

Less social support for women in disadvantaged neighborhoods means that they are more likely to be the victims of intimate partner violence

*In new research, **Emily M. Wright** finds that where women live can have a big influence on how protected they are from intimate partner violence. Using survey data from Chicago women, she finds that social support for women was reduced in areas with higher levels of disadvantage, leading to a greater chance of victimization. While family support was an important protective factor for women, social support from friends actually led to higher frequencies of partner violence.*



Do women become *less* protected from intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization when they reside in certain types of neighborhoods, particularly disadvantaged ones? Questions like this examine how certain types of neighborhoods make people more or less vulnerable to victimization. In new research, I examined whether the impact of social support on IPV was stronger or weaker in disadvantaged neighborhoods or whether it protected women against victimization regardless of the neighborhood in which she lived. I found that the effect of social support was indeed diminished in areas with higher levels of disadvantage.

Social support from others is a **protective** factor **against** victimization like IPV. Friends, family, or acquaintances may provide instrumental and expressive forms of support to victimized women, which may help her to leave the relationship or cope with victimization. Support may also **increase** the likelihood that victimized women will seek and receive help from others. Women who receive social support from others outside of their intimate relationship may also have people to turn to for emotional, physical, or financial assistance in order to leave an abusive relationship. Friends or family members can provide safe alternative living arrangements or financial accommodations for a woman when she attempts to leave the relationship, and they may also give her **advice** on **where to go** or what services (advocacy, legal, or otherwise) she may be able to receive. Social support from others can also help victimized women better cope with ongoing abuse or better deal with the aftermath of abuse. Receiving social support from others may also help to prevent partner abuse or make others aware of it; once the violence becomes publically known, friends or family members may intervene to stop the violence.

Yet, it is possible that neighborhood disadvantage may *diminish* the protection of social support on IPV, for at least two reasons. First, neighborhood disadvantage may impact the number and quality of social ties that women in disadvantaged neighborhoods develop with their neighbors, and this may impact the support and supervision that is available or provided to her (an indirect effect); impacting the level of available support may then influence its protective effect on IPV. Second, neighborhood disadvantage may also **influence** the norms and beliefs of residents in the area – if disadvantage increases tolerance levels for crime and violence in the neighborhood, it may diminish the effectiveness of social support in protecting women if and when it is available or provided (a moderating effect).



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The data from my research comes from the [Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods](#) (PHDCN), which includes more than 4,600 women from 80 neighborhoods in Chicago who reported being in an intimate relationship in the prior year (surveyed from 1994-1997). Information regarding neighborhood disadvantage come from the 1990 U.S. Census, while the women who reported about their IPV victimization were surveyed independently. My analyses examined whether social support from friends and family members influenced women's likelihood and frequency of intimate partner violence victimization; after these and other individual-level predictors (e.g., age, race, income, education, and cohabitation) were accounted for. I then examined neighborhood disadvantage to determine if the support women received was more or less effective when they lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods versus other types of neighborhoods.

My analyses indicated that effect of social support on IPV appeared to be *diminished* in more disadvantaged areas. I found that receiving social support from family members was related to a lower likelihood of being victimized by IPV as well as lower frequency levels of victimization. Thus, [support](#) from family members was an important protective factor for females. However, I found that social support from friends was related to higher frequencies of partner violence, though it was not related to the prevalence or likelihood of partner violence. In this case, it is possible that to the degree that supporters believe that violence is okay to use in relationships or that it is "none of their business," the support they offer may not necessarily be helpful to the victim. Most importantly, I found that the effect of social support on IPV was *diminished* in more disadvantaged areas. When social support functioned as a protective factor against IPV (when it came from family members), its effect was weakened in areas of higher disadvantage, whereas when social support exacerbated violence (when it came from friends), its effect was also weakened in areas of higher disadvantage. My findings suggest that *support simply becomes less relevant in disadvantaged areas*. These results also contribute to a growing body of research that suggests that neighborhood features moderate the impact of risk and [protective](#) factors (e.g., exposure to violence, familial factors, etc.) that have long been associated with victimization, crime, and delinquency.

The family support scale arguably may have included more instrumental types of support while the friends' support scale may have included more expressive forms of support. My results, then, could suggest that instrumental forms of support (those given primarily by family in this study) may be more important protective factors for women than expressive or emotional forms of support. Additionally, my findings suggest that services for the prevention of and

response to IPV, as well as support services for victims of intimate partner violence, should be strategically placed in areas of disadvantage. For instance, domestic violence shelters, counseling services, and services for children exposed to domestic violence should be strategically located in disadvantaged areas. Further, police officers patrolling such areas should understand [how to best respond](#) to partner violence and should be knowledgeable about the services available around the neighborhood. Support services, such as centers for legal or financial advice or temporary and affordable housing assistance for victimized women, should also be placed in such locations.

*This article is based on the paper, [‘The Relationship Between Social Support and Intimate Partner Violence in Neighborhood Context’](#), in *Crime & Delinquency*.*

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