

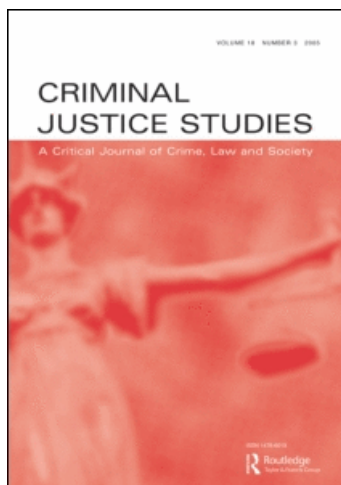
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### Which women are more likely to be abused? Public housing, cohabitation, and separated/divorced women

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Which women are more likely to be abused? Public housing, cohabitation, and separated/divorced women

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Data collected at Canadian public housing estates in eastern Ontario are used here to analyze two hypotheses. Overall these women report more violence than do otherwise situated women in other general surveys. More specifically, complex theoretical models were designed to generate two hypotheses for further analysis: First, that separated/divorced women are more likely to be abused within public housing than married women. Second, that cohabiting women will report violence victimization at a higher rate than separated, divorced, or married women. Some support for both hypotheses were found, and the theoretical models are used to discuss these findings.

**Keywords:** women; theoretical models; public housing; cohabitation; separated/divorced women

*One of the first things criminologists (should) teach their students is that not everyone has an equal chance of becoming a victim of violent crime. (Renzetti & Maier, 2002, p. 47)*

The argument is often made that woman abuse is found in all sociodemographic categories (Denham & Gillespie, 1998; Menard, 2001), but despite the truth of this assertion some women are at greater risk of being assaulted by men than others (Schwartz, 1988a). An example we focus on here is women living in public housing. In this paper we will look at several theoretical models and the tests performed on them on an eastern Ontario sample of women living in public housing. We used an instrument of our own design, the Quality of Neighborhood Life Survey (QNLS) that included questions from the Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) that measured psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in heterosexual, gay, or lesbian relationships. Overall 19.3% of the women reported physical violence victimization within the past 12 months. This is markedly higher than rates found in most North American surveys that also used a variant of the Conflict Tactics (CTS or CTS-2) (DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, & Perry, 1999). For example, the widely cited National Violence Against Women Survey found that 1.9% (19 out of every 1000) of US women reported being the targets of any of the physical assault CTS items (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), while the QNLS uncovered more than 10 times as much violence with a rate of close to 200 out of every 1000. Presumably the fact that the QNLS only looked at women in public housing accounts for the higher rate.

Slowly, there has been an increasing recognition among theorists that women living in inner-city public housing are at greater risk for male abuse. Yet, even within public housing

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some women are more at risk than others. An important research gap is that no North American study has thus far tried to identify the groups of women living in these ‘cities-within-cities’ that are at the most risk of being assaulted by male partners (Venkatesh, 2000). We hypothesize that separated/divorced female public housing residents are more likely to be harmed by intimate violence than their married counterparts. Guided by the theoretical model described in Figure 1 and using data from the QNLS, we tested this hypothesis. A second object of this paper was to develop a theoretical model to hypothesize that women who are living in cohabiting relationships will report serious victimization at a higher rate than married women, or than separated and divorced women. Although this will be tested in the same way with QNLS data, the theoretical model behind this objective is slightly different than the first, and represented as Figure 2.

**Theoretical models**

Figure 1 builds on DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s economic exclusion/male peer support model of public housing woman abuse (2002), DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, and Tomaszewski’s theory of post-separation woman abuse in public housing (2003), and Sernau’s web of exclusion model (2001). Briefly, this model asserts that the rapid disappearance of manufacturing work that has occurred in North America since the 1970s has generated an alarmingly high rate of unemployed men. Often these men end up living in socially isolated public housing

