

FOR RELEASE: Friday, July 08, 2005

Federal Funding for Domestic Violence Programs Not Reaching Intended Recipients

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Federal funding for local domestic violence programs is not reaching underserved areas and people who most desperately need the services.

Researchers at the University of Arkansas studied data from every county in the United States and statistics from national domestic violence program directories and discovered that poor and minority women and women who live in rural areas do not receive the same public services – counseling, access to shelters, legal aid and child-care assistance – as white women who live in affluent areas with a major college or university nearby. In many cases, especially in rural areas, public services to help women escape or combat domestic violence do not even exist.

“We found that the funding process favors existing organizations, which may not be the most effective way of reaching communities with the greatest need,” said **Amy Farmer**, economics professor at the University of Arkansas’ Sam M. Walton College of Business.



Farmer, Jill Tiefenthaler, a professor of economics at Colgate University, and Amandine Sambira, former economics graduate student at the U of A, analyzed local and national data to determine whether the Violence Against Women Act, the federal law that protects and assists victims of intimate-partner violence, is effectively and efficiently serving all victims. The researchers’ findings will be published in the forthcoming *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

In addition to demonstrating funding inequities based on race, income and geography, the researchers argued that the U.S. Department of Human Services does not have a comprehensive study showing which are the most effective and efficient programs. The absence of such

information means the Violence Against Women Act does not specifically target funds to areas and populations with the greatest need.

“Programs to combat intimate-partner violence in the U.S. are not the result of any coordinated government response,” Farmer said. “We know very little about what services are provided nationally and whether these programs are reaching as many women as possible.”

The problem is not one of discrimination or politically motivated funding, Farmer said. Instead, inequities exist because the process by which federal money reaches the local level is flawed and inconsistent from state to state. To receive money, local agencies must apply for grants, which are administered by states. Farmer argued that this system is biased because it favors existing organizations.

Many states exercise strict control over which organizations may receive money. Some states go so far as to provide a list of a limited number of specific agencies that qualify for such funding. The result is that existing programs expand, which isn’t necessarily bad, but new programs, ones that may target underserved women, cannot compete with established agencies for limited funding, Farmer said.

Furthermore, community resources play a significant role in determining whether domestic-violence programs will be provided. Many rural counties do not have an advocate for victims of domestic violence or personnel to apply for grants.

“It’s not as if people are intentionally excluding these counties,” Farmer said. “It’s simply an unintentional consequence, which is why it’s important to note because I think there would be a real desire to change that.”

Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 and an updated version in 2000 after many years of work by grassroots organizations that were strongly influenced by feminist thinking. Prior to the act, a coalition of groups relied on private donations, charities and miscellaneous governmental financing to fight domestic violence. Farmer argued that the history of grassroots organizations, which were concentrated in affluent areas and cities with a major university or college, has contributed to the lack of a “top down” understanding of the needs of domestic-abuse victims nationwide.

“Our analysis of the services to assist victims supports the notion that grassroots organizations in well-resourced communities are more effective, and these services are in relatively short supply in less-resourced areas,” Farmer said.

The updated Violence Against Women Act placed special emphasis on providing support for underserved populations and appropriated \$3.3 billion over five years to fight domestic abuse. Farmer emphasized that more than half of that amount, administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, goes to local law-enforcement agencies to encourage arrest policies and help with prosecution. The rest of the money is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services and is devoted to shelters, rape prevention and education and other community outreach programs.

A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicated that almost 25 percent of women and nearly 8 percent of men reported being physically assaulted, raped and/or stalked by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Other surveys have reported the percentage of women who have experienced domestic abuse to be as high as 31 percent. A U.S. General Accounting Office report from 1998 indicated that 55 to 65 percent of women on public welfare reported having been abused by an intimate partner.

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Contact:

Amy Farmer, professor of economics, Sam M. Walton College of Business, (479) 575-6093,
afarmer@walton.uark.edu

Matt McGowan, science and research communications officer, (479) 575-4246,
dmcgowa@uark.edu