



# The Cost of Domestic Violence

Sylvia Walby (University of Leeds)

September 2004

The research estimates the cost of domestic violence for the state, employers and the men and women who are subjected to it. The methodology is based on the Home Office framework for costing crime and develops this so as to include the specific cost related to domestic violence. The estimate of costs provides an additional perspective for examining the devastating consequences of domestic violence for society as well as for victims.

## Key findings

The total cost of domestic violence to services (Criminal Justice System, health, social services, housing, civil legal) amounts to £3.1 billion, while the loss to the economy is £2.7 billion. This amounts to over £5.7 billion a year. The costs can be broken down as follows:

- **Criminal Justice System:** The cost of domestic violence to the criminal justice system (CJS) is around £1 billion a year. This is nearly one-quarter of the CJS budget for violent crime. The largest single component is that of the police. Other components include: prosecution, courts, probation, prison, and legal aid.
- **Health Care:** The cost to the NHS for physical injuries is around £1.2 billion a year. This includes GPs and hospitals. Physical injuries account for most of the NHS costs, but there is an important element of mental health care, estimated at an additional £176 million.
- **Social Services:** The annual cost is nearly a £.25 billion. This is overwhelmingly for children rather than for adults, especially those caught up in the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse.
- **Housing:** Expenditure on emergency housing includes costs to Local Housing Authorities and Housing Associations for housing those homeless because of domestic violence; housing benefit for such emergency housing; and, importantly, refugees. This amounts to £.16 billion a year.
- **Civil Legal:** Civil legal services cost over £.3 billion, about half of which is borne by legal aid and half by the individual. This includes both specialist legal actions such as injunctions to restrain or expel a violent partner, as well as actions consequent on the disentangling of marriages and relationships such as divorce and child custody.
- **Economic Output:** Lost economic output accounts for around £2.7 billion a year. This is the cost of time off work due to injuries. It is estimated that around half of the costs of such sickness absences is borne by the employer and half by the individual in lost wages.

An additional element is the human and emotional cost. Domestic violence leads to pain and suffering that is not counted in the cost of services. This amounts to over £17 billion a year.

Including all costs, the total cost of domestic violence for the state, employers and victims is estimated at around £23 billion.

## Introduction

Domestic violence has devastating consequences for both the individual victim and the wider society. It drains the resources of public and voluntary services and of employers and causes untold pain and suffering to those who are abused. This report addresses one aspect of domestic violence, the cost, for a range of people and social institutions.

## Aims of the research

While considerations of justice and fairness provide a sufficient basis for public intervention into domestic violence, a better understanding of the full cost of domestic violence provides the basis for action within an additional policy framework, that of finance. Adding a financial dimension increases the range of ways in which policy interventions can be articulated, measured and evaluated. In particular, it may assist in addressing spending priorities by mainstreaming concerns about domestic violence into more conventional policy frameworks. This is complementary to policy frameworks based on need and justice, not an alternative to them. The aim of this research is to estimate the cost of domestic violence for the state, employers and those individuals who are subject to it.

## Method

The methodology is based on the Home Office framework for costing crime (Home Office Research Study 217, Brand and Price, 2000), and develops this so as to include the specific costs related to domestic violence.

Three key types of information are needed in order to cost domestic violence. First, the extent and nature of domestic violence, including both the number of victims and the number of incidents needs to be discovered. Second, there must be a measure of the extent and nature of the impact of domestic violence on victim's lives and society as a whole, including the extent to which it leads to use of services, disrupts employment and causes pain and suffering. The third element is the estimation of the cost of the provision of services, of lost economic output and the public's willingness-to-pay to avoid the human costs of pain and suffering.

Information on the extent of domestic violence is taken from various sources, including the 2001 Home Office British Crime Survey self-completion module on Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking (BCS IPV) (Walby and Allen 2004). This includes not only physical domestic violence, but also rape, sexual assault and stalking by intimates. It includes domestic violence against both men and women. The self-completion module of the BCS provides greater confidentiality and thus greater disclosure of domestic violence than the main part of the BCS, which relies on face-to-face interviewing, and is therefore more reliable and produces the best British estimates. The self-completion module estimates a prevalence of domestic violence that is five times higher than that in the main face-to-face part of the BCS.