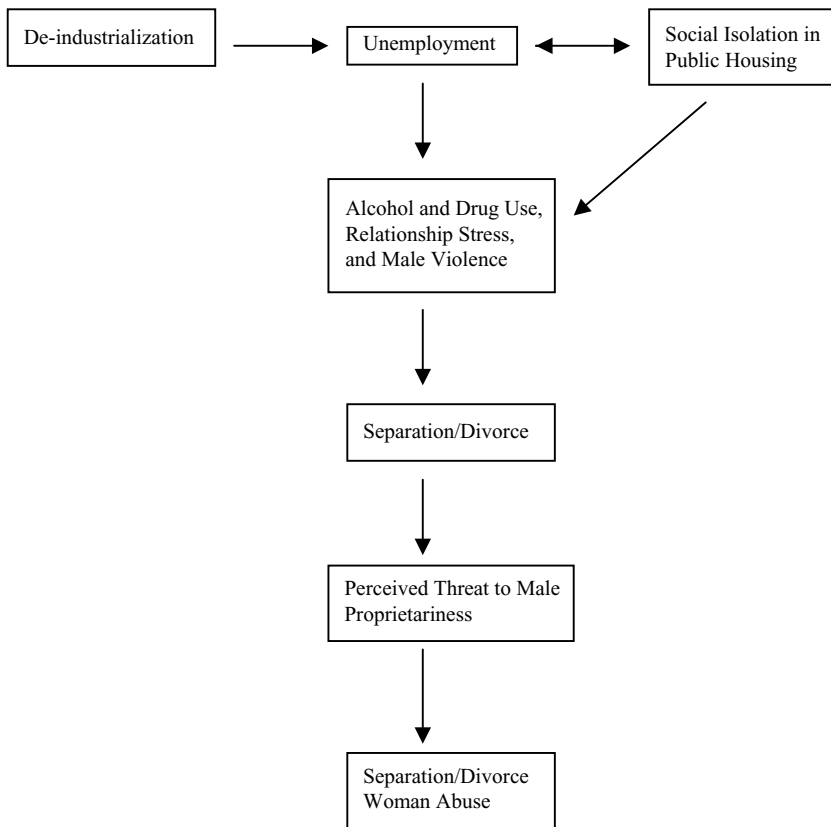


Figure 1. The social and economic exclusion model of separation/divorce woman abuse in public housing.

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communities. This isolation within such centers of concentrated urban disadvantage can further contribute to unemployment because many employers believe that public housing residents are more likely than others to steal, miss work, and abuse substances (Wilson, 1996). Obviously, not every employer has this perception and many businesses will hire public housing residents (albeit at low wages). Still, with the suburbanization of employment even many low paying jobs are now only found far from inner-city housing estates. Thus, it is difficult to get or sustain a job if people cannot afford cars or expensive public transportation (DeKeseredy, Alvi et al., 2003; Ehrenreich, 2001; Wilson, 1996).

It is not surprising that a large number of jobless men turn to alcohol and drugs to cope with the day-to-day problems associated with being economically and socially excluded (Currie, 1993). In a community like the one examined in this study staying 'clean and sober' is almost impossible, especially if many of your peers do not have the courage, motivation, or desire to abstain from abusing drugs and alcohol. For example, when QNLS respondents were asked how many of their friends used drugs, such as marijuana, hashish, speed, or crack, more than a third of both men and women said that some, most, almost all, or all of their friends did so (DeKeseredy, Alvi et al., 2003). For those respondents under the age of 30, 47% of the men and 50% of the women reported that their friends used drugs.

Excessive drug and alcohol consumption generates considerable relationship stress and is strongly associated with male-to-female violence (DeKeseredy, Alvi, & Schwartz, 2006; Kantor & Straus, 1990; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). Not surprisingly, many women do not wish to live with men who abuse substances and who are violent. Hence, they exit or try to terminate their relationships. As one Chicago woman told Edin (2000, p. 126):

I married [my first husband] a month after I had [our son]. And I married him because I couldn't afford [to live alone]. Boy, was that stupid. And I left him [two years after that] when our daughter was five months old. I got scared. I was afraid because my kids were starting to get in the middle. [My son] still to this day, when he thinks someone is hurting me, he'll start screaming and crying and beating on him. He had seen his father [beat me up]. I didn't want him to see that. I remarried six months later because I couldn't make it [financially]. And I got into another abusive marriage. And we got separated before the year was even up. He would burn me [with cigarettes]. He was an alcoholic. He was a physical abuser, mental [too]. I think he would have killed me [if I had stayed].

