

Contrary to popular belief, the incidence of domestic violence in Britain does not seem to have risen during the recession. But according to research by **Jonathan Wadsworth** and colleagues, men and women have experienced different risks of unemployment – and these have had contrasting effects on the level of physical abuse.

Unemployment and domestic violence



Domestic violence hurts. Aside from the obvious physical and psychological harm to the victims, it also damages the economy. The annual cost placed on hospitals, police, the criminal justice system, schools and workplaces has been estimated at £5.8 billion.*

According to the British Crime Survey (BCS), around 560,000 women report some form of domestic abuse in any year – that’s 6% of the female population of working age. The charity Refuge estimates that two women a week die as a result of domestic violence. About 93% of defendants in domestic violence court cases are men; and in the data

we have analysed, roughly 70% of victims are women.

In public discussion of domestic violence, there is a widespread perception that its incidence varies with the economic cycle and that rising unemployment could provide a ‘trigger’ for violent situations in the home. Newspaper headlines of recent years include ‘Growth in violence against women as recession hits’ (*The Guardian*, 2009) and ‘Recession blamed for increase in domestic violence’ (*Daily Mirror*, 2011).

But from an economic perspective, it is far from clear that unemployment influences domestic violence in the way that many commentators expect. Indeed, our research suggests that there are significant gender differences: high or

rising unemployment among men is associated with falls in domestic violence, while high or rising unemployment among women is associated with increases in domestic violence.

Figure 1 shows the pattern of unemployment rates for men and women in England and Wales since 2005. Unemployment went up for both sexes at the start of the downturn in 2008, but more so for men. Since then, the rates for the two sexes have followed rather different patterns, levelling off for men after 2009, but continuing to rise for women. The unemployment rate for men remains higher than that for women.

Figure 2 documents the incidence of all forms of reported domestic violence and physical abuse on women over the same period, using BCS data. It is far from clear that the incidence of domestic violence rose after the economy went into recession. If anything, the opposite seems to be the case, particularly for the rate of physical abuse, which fell during the downturn. So rates of reported domestic violence fell in a period when unemployment was rising.

What might explain these patterns? Economists tend to think of human relationships in terms of costs and benefits. Partnerships can convey economic benefits – not just in terms of possible gains from pooling resources and sharing consumption but also from other intangibles – but they may also incur costs if the relationship is in trouble. Partnerships then break down if the costs are greater than any benefits.

Figure 1:
Male and female unemployment rates in England and Wales

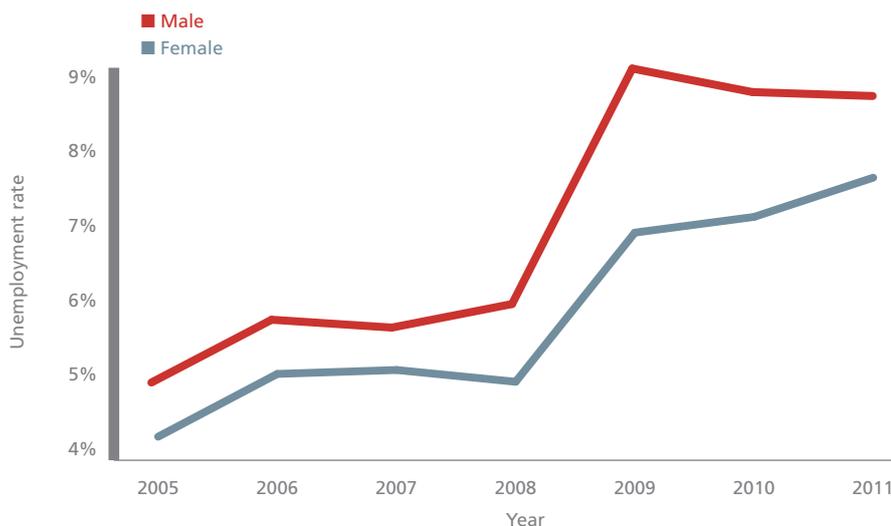
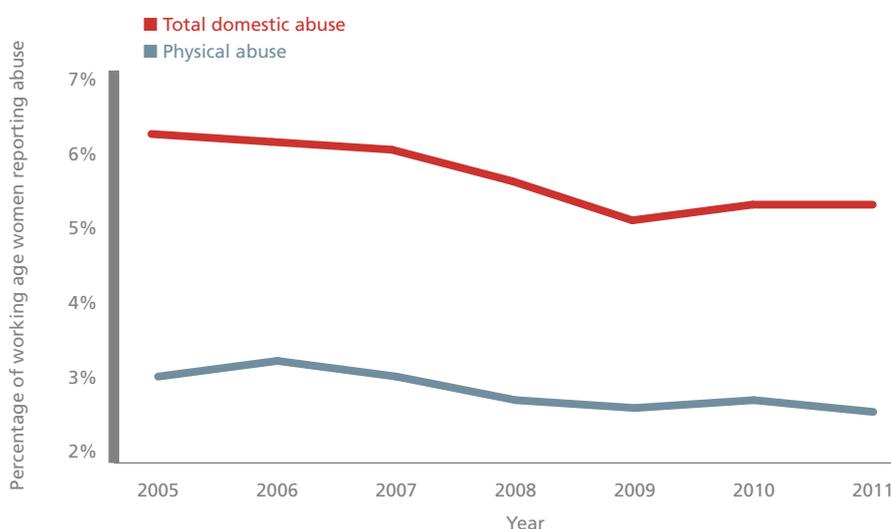


