemnation of the study (Newbold 1995), while the Skeptics awarded it their "Bent Spoon Award" as an indication of their evaluation of it. (The Bent Spoon Award is named after Uri Geller, who claimed he could bend metal with his mind.) The authors of the report and Secretary for Justice, John Belgrave, defended the study, accusing its critics of misunderstanding or misinterpreting its methodology and findings, or both. Central to this debate was the definition of abuse. The issue is illustrated in the following tables reproduced from *Hitting Home*.

On the basis of these results, and equivalent results for abuse in the previous year, the researchers concluded:

Our study establishes that the prevalence rates for men's abuse of women partners during the past year are 21% reporting at least one act of physical abuse and 53% reporting at least one act of psychological abuse. Equivalent lifetime rates are 35% for physical abuse and 62% for psychological abuse. (Leibrich et al. 1995, p145)

Table 1. Types of physical abuse used during lifetime

Types of physical abuse	Number	%
Threatened her with a knife or gun	23	1
Used a knife or gun on her	29	1
Physically forced her to have sex	30	1
Beat her up	50	2
Choked or strangled her	50	2
Pressured her to have sex in a way that she didn't like or want	65	3
Kicked, bit or hit her with a fist	89	4
Hit or tried to hit her with something	128	6
Threw something at her	259	12
Slapped her	344	16
Pushed, grabbed or shoved her	559	25
At least one of the above	770	35

Source: Leibrich, Paulin & Ransom (1995), p.82.

Note. n = 2,226

Table 2. Types of psychological abuse used during lifetime

Types of psychological abuse	Number	%
Made her do something humiliating or degrading	50	2
Prevented her from having money for her own use	138	6
Deliberately destroyed or harmed something belonging to her	153	7
Humiliated her in public	174	8
Threatened to hurt her	196	9
Humiliated her in front of family or friends or mates	322	15
Threatened to hit or throw something at her	377	17
Put down her family and friends	512	23
Tried to keep her from doing something she wanted to do	572	26
Threw or smashed or hit or kicked something	572	26
Insulted or swore at her	953	43
At least one of the above	1,380	62

Source: Leibrich, Paulin & Ransom (1995) p.83.

Note. n = 2,226

New Zealand prevalence rates for men who report physical abuse of women are far higher than most existing prevalence rates of women who report being abused by men. Our one year prevalence rate is approximately double those in other research and the lifetime prevalence rate is approximately half as high again as those in other research. (Leibrich et al. 1995, p17)

Newbold and the Skeptics criticised these conclusions on the grounds that, by defining physical and psychological abuse so widely, and including minor levels of abuse, the study trivialises serious violence and obscures its true nature and extent. Closer examination of the study's findings supports this argument. Consider first the types of physical abuse measured in the study. Lifetime admission rates among those surveyed for most of these behaviours are very low, around 1% to 2% for acts such as using a knife or gun on a partner, to 6% for hitting her with something. Including slapping increases the incidence of physical abuse to 16%, but it is only when pushing, grabbing or shoving are included does the reported abuse exceed 20%. Though this cannot be calculated precisely from the figures given, it seems likely that if this last category had been excluded, the estimate of **lifetime** (that is, of someone **ever** doing one of these acts) would be closer to 20% than the 35% reported.

Similarly, most types of psychological abuse measured have levels of incidence ranging from 2% to 17%. Again, it is only when "insulted or swore at her" is included that the incidence of psychological abuse approaches the 62% quoted in the report. Removing this category from the analysis would reduce the estimate of psychological abuse in the study to perhaps 30%, only half the level reported.

The point at issue is not that pushing, shoving, grabbing, insulting or swearing at a partner cannot or should not be defined as domestic abuse. The question is the validity of combining these behaviours with threatening a woman with a gun or a knife, or humiliating or degrading her, and claiming that this is evidence of New Zealand men's violence towards women. This is equivalent to combining armed robbery and taking paperclips from work, and claiming that New Zealanders are a nation of dangerous thieves.

It is certainly true, as the authors of the report argue, that the definitions of violence used in the study are clearly set out. Furthermore, the research methodology is meticulously explained and documented and the research was competently conducted. This is a credit to the researchers concerned. The problem is not in the research itself but in the interpretation and reporting of its results.

An equally plausible interpretation of the findings of this study is that New Zealand men are not particularly abusive of their wives or partners. Only a small fraction of the "physically abusive" 35% of men identified in the study had assaulted their partners in a way that was likely to cause injury. Similarly, the majority of those who admitted "psychological abuse" were guilty of relatively minor acts such as insulting their partner or her friends. Furthermore, 75% of men said they did not approve of physical abuse, not even pushing, shoving or grabbing, under any circumstances, while 90% disapproved of hitting a woman even if she hit them first or was physically abusing their child.

The picture which these results paint is not one of large numbers of violent men abusing their partners. Yet, in the foreword to *Hitting Home*, this is exactly what is claimed:

... it is one of the few studies to determine rates of abuse by asking men about their own behaviour. There are messages for us simply in the fact that these violent men (my emphasis) reveal what they do.

This theme of violent men and high abuse rates is consistently emphasised throughout the report. As I have demonstrated, the basis for this assertion is at best tenuous, at worst unsupported, but it is only by studying the report in detail that this is revealed. For many readers the divergence between the study's findings and its conclusions would not be apparent. In fact, such a divergence would seem inconceivable given the unequivocal nature of the study's conclusions.

Hitting Home is a sophisticated and carefully prepared document designed to promote a particular view about domestic abuse in New Zealand. The results of the study it reports are presented in a way that emphasises abuse and the study's inflated estimates of it; given the nature of the study's "findings", the media's uncritical acceptance and dissemination of them was predictable. Thus it is difficult to escape the conclusion that domestic abuse was defined in this study so that high reported levels of it were inevitable and, that having achieved this, the findings were reported in a way that highlighted this "fact" and guaranteed the maximum possible publicity for it.

Domestic abuse is a problem in our society and no-one can condone the behaviour of violent men, but that is not sufficient reason for exaggerating the extent of the problem by redefining "violence" in such a way that grievous bodily harm and an insult in an argument are indistinguishable. The risk of doing so is that serious abuse is trivialised, and that false ideas about men's violence will lead to bad public policy and poor legislation.

References

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