

# Domestic violence: Girls who grow up in deprived areas at increased risk

February 5 2020, by Alexa Yakubovich

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Violence committed by intimate partners is one of the [most common](#) forms of violence against women. In 2019, 6% – [or one million women in the UK](#) – reported having experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence by a current or former partner in the last year alone. But despite its prevalence, relatively [few interventions](#) exist that prevent

partner violence in the first place.

In our new [research published in \*Epidemiology\*](#) with colleagues at the Universities of [Oxford](#) and [Bristol](#), we found that women who spent longer periods of their childhoods in deprived neighborhoods were more likely to experience intimate partner violence.

We used data from Bristol's [Children of the 90s Study](#). Participants were followed from birth and we looked at the neighborhoods they were living in every one to three years during the first 18 years of their lives. Participants then reported on their experiences of partner violence between ages 18 to 21.

Overall, we found that 32% of the women in our study [experienced intimate partner violence between the ages 18 to 21](#). Our findings also show that women who spent longer periods living in deprived neighborhoods during the first 18 years of their lives were nearly 40% more likely to experience partner violence in early adulthood. They also tended to experience this violence more frequently.

## **Possible explanations**

Longer exposure to neighborhood deprivation during childhood has been associated with [lower cognitive ability](#), [school dropout](#), and [early parenthood](#). Our research extends this evidence and suggests that sustained exposure to more deprived neighborhoods over childhood also increases women's later risk of experiencing partner violence.

[Several reviews](#) have suggested [factors](#) that could explain [why this is the case](#).

For instance, neighborhoods with fewer social and [economic resources](#) tend to have [higher rates of violence](#). Sustained exposure to this

neighborhood violence may in turn normalize aggression in relationships. Living in more deprived neighborhoods may also increase trauma or stress. This can heighten a person's risk of substance misuse or [social isolation](#). It can also increase relationship strain and can prevent people from seeking help. All of these factors may then exacerbate the risk of partner violence or the ability to leave.

## Neighborhood deprivation

[A new study](#) from the US sheds further light on how deprived neighborhoods may affect [child development](#) and the risk of partner violence in adulthood.

The researchers interviewed groups of men who were in treatment programs for perpetrating partner violence. Among their findings, growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods was shown to reinforce models of violence, increase trauma, decrease interpersonal trust and safety and influence traditional gender norms.

The researchers highlight the critical ways "structural forces"—from [mass incarceration](#) to social and economic changes over time like [urban development and changes in employment opportunities](#) – shaped participants' neighborhoods and experiences.

If women who grow up in more disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to have partners with similar backgrounds, these factors may further explain our findings.

## Reducing inequalities

Intimate partner violence can affect women from all walks of life. [But to design effective prevention](#), factors that change the risk of this violence

must be targeted.

To our knowledge, [our research](#) is the first to look at the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and intimate partner violence over a long period of time.

[Most studies on partner violence](#) only look at the neighborhoods [women](#) are living in at one point in time. This does not account for the fact that some people move and that [this change in environments may matter](#). Indeed, our findings suggest that these differences in the duration of exposure to neighborhood deprivation matter when determining the risk of partner violence.

[Emerging evidence](#)—mainly from low and [middle-income countries](#)—has shown that targeting conditions like income inequality reduces partner violence. Our results suggest that policy and intervention strategies that reduce neighborhood inequalities may also prevent this violence.

[Women's reports](#) on their experiences of [violence](#) are critical to understanding the burden of [intimate partner violence](#). But research and policy that moves beyond individual factors to account for the role of neighborhood and societal contexts over time is needed for large scale change to happen.

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