Not all women who separate or divorce their partners end up leaving their homes, particularly if it is their name that is on the lease. Some 'invert patriarchy' by evicting the male partner that they see as irresponsible, or who may be too difficult to house and feed (Bourgeois, 1995; DeKeseredy et al., 2006; Edin, 2000). Regardless of how the relationship ends, male public housing residents, like other 'truly disadvantaged men' (Wilson, 1987) strongly adhere to the ideology of familial patriarchy.<sup>1</sup> Thus they are more prone to interpreting women ending relationships as a challenge to male proprietariness (DeKeseredy, Alvi et al., 2003; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002), which can result in violent retaliation (Brandwein, 1997; Davis, 1999; DeKeseredy, Rogness, & Schwartz, 2003; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997; Ptacek, 1999). Following Wilson and Daly (1992, p. 85), male proprietariness is referred to here as 'the tendency to think of women as sexual and reproductive "property" they own and exchange.' More generally, proprietariness refers to 'not just the emotional force of [the male's] own feelings of entitlement but to a more pervasive attitude [of ownership and control] toward social relationships with [intimate female partners].'

Some of the QNLS data described further on partially support the above model and Bourgeois' argument (1995, p. 500) that by abusing women, many socially and economically excluded inner-city men are 'desperately attempting to reassert their grandfathers' lost

autocratic control over the household ...' Women who resist or challenge their partner's patriarchal expectations are at a substantially elevated risk of being assaulted (Raphael, 2001a; Smith, 1990; Yllo, 1983). Yet if staying in a relationship can increase risk, leaving may not be the easiest answer either. Certainly in homicide we know that women who leave or attempt to leave highly controlling partners are under increased risk of being killed, especially if she leaves for another partner (Campbell et al., 2003). As Polk (2003, p. 134) reminds us, '[T]ime and time again the phrase "if I can't have you, no one will" echoes through the data' on homicide in the context of sexual intimacy.

In another paper we argue that coercing or convincing people to get married is not going to be a cure for the evils of woman abuse, as a wide variety of symptoms related to poverty, urban disadvantage, male peer support, and formal labor market exclusion are bound to defeat any 'wedfare' policies (DeKeseredy et al., 2006). However, it is not unusual for studies to discover that cohabiting couples report higher rates of woman abuse (Brownridge & Halli, 2001), and we investigated this claim also. The theoretical perspectives that guided our investigation of cohabitation were different from the previous investigation, although it is obvious that the mechanisms are related and therefore the theories have some strong overlap. In the case of cohabitation, Figure 2 is heavily informed by sociological perspectives offered by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002), Sernau (2001), Wilson (1986), and Young (1999). This economic exclusion model combines macro- and micro-level factors to suggest that major economic transformations in the USA (e.g., the shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy, stagnating wages, downsizing, and outsourcing of jobs) led to an increase in formal labor market exclusion. These changes have had many effects, but one is