Information on the costs (e.g. services) is derived from a variety of studies including the Home Office study on the cost of crime, which in turn builds on the programme of research in the Department for Transport, which provides estimates for health care, lost economic output and human costs. Information on the cost of services is derived from the BCS IPV, or identified from reports by services on their own expenditure, or from other recent research. Information on the actual level of service use is gathered from reports by service providers and the BCS IPV.

The estimates are for England and Wales and are centred on 2001.

## Main findings

The research includes the cost of domestic violence to public services. In this report this includes the criminal justice system (including the police), the health care system (including mental health), social services, housing and refuges, and civil legal services. This includes a wider range of services than has been included in previous studies of the cost of crime, in recognition of the special features of domestic violence.

There is also the cost of lost economic output as a result of the disruption of employment. This is a cost that is borne by both employers and the victim themselves, as well as having further effects on the economy as a whole that are not estimated here.

It would be misleading and incomplete to restrict the economic cost of domestic violence to those associated with services and employment only. Like other crimes, domestic violence also generates significant 'intangible' costs associated with pain and suffering, and to omit these only in relation to domestic violence would falsely represent this type of crime as less costly than other violent crimes. The importance of including costs in relation to the physical and emotional suffering of domestic violence victims is recognised by both the Home Office and Department for Transport for estimating costs in comparable circumstances of crime and injury. This report follows the practice of these other government ministries which estimates these costs on the basis of the public's 'willingness-to-pay' to avoid pain and suffering.

There are three main types of cost. First, there is the use of services, often public services. In this report this includes the criminal justice system (including the police), the health care system (including mental health), social services, housing and refuges, and civil legal services. This includes a wider range of services than has been included in previous studies of the cost of crime, in recognition of the special features of domestic violence. Second, there is lost economic output as a result of the disruption of employment. This is a cost that is borne by both employers and the victim themselves, as well as having further effects on the economy as a whole that are not estimated here. Third, there is the human cost of pain and suffering. This is included, following Home Office practice in estimating the cost of crime, so as not to diminish the importance of this aspect of domestic violence. It is estimated on the basis of the public's 'willingness-to-pay' to avoid pain and suffering in comparable circumstances.

The cost of domestic violence is partly borne by the state and the wider society, partly by the individual who suffers the violence, and partly by employers. The state bears the cost of most of the services, that is, £2.9 billion for the criminal justice system, health care, social services, emergency housing, and, through legal aid, civil legal services. The individual victims suffer immense human and emotional costs as well as considerable income losses from lost employment, substantial civil legal costs and some costs associated with moving home and health care, amounting to around £19 billion. Lost economic output amounts to £2.7 billion, about half of which, £1.3 billion, is borne by employers.

The estimates may be conservative because there is insufficient data to enable reliable estimates to be made of some likely costs. A review of data collection and official statistics about the extent of domestic violence and about the associated use of public services is recommended. There is very little systematically collected information about the use of public services as a result of domestic violence and there is no commitment to collect reliable information on the extent of domestic violence on other than an ad hoc basis.

The demonstration of the scale of the impact of domestic violence on society by estimating its cost may enable a wider range of both policy-makers and the general public to understand the extent of the problem and the potential gains to all that could result from the reduction and elimination of domestic violence. This is consistent with the move towards evidence-based policymaking, and the development of transparent, comparable measures of the costs and benefits that flow from policy action and inaction. It shows the cost of inaction.

The high cost of domestic violence further demonstrates the extent to which this violence has devastating consequences that are borne both by the direct victims and also by the wider society. There is a wide range of expensive repercussions as a consequence of the utilisation of public services paid for by the whole country and of the lost economic output borne by employers, as well the impact on those who suffer domestic violence directly. The presentation of the issue as a cost may facilitate the mainstreaming of policy to reduce and eradicate domestic violence into mainline policy analysis and priorities.

## Further Information

Copies of the full report can be obtained from:

DTI Publications Orderline  
ADMAIL 528  
LONDON SW1W 8YT  
T• 0870 150 2500  
F• 0870 150 2333  
E• [publications@dti.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications@dti.gsi.gov.uk)

Copies of the full report are also available on the Women and Equality Unit website, along with further information about the Unit.

[www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk)