

# Study reveals women granted restraining orders against abusers see decreased earnings

March 6 2015, by Sharon Blake

---

"Why doesn't she just leave?" is a timeworn question about women trapped in relationships that are physically and/or emotionally abusive to them. Economic dependence is clearly part of the story—many women lack the financial means to leave and find themselves trapped by both poverty and abuse.

Of the [women](#) who do attempt to escape the [abuse](#), some opt to petition a judge for a civil [restraining order](#), also called a Protection From Abuse (PFA) order, for protection from abuse, harassment, threats, or intimidation. Research shows that PFAs can promote women's safety and help women manage the threat of abuse.

However, a new study by two University of Pittsburgh sociologists shows that turning to the courts may not be effective at helping these women earn more money or even return to their prior level of [earnings growth](#).

Pitt Professor of Sociology Lisa Brush and Associate Professor of Sociology Melanie Hughes in the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences have coauthored "The Price of Protection: A Trajectory Analysis of Civil Remedies for Abuse and Women's Earnings," published in a recent issue of *American Sociological Review*, the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association.

The paper investigates changes in women's earnings before and after they petition the courts for a restraining order against an abuser. Although one might theorize that such an order would clear the way for

the woman to return to work and increase her earnings, Brush and Hughes found overwhelming evidence that this period of petitioning is accompanied by serious financial instability, vulnerability, and hardship for women. In fact, the researchers estimate that women lose anywhere between \$312 and \$1,018 dollars in the year after petitioning and further analysis indicates the women are not recouping these losses later.

The study is the first to assess what happens to women's earnings before, during, and after petitioning for a restraining order.

The researchers studied records of 3,923 women in Allegheny County who had reported any earnings between January 1995 and December 2000 and who had petitioned for a PFA order between January 1996 and December 1999. They looked for changes in earnings growth before and after petitioning. They also took into account whether the women were on welfare prior to or after petitioning, and whether they secured just the initial PFA of usually 10 days or followed through and requested a hearing, a necessary step for a long-term restraining order. (In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, judges can grant petitioners a temporary 10-day restraining order and then a longer 12-to-18-month renewable order.)

"Our study convincingly shows that women's petitioning for a PFA does not come with either short- or long-term increases in earnings growth," said Hughes. "We cannot offer women a restraining order as a tool to stop abuse and then walk away. We need to offer women other forms of support, especially economic ones, during this unstable time."

"The study is significant," adds Brush, "because it definitively demonstrates the inadequacy of the two mechanisms—welfare and protective orders—that we expect women to use to escape from abusive relationships. Sometimes, a woman can't afford to 'just leave.' Sometimes, a protective order is just a piece of paper. And sometimes, the turmoil of abuse and the petitioning process causes not just a short-

term shock but a decline in [earnings](#) that takes years to make up."

The researchers say their study is just a first step toward unpacking the costs of women's efforts to end abuse. They say the economic losses women experience when petitioning for a PFA is a call out to researchers, advocates, and policymakers to develop strategies to enhance women's safety, solvency, and economic stability.

**More information:** "The Price of Protection: A Trajectory Analysis of Civil Remedies for Abuse and Women's Earnings." *American Sociological Review* February 2015 80: 140-165, [DOI: 10.1177/0003122414561117](#)

Provided by University of Pittsburgh

Citation: Study reveals women granted restraining orders against abusers see decreased earnings (2015, March 6) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-reveals-women-granted-restraining-abusers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.