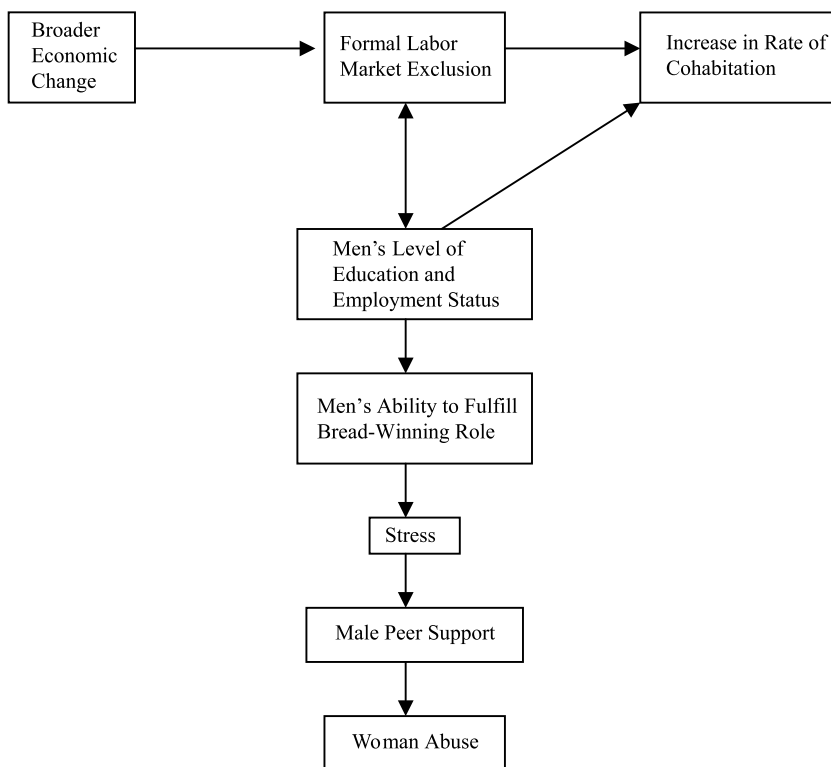


Figure 2. The economic exclusion model of woman abuse in cohabitation.

an increase in cohabitation because 'growing economic uncertainty ... plays a big role in postponing formal legal commitment' (Conway, 2001, p. 31). We know that cohabiting men are generally less educated and more unemployed than their female partners (Brownridge & Halli, 2001; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1989). Men who are unemployed, and who have female partners who provide all or most of the family income, may have some of the highest rates of battering (Schwartz, 1990). Our model suggests that they experience considerable stress because they are unable to be 'good breadwinners,' which, according to many women, 'is an especially important quality in a prospective husband' (Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003, p. 63). To cope with this stress, many economically disenfranchised cohabiting men turn to their male peers for support and the advice and guidance these men provide often promotes various types of woman abuse (DeKeseredy, Alvi et al., 2003; Raphael, 2001b).

Unfortunately, the QNLS was not specifically designed to test the theories in Figures 1 and 2. Still, until now, there have been no attempts to test a theory of woman abuse in public housing and the results presented here will hopefully prompt other scholars to do so.

## Method

### *Sample, data collection, and setting*

The sites selected for this study were six public housing estates in the west end of a large eastern Ontario city. One person 18 or older in each unit was asked to complete the QNLS questionnaire. Questionnaires were mailed out and also distributed by members of the public housing community, such as coordinators of community centers, yielding 325 useable questionnaires. Seventy-one percent of the final sample were women and Table 1 describes the QNLS sample's selected sociodemographic characteristics. As reported in this table, about one-third of the women are separated and divorced and close to 22% are married. Further, about half of all female QNLS participants are on welfare (47.6%), while about 40% of the men received such government assistance. In terms of ethnicity, 66% of the women and 53.8% of the men described themselves as English Canadian or French Canadian. The only other category attracting a large number of respondents was African, where 11% of the women and 22.3% of the men so self-identified. Moreover, roughly one-third (28.9%) of QNLS respondents reported living in what Kasarda (1992) calls 'severely distressed households,' that is, they displayed at least four of the following five characteristics: (1) being a single parent; (2) being dependent on government assistance; (3) having a low education level; (4) having a low income; or (5) having a poor work history.

## Measures

### *Woman abuse*

Woman abuse is multidimensional in nature (DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991). In other words, many victims report being victimized by various types of injurious male behaviors in intimate relationships, ranging from verbal harassment to attempted murder, while of course many are indeed murdered. Here, however, we will limit the term 'woman abuse' to nonsexual violent behaviors that are most likely to be officially designated as criminal and to cause major bodily harm. The principal measure is a modification of the severe violence index in Straus et al.'s CTS-2 (1996). Table 2 presents the items included in this index and the incidence (events that occurred in the past year) rates associated with each one. Although the CTS and the CTS-2 are heavily used by researchers, the usual format is to combine all forms of violence from slaps and shoves through gun assaults into one overall figure. However,

Table 1. Selected socio-demographic characteristics women only.