Figure 2:
Domestic violence in England and Wales



Female unemployment increases the risk of domestic abuse; male unemployment reduces the risk

* ‘The Cost of Domestic Violence: Update 2009’ (<http://www.avaproject.org.uk/media/60461/costs%20of%20dv%20by%20local%20authority.pdf>)

Domestic violence can be seen in a similar way. Some people may perpetrate abuse if the costs of doing so are smaller than any perceived gains. And some may endure some level of abuse if the costs of enduring it are perceived to be less than the alternative costs incurred in ending the relationship.

Unemployment influences both the costs and benefits of partnerships. If unemployment is low, then the chances of finding a job or keeping a job are high and so the potential income gains from a partnership are raised. If unemployment is high, then the chances of losing a job are high, lowering the gains from a partnership over and above any additional stresses that a raised prospect of job loss may bring.

But what if unemployment is unevenly distributed across men and women? According to our framework, this will introduce differential costs and benefits to a partnership. A higher risk of unemployment for men may act to deter violence in the home, since the contribution of the man to any partnership is reduced. If the man values the partnership, a higher risk of his own unemployment may temper any abusive intentions.

For women, a higher risk of unemployment is also likely to reduce their chances of finding a job should the relationship break down, but it may, in certain cases, be associated with continuing in an abusive relationship. So our theory predicts that high or rising unemployment among men will be associated with falls in domestic violence, while among women it will be associated with increases in domestic violence.

Is there any evidence to support this idea? To test it, we matched data on unemployment rates among men and women across the 43 police force areas in England and Wales that are reported in each year of the BCS. Each survey includes interviews with around 12,000 women of working age who are asked whether they have suffered any abuse over the past 12 months, ranging from being repeatedly belittled to having a weapon used against them.

Self-reported incidences of abuse in surveys are less likely to suffer from lower recording rates in official statistics that might be prompted by women's fear of the consequences of reporting domestic





violence. The BCS is currently looking at whether isolating the respondent from the interviewer also changes response rates.

Figure 3 plots the yearly change in physical abuse against the yearly change in unemployment rates for men and women in each police force area. The red line in each chart summarises the relationship between domestic violence and unemployment: for men, it is negative, while for women, it is positive. If we plot the change in domestic violence against the change in the aggregate unemployment rate – not split by gender – we find no effect.

So while we find no evidence to support the hypothesis that domestic violence increases with overall unemployment, male and female unemployment rates have opposite effects on domestic violence. Higher unemployment for women increases the risk of domestic abuse; higher unemployment for men reduces the risk. From a policy perspective, it is therefore conceivable that measures designed to enhance women’s job security could be an important contributor to a reduction in domestic violence.

This article summarises ‘Unemployment and Domestic Violence: Theory and Evidence’ by Dan Anderberg, Helmut Rainer, Jonathan Wadsworth and Tanya Wilson, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1230 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1230.pdf>).

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Policies that enhance women’s job security could contribute to a reduction in domestic violence

Figure 3: Changes in domestic violence and unemployment rates for men and women

