

Women and children bear brunt of domestic violence, Stanford scholar says

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Domestic violence kills far more people than civil wars worldwide, new research by a Stanford faculty member has found.

The study, written by Stanford political scientist James Fearon and Oxford University's Anke Hoeffler, estimated the global costs of all types of violence. They found that the economic and social cost of all violence worldwide is about \$9.5 trillion a year, equivalent to 11.2 percent of the world's [gross domestic product](#).

Stanford News Service recently interviewed Fearon, the Theodore and Frances Geballe Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, about the report, which was produced by the Copenhagen Consensus Center for use by the United Nations.

What were your most significant findings about domestic violence?

My co-author, Anke Hoeffler, and I combined data on crime rates in developing countries with research on the economic and social costs of different sorts of violent crimes in the U.S. (mainly) to produce rough estimates for these costs in low-income countries. We then compared these to estimates for the economic and social costs of civil wars globally. We find that because the prevalence of homicide, [intimate partner violence](#) and child abuse is so much greater than the prevalence of violence and damage due to civil wars – ranging over several orders of magnitude – these more domestic forms of violence look like a vastly bigger problem from the perspective of human well-being.

This is true even if you make fairly conservative assumptions about relative costs. Civil wars can be horribly lethal and destructive, but they are concentrated in a comparatively small number of countries and usually in small parts of those countries.

By contrast, about one in three countries has a homicide rate greater than 10 per 100,000, which the World Health Organization considers to be an epidemic level. And severe physical abuse of children and women is definitely far more common than 10 per 100,000 in a very large number of countries.

What does the report say about females and children?

Reported homicides of women and children are much lower than for men (though underreporting is surely worse for both and especially for female infants in some places.) However, the prevalence of severe physical abuse of women and children appears to be shockingly large. We draw on cross-national surveys that suggest that in low-income countries, about 15 percent of children are regularly subject to severe physical discipline, meaning being hit on the head, face, or ears repeatedly or beaten with an implement.

Globally, about 30 percent of women over the age of 15 are estimated to suffer intimate partner violence at some point in their lives. Add to these forms of assault early marriage of young girls in many places, which can be considered a form of violence against women because of documented bad health effects and high rates of abuse, and female genital mutilation. Even if we estimate the economic and personal costs of such violence (per person) as several orders of magnitude lower than for homicide and deaths and refugee costs in civil wars, the prevalence is so much higher that you end up with costs being dominated by these forms of violence.

What myths did this study debunk?

International organizations and developed country aid programs have tended to focus on aid to address civil war violence rather than on research or aid to address these far more prevalent, but also

very costly, forms of violence. It's a great thing that they have put civil war and violent conflict on the development agenda, and important progress has been made there. Our report argues for going further.

We wrote it as part of a process feeding into the United Nation's selection of a new set of Millennium Development Goals for the next 15 years, from 2015 to 2030 ... very little international aid is (now) focused on improving the professionalism of police in developing countries, or on programs and political and social movements aimed at reducing [domestic violence](#).

Why does violence between individuals result in more deaths than civil wars?

Using what we think are the best available estimates, we note in the report that in recent years the global number of homicides has been running eight to nine times the global number of battle deaths in civil wars each year. We think both estimates (in 2008, around 420,000 homicides versus about 49,000 battle deaths) are probably too low. Homicides are probably significantly underreported in many developing countries, and the battle death estimates don't usually include other deaths that are less directly caused by civil war violence. It's hard to say if better estimates would make the ratio larger or smaller, but our best guess is that it wouldn't change radically.

As to why the disparity, in large part it is probably a function of there being so many more individuals (who have the capacity to kill another individual) than there are groups that have the capacity and motivation to organize to use violence. There have been some terrible times when collective violence surely surpassed interpersonal homicide – such as during World War II – but since then, for a number of reasons, interstate warfare has greatly subsided. In the last 20 years even civil war violence has declined quite a bit, though with a recent uptick due to conflicts in the Middle East.

How can societies best tackle the problem of domestic violence?

High homicide rates and violence against women

and children may seem to be intractable, cultural problems, but some countries have made remarkable progress in reducing homicide rates, at the least. In many low-income countries, people have next to no trust in the police, for good reason, since they are often ineffective or highly abusive and in league with crime networks themselves.

Reforming and increasing the professionalism of developing country police forces is something both international donors and developing country governments should devote more effort to.

For high-income countries, there is a growing body of high-quality evaluations of the effectiveness of diverse programs aimed at reducing crime in communities, including [domestic abuse](#). One of the big gaps we note in our report is that there is hardly any parallel for low-income countries, and there are reasons to think that programs and approaches that work for a high-income country police department, for example, might not work for a low-income country police department. More of a focus on identifying, funding and evaluating different ideas for community-based programs aimed at reducing violence in low-income countries would be worth considering.

Finally, big changes might be brought about by social movements by highlighting and calling into question long-standing practices (such as abusive child discipline). The international aid community has funded civil society organizations focused on increasing democracy and improving local-level governance – how about aid to support civil society organizations focused on changing norms concerning homicide, child abuse and domestic partner [violence](#)?

More information: The study is available online: www.copenhagenconsensus.com/po.../conflictandviolence

Provided by Stanford University

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