Average age	42	
Median personal income	\$5085 ( <i>N</i> = 101)	
Median household income	\$10,363 ( <i>N</i> = 95)	
Major source of income	Percent	<i>N</i>
From job	17.6	30
From employment insurance	2	3
From welfare	47.6	81
Disability payments	26.5	45
From family or friends	6.5	11
Marital status	Percent	<i>N</i>
Single	22.3	47
Dating someone	9.5	20
Living with someone	6.6	14
Married	21.8	46
Divorced	17.5	37
Separated	12.3	26
Widowed	10.0	21
Ethnic identification	Percent	<i>N</i>
Central American	0.5	1
Scandinavian		
French Canadian	16.7	35
English Canadian	49.3	103
Aboriginal	2.9	6
British	1.4	3
Eastern European	0.5	1
Southern Europe	1.0	2
Far Eastern	2.4	5
African	11.0	23
Caribbean	6.7	14
Middle Eastern	6.2	13
Latin American	1.4	3

Table 2. Incidence rates of severe violence against women.

Violence	Yes		No	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Kick you	7	3.9	171	96.1
Punch or hit you with something that could hurt	5	2.8	173	97.2
Slam you against a wall	8	4.5	169	95.5
Choke you	4	2.2	174	97.8
Burn or scald you on purpose	0	0.0	178	100.0
Beat you up	6	3.4	171	96.6
Used a knife or gun on you	1	0.6	176	99.4

most of the violence that turns up in any CTS survey is what Straus et al. (1996) term 'minor violence.' Here, limiting the table to severe violence means lower figures than usually reported. Just as one example, the highest figure here is the 4.5% of the women who reported that they had been slammed against a wall. In a CTS-2 question that was on the QNLS survey but not used in this analysis, fully 14.5% of females reported being grabbed.

## Results

Like other surveys administered in North America (e.g., Johnson & Sacco, 1995; Kennedy & Dutton, 1989; Smith, 1990), the QNLS found that separated or divorced women report higher rates (22.6%) of violence than those in marital relationships (12.2%). In a static survey such as this one, it is unclear whether these women exited abusive relationships or whether the reported violence occurred after separation/divorce, although most researchers have looked at large differences such as in this study and concluded that physical assault during separation/divorce is a serious problem. While the differences between these two groups are not statistically significant, the large differences do challenge the popular belief that the most important weapon women have in the battle to end their partners' abuse is to divorce or separate from them (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Schwartz, 1988b). One other piece of evidence to support that notion deals with welfare. Although data presented in Table 1 show that about 50% of female QNLS respondents are on welfare (47%), we can further specify that married and estranged women were on state support at about the same level. Yet, estranged women who reported violence victimization were more likely to be on welfare or other state support. Since the numbers are small and the percentage of all women on welfare is high, any such conclusion must be tentative, but it is possible that separated/divorced women may have sought welfare and safety in public housing as a means of seeking autonomy from abusive or addictive men (Brandwein, 1999; DeKeseredy, Alvi et al., 2003; Raphael, 1999; Young, 1999).

It may be more difficult to explain why cohabiting relationships are more marked by violence than marital relationships. Here, the QNLS found 42.9% of the cohabiting women reported being victimized by one of the severe violence index items in the CTS-2, as compared to 12.2% of the married women. This difference is statistically significant at the 0.007 level. Recall that 22.6% of the separated/divorced women reported severe victimization, but probably because of small numbers the difference between cohabiting women and separated/divorced women is not statistically significant. However, in a crosstabular analysis of the three marital status groups (cohabiting, married, separated/divorced) and violent victimization on the CTS-2, the differences as above are statistically significant ( $s = 0.026$ ) when testing the hypothesis that cohabitation will be highest (one-tailed test).

## Discussion and conclusion

We suggest that women living in poverty maintain the traditional view that the male role is the primary breadwinning role, and that the men have this view also. The more that the primary income from the family comes from the woman, the more likely it is that violence will occur (Schwartz, 1990). More broadly, men who feel they are unable to live up to gender expectations are more likely to abuse their partners compared to men whose ability to conform affirms their masculinity and sense of control (Johnson, 1997; Raphael, 2001a).

