

# Making the links between economic inequality and intimate partner violence

This study by Dr Jude Towers investigates the connection between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. It shows that access to economic resources is an important risk factor and argues that by understanding economic resources better, economic policy development could create better outcomes for women and their children.

*“With gendered economic inequality on the rise advancing understanding of the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women has never been more urgent.”*

The relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is complex and multidirectional. With gendered economic inequality on the rise advancing understanding of the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women has never been more urgent. Research based on the British Crime Survey 2008/9 suggests that whilst there is a significant relationship between a lack of economic resources and an increased likelihood of recent intimate partner violence for working-age women in England and Wales, some economic resources may be of greater importance in their association with intimate partner violence than others.

## Background

There is a substantial body of research on the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. This literature covers a broad range of different relationships between economics and intimate partner violence but arguably the most extensive considers whether women with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women with comparatively greater economic resources. The two key resources most explored in this literature are women's employment and women's income.

The findings from many of these studies demonstrate the complexity of the relationship

between these economic resources and intimate partner violence against women. Nevertheless they provide strong evidence to suggest that women with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women with comparatively greater economic resources.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

The research reported here is also concerned with the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. Economic inequality can be conceived of as the disparity in economic resources across a population. Thus economic inequality is operationalised via economic resources such as employment status, or earned income.

This research builds on previous studies in four ways: the findings for the first two are reported here; the findings for the third and fourth (outlined below) will be published in due course. The first is an analysis of the relationship between intimate partner violence against women and a number of individual, but also household and neighbourhood, economic resources.

The second analyses whether certain economic resources (such as employment or income) are more 'important' in relation to intimate partner violence against women.

The third analyses whether economic resources at a certain level (individual;

household; or neighbourhood) are more important in relation to intimate partner violence against women. The fourth analyses whether the relationship between recent intimate partner violence and economic resources differs depending on whether women are still in or have exited the violent relationship.

### Method

The research is based on an analysis of the British Crime Survey (BCS) Intimate Violence Module 2008/9. This BCS (now renamed the Crime Survey for England and Wales) module asks respondents (women and men aged 16-59 years) about their experiences of being a victim of intimate partner violence in the past 12 months (recent IPV). The BCS main questionnaire contains key economic data about the respondent, their household and their neighbourhood which can be linked to intimate partner victimisation. The survey is also structured in such a way as to enable additional economic variables to be constructed, added to the dataset and linked to intimate partner victimisation. Nine economic resource variables were identified or constructed for analysis in relation to women's intimate partner violence victimisation: employment status; socio-economic class; earned income; household income; housing tenure status; household poverty status; neighbourhood income and neighbourhood employment deprivation; and violence against women service provision.

To create an analysis sample women aged 16-59 years who had been in one or more intimate partnerships in their lifetime were identified. This created an analysis sample of 12,920 female respondents.

An inclusive definition of recent IPV was used; this included non-physical abuse (prevented from having fair share of household money; stopped from seeing friends and family; repeatedly belittled and made to feel worthless), stalking behaviours and threats of physical or sexual violence, as well as physical and sexual violence. 'Partner' included current or ex-intimate partners and dating partners.

A prevalence measure (victim once or more during the past 12 months) was used for the analysis. This identifies two groups of women for comparative purposes: those reporting one or more incidents of recent IPV and those

reporting zero incidents of recent IPV. From the sample of 12,920 female respondents 763 reported one or more incidents of recent IPV. This equates to an estimated 5.3% of the female population (aged 16-59 years) of England and Wales.

**Table 1: Prevalence of recent IPV against working-age women in England and Wales**

	No. in sample	Estimated % of female working-age population	Standard Error
Recent IPV	763	5.2	(0.3)
No recent IPV	12,157	94.8	(0.3)
Total	12,920	100.0	-

Source: BCS Intimate Violence Module 2008/09

Analysis of the relationship between recent IPV victimisation and economic resources used binary logistic regression modelling. This method enables the identification of statistically significant relationships between recent IPV and individual economic resources. An odds ratio is derived which gives an indication of how much greater or lesser the odds are of recent IPV for women with a certain level of economic resource compared to women with a different level of the same economic resource, for example the odds of recent IPV for unemployed women compared to employed women. When multiple economic resources are analysed in the same model, this method enables the identification of economic resources which retain a statistically significant relationship with recent IPV even after the effects of the other economic resources have been accounted for. This indicates economic resources which may be of particular importance in relation to recent IPV (see *Table 2 overleaf*).

### Findings

When each of the nine economic resources was analysed individually in relation to recent IPV all except one were found to have a statistically significant relationship. The exception was violence against women service provision.

**Women's employment:** the odds of recent IPV for women who were unemployed were 2.3 times higher than those of employed women ( $p < .001$ ); and the odds of recent IPV for economically inactive women were 1.4 times higher than those of employed women ( $p < .001$ ).

The odds of recent IPV for women in the three lowest **socio-economic classes** (never worked / long term unemployed; semi-routine and routine occupations; and lower supervisory and technical occupations) were 2.3 times; 1.5 times; and 1.7 times higher respectively than those of women in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations ( $p=.005$ ;  $p=.002$ ;  $p=.010$ ). However, the odds of recent IPV for women classified as small employers / own account workers and those classified as having intermediate occupations were not found to be significantly different to those of higher managerial, administrative and professional women ( $p=.996$  and  $p=.543$  respectively).

The odds of recent IPV for women whose **individual earned income** was £0 because they were unemployed were 2.4 times higher than those of women earning an above average £20,000 or more per annum ( $p<.001$ ) and the odds of recent IPV for women whose earned income was £0 because they were economically inactive were 1.5 times higher than women earning £20,000 or more per annum ( $p=.006$ ). However, the odds of recent IPV for women with a low (less than £10,000p.a.) or average (£10,000-£19,999p.a.) earned income were not found to be significantly different to those of women earning an above average income of £20,000 or more per annum ( $p=.191$  and  $p=.551$  respectively).

Women whose **household income** was low (less than £10,000p.a.) had 3.5 times higher odds of recent IPV compared to women whose household income was an above average £30,000 or more per annum ( $p<.001$ ). Women whose household income was an average £10,000-£29,999 per annum also had significantly higher odds (1.9 times higher) of recent IPV compared to women whose household income was £30,000 or more per annum ( $p<.001$ ).

For **housing tenure status**, the odds of recent IPV for women in social rented housing were 2.7 times higher than those of women in owner/occupier housing ( $p<.001$ ) and were double for women in private rented housing compared

**Table 2: Economic Resources and the categories of analysis**

<i>Economic Resource</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Employment status	Unemployed Economically inactive Employed
Socio-economic class	Never worked & long-term unemployed Semi-routine & routine occupations Lower supervisory & technical Small employers & own account workers Intermediate Higher managerial, administrative & professional
Earned income	Economically inactive (£0) Unemployed (£0) Low (£1-£9,999) Average (£10,000-£19,999) Above average (£20,000 or more)
Household income <sup>4</sup>	Low (less than £10,000) Average (£10,000-£29,999) Above average (£30,000 or more)
Housing tenure	Social rented Private rented Owner/occupier
Household poverty status	At or below poverty threshold Above poverty threshold
Neighbourhood income deprivation	0% most deprived Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) All other LSOAs
Neighbourhood employment deprivation	0% most deprived LSOAs All other LSOAs
Violence against women service provision	One or more services in Local Authority Zero services in Local Authority

to women in owner/occupier housing ( $p<.001$ ).

The odds of recent IPV for women whose households were at or below the **household poverty** threshold were 2.6 times higher than those of women whose households were above the poverty threshold ( $p<.001$ ).

The odds of recent IPV for women living in the most deprived 10% of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) for both **neighbourhood income deprivation** and **neighbourhood employment deprivation** were significantly higher than those for women living in the other 90% of LSOAs (1.6 times higher ( $p<.001$ ) and 1.3 times higher ( $p=.048$ ) respectively).

The second part of the research was designed to investigate whether any

of the nine economic resources were more 'important' in relation to recent IPV victimisation. This was assessed as those economic resources found to have a statistically significant relationship to recent IPV even after the effects of the other economic resources had been accounted for. When all nine economic resource variables were analysed together, only two were found to still have a statistically significant relationship to recent IPV after the effects of the other economic resources were accounted for: **household income** and **housing tenure status**.

The odds of recent IPV for women whose **household income** was average (£10,000-£29,999 per annum) were 1.5 times higher than those of women whose household income was £30,000 or more per annum ( $p=.019$ ). However,

the odds of recent IPV for women with low household incomes were now not found to be significantly different to those of women with above average household incomes ( $p=.090$ ).

The odds of recent IPV for women with social and private rented **housing tenure** compared to owner/occupier housing remained significantly higher: 1.7 times higher for women in social rented housing ( $p=.013$ ) and 1.9 times higher for women in private rented housing ( $p<.001$ ).

### Discussion and conclusions

The finding that service provision was not a significant factor in relation to intimate partner violence warrants further investigation. It is likely that the data in this research was unable to accurately capture the complexities of service access for women. In a time of cuts to, but growing demand for, services, understanding the role of specialist service provision in preventing re-victimisation is of considerable importance.

The key finding from the two parts of the research reported here is that working-age women in England and Wales with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience recent IPV compared to women with comparatively greater economic resources. This finding strengthens the evidence-base which suggests women's economic inequality (i.e. access to economic resources) is an important factor in relation to intimate partner violence.

The findings from this research challenge the current focus on individual economic resources (employment and income). Whilst significant relationships were found for employment and earned income with recent IPV, significant relationships were also found between recent IPV and household and neighbourhood economic resources. The relationship between earned income and recent IPV was also particularly complex. The lack of earned income through unemployment or economic inactivity increased women's odds of recent IPV, but the odds of recent IPV for women with low and average levels of earned income were found to be no different to those of women with an above average earned income. Thus could the reduced risk be linked to earning an income rather than how much income women earn?

Perhaps more importantly, when the comparative importance of all nine economic resources was analysed, it was only two household resources (household income and housing tenure status) which retained a statistically significant relationship with recent IPV after the effects of the other economic resources had been accounted for. Relatively little analysis has been conducted which compares the significance of different economic resources in this way. Analysing a wider variety of economic resources, but importantly, comparing the significance of these to each other may reveal important economic resources in relation to intimate partner violence against women which have not yet been fully interrogated.

Thus women's access to economic resources can be argued to be a significant factor in reducing the odds of intimate partner violence. Gendered changes in the economy are therefore an important factor in considering the prevention of violence against women. In addition understanding which economic resources are most significant in reducing the odds of intimate partner violence could enable the development of both economic and violence prevention policies which are more effective in combating violence against women.

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### Notes

1 Holly Johnson; Natalia Ollus and Sami Nevala (2008) *Violence Against Women: An International perspective*. New York, Springer.

2 Claire Renzetti (2011) Economic issues and intimate partner violence against women. Claire Renzetti; Jeffrey Edleson and Raquel Kennedy Bergen (Eds) *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*. 2nd edition. Los Angeles, Sage: 171-188.

3 Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen (2004) *Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. Home Office Research Study 276. London, Home Office.

4 It is likely that the number of adults in a household will be correlated with household income. The number of adults in the household (single adult; two or more adults) was taken into account in the analysis.