

State of European research on the prevalence of interpersonal violence and its impact on health and human rights

Executive Summary

Interpersonal violence is increasingly being considered a violation of human rights and, as such, a public problem of significant concern to individuals, societies, and states. Determining the prevalence of interpersonal violence is one important step towards intervention and prevention. Over the past few years many European countries have conducted epidemiological studies to assess the extent of different forms of interpersonal violence against different groups of people.

The majority of prevalence surveys have focused on violence against women (England and Wales, 2001; Finland, 1997; France, 2000; Germany, 1992, 2003; Holland, 1986, 1997, 2003, 2004; Iceland, 1996; Lithuania, 1999, 2000; Norway, 2004; Portugal, 1995; Russia, 2002; Spain, 1999, 2002; Sweden, 1999, 2000; Switzerland, 1994), and violence against children and youth (Austria, 1993; Croatia, 2003; Denmark, 1999; Finland, 1992-1998; France, 1989; Germany, 1992-1998; Holland, 1988-9, 1998-9, 2003; Norway, 1994; Poland, 1999; Romania, 1999; Spain, 1995; Sweden, 1990, 1994; Switzerland, 1994-5; United Kingdom, 1985, 1990, 1998-9). Additional research has obtained data on violence against men (England and Wales, 1995, 2001; Estonia, 2001; Germany, 1992, 2003; Holland, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2004; Iceland, 1996), elderly people (Finland, 1989; Germany, 1992; Holland, 1994; Spain, 2000; United Kingdom, 1992), homosexuals and bisexuals (the Baltic states, 2002; Germany, 1999; Sweden, 1997, 2001), people with disabilities (Austria, 1996; Germany, 1999; United Kingdom, 1993, 1995), and immigrant, migrant and minority women (France, 2000; Germany, 2003; Sweden, 2000).

These prevalence surveys reveal – across gender, age, race, socio-economic class, and cultural factors – high levels of physical, sexual and psychological interpersonal violence in all countries where such surveys have been conducted. A few prevalence studies have also obtained information about the health impact of different forms of interpersonal violence on victims, indicating that such violence greatly affects all aspects of victims' health, from immediate physical harm to the longer-term impairment of victims' mental, physical and social health. As a consequence, interpersonal violence fuels demand for emergency and long-term physical and mental health care and other social services. This, in turn, increases the financial strain on states' health and social service systems.

In order to compare levels of interpersonal violence between countries and social groups it is necessary to assess carefully how prevalence surveys were carried out in order to determine methodological similarities and differences. The results of this analysis indicate that, at present, it is not possible to directly compare the prevalence rates of specific forms of interpersonal violence between different European countries because the existing studies have many important methodological differences.

Policy makers across Europe should use the evidence on the extent of interpersonal violence and on differences in victimization levels between population groups and countries to set up prevention and intervention programs. To aid in the effectiveness of such programs further attempts should be made to establish standards

for assessing levels of interpersonal violence in different European countries that would make findings more comparable and that would allow the identification of population groups that are at high risk. In this way, a careful analysis of differences in levels of interpersonal violence may yield valuable information about programs and interventions, cultural features, and other differences between countries that may contribute to the reduction or even elimination of interpersonal violence in families and schools, at work, and in communities. Future research should focus on the needs of specific groups of citizens, and longitudinal studies should evaluate the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs in reducing interpersonal violence. A research agenda that is sensitive to the needs of diverse communities and that adheres to innovative comparative research methodologies is likely to inform the policy makers about intervention strategies that would protect and enforce human rights in Europe.