Still, stress is not a sufficient explanation of male violence. Another important factor is alcohol abuse. In general, unemployed men drink more alcohol than those who work and thus it is not surprising that cohabitators have more problems with alcohol than married men



(Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1989; Horwitz & White, 1998; Stets, 1991). In addition, the social context of alcohol consumption may play a stronger role than drinking itself. For instance, Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, and Alvi (2001) found that college men who drink 2 or 3 times a week and have male peer support for both emotional and physical violence are almost 10 times as likely to assault women than men who do not drink or have this support.

Specifically, unemployed men have more time to spend with male peers, and if these peers view woman abuse as a legitimate and effective means of reclaiming patriarchal authority (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002; Raphael, 2001b) they may not only provide support but further serve as role models if they assault their own partners.

The findings in this study help develop a better understanding of variations in public housing woman abuse. The data also confirm that regardless of where they live and their economic status, cohabiting women are most at risk of being victimized by male violence, but that separated/divorced women are also at high risk. Still, several methodological improvements are necessary in future research. For example, more precise measures of the timing of abuse and relationships with offenders are necessary. For example, it would be helpful with separated/divorced women to know if they left an abusive relationship and suffered no further abuse, or whether they left any type of relationship and the victimization they suffered in the past year was after the separation or divorce. Further, to obtain richer information on the factors that motivate men to abuse their estranged partners, it is necessary to examine their characteristics and to survey or interview males in public housing communities. A review of the extant literature on woman abuse in North American public housing reveals that there have been no self-report surveys administered to men, which is another major research gap that should be filled.

Another step forward would involve developing a well-crafted survey specifically designed to measure violence against women in public housing and the factors that contribute to this harm. The QNLS was specifically a woman abuse survey, and much of it emphasized other types of crimes and victimization (e.g., robbery), which is not the most effective way of generating data on intimate violence (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Schwartz, 2000). Further, more theory construction and testing is necessary. To the best of our knowledge, our theories are the only ones on public housing woman abuse that have been constructed, and they have not been subject to in-depth empirical scrutiny.

Despite these problems, the QNLS data reported here and elsewhere (see DeKeseredy et al., 1999) do not obscure the fact that woman abuse in Canadian public housing is a major social problem. Hopefully, this crime will soon cease to suffer from academic 'selective inattention' and also receive more scrutiny from policy makers, the media, and the general public. Thus far, too much scholarly and government emphasis has been placed on what happens outside public housing units (e.g., drug dealing, gang activity, etc.).<sup>2</sup> Our goal has been to start the process of producing findings that 'will help refocus attention on what happens inside' them (Renzetti & Maier, 2002, p. 62).

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### Notes

1. The ideology of familial patriarchy is a discourse that supports the abuse of women who violate the ideals of male power and control over women in intimate relationships (DeKeseredy &

Schwartz, 1993; Smith, 1990). Relevant themes of this ideology are an insistence upon women's obedience, respect, loyalty, dependency, sexual access, and sexual fidelity (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Pateman, 1988).

2. See DeKeseredy, Alvi et al. (2003) for an in-depth review of the extant literature on crime in North American public housing communities.

### Notes on contributors

Walter S. DeKeseredy is Professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. He has published 13 books, dozens of scientific articles, and dozens of book chapters on woman abuse, criminological theory, and crime in public housing. Along with Schwartz, he is the co-winner of the 2004 Senior Scholar Award of the Division on Women and Crime of the American Society of Criminology.

Martin D. Schwartz is Professor of Sociology and Presidential Research Scholar at Ohio University, and is currently a visiting research fellow at the National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice. He has written or edited 11 books, more than 60 refereed journal articles, and another 40 book chapters, government reports, and essays. His research interests include the many forms of violence against women, and the masculinity and male peer support studies that begin to explain it. He has won the lifetime achievement award of the Division on Critical Criminology of the American Society of Criminology.

Shahid Alvi is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. His research interests include masculinities, critical criminology, crime and public housing, and violence against women. He is also the 2002 recipient of the Critical Criminologist of the Year award from the American Society of Criminology's Division on Critical Criminology.

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