

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Self-Defense for Women:  
Identifying Training Needs**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Women are being assaulted in ever increasing numbers and as a result, are asking for courses in self-defense to protect themselves. In an effort to provide the most effective techniques for such training, it is necessary to identify not only the specific methods that are being used in these assaults, but to determine the fears women have (whether real or unfounded) about such assaults. An evaluation of women assault victims, and the perception of non-assaulted women, was made to assist in developing the most effective self-defense techniques to utilize in presenting a short term course on Women's Self-Defense.

A convenience sample of 60 female college graduate students were given questionnaires asking for their experience with personal assault as an adult, or if they had never been assaulted what they believed would be involved in such an assault. Of the 60 questionnaires distributed, 53 or 88.3% were completed and returned.

About one-tenth of the respondents, the majority of which were white, indicated that between the ages of 11 and 20 years they had been assaulted. Most of these respondents had their arms held and or twisted to hurt or control them and about one-fifth were punched.

Ninety percent of the respondents had never been assaulted. The majority indicated five actions they thought would be used if they should be assaulted. They included in descending rank order: arm grabbing; slapping or punching in the face; choking or strangling; hair pulling; and, the use of some form of weapon.

The two most common "real" and "anticipated" assaults were arm holding/grabbing and punching. Based on this sample, the development of self-defense techniques for women would need to focus on these two types of attack.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
METHODOLOGY.....	7
FINDINGS.....	10
DISCUSSION.....	12
REFERENCES.....	15
APPENDICES	

## **Introduction**

Women responding to the fear of possible, or actual, assaults are seeking out instruction in self-defense and martial arts as a protection/preparation for such future assault possibilities. They are contacting law enforcement agencies for both direct assistance and referrals. Some departments are providing this training either as a response to specific requests or to be more proactive in women's safety. Either way the instructors in these areas have many possible techniques they can teach their students, but they are lacking in the specific detailed information of exactly what physical actions are involved in the typical assault on females. Normally, these courses are one-time presentations conducted within a one- to three-hour time frame. These constraints necessitate optimum utilization of the time available. With specific information about the actual techniques used in the assaults, better programs can be developed that will address the real needs of their female citizens.

The current literature addresses the elements involved in assaults on women. It moves through the characteristics of assaults from the broader areas of classification of offenses based on criminal definitions, to types of weapons that were used, to the relationship of the victim to the aggressor. However, detailed information on the specific actions that occur in an assault has not been researched and compiled. This detailed information is collected by law enforcement and prosecutors for reporting and trial purposes and is available from the victims, but it has not been compiled and published on a state or national level. Without such specific detailed information, development of effective self-defense techniques against these assaults is only at best a speculation.

The purpose of this study is to examine the current concerns of women relating to physical assault. This study will look at the current beliefs women hold related to a possible physical assault against their person compared to actual physical assault cases occurring in society. This information can serve as a basis for the development women's self-defense courses that will provide appropriate defenses for the actual types of assaults being perpetrated on women.

This has been an age where people are exposed to the occurrence of assaults, from the grab, slap, or punch through homicide. At the same time, the possibility, and even probability, of such crimes being committed against anyone in our society is continually being presented through all of the news media. This continual presentation of the potential for violence places many citizens in fear for their own safety and the safety of those they care about.

Physical violence is a threatening possibility for anyone, but more so for the female in society. With usually less strength than the male and less experience in physical activities along with an attitude that is normally less aggressive, the female is placed in a position of being the more vulnerable of the sexes. Psychological and physical tests of both males and females demonstrate these differences very clearly.

The following study seeks to investigate the actual and perceived concerns of women to the possibility of a physical assault. Very little information of a specific nature is available in the literature. The information received from the respondents regarding their concerns about possible physical assaults was not qualified by how they arrived at their conclusion.

This study is based on the assumption that the respondents comments were derived from various sources in their particular culture, including their personal experiences, and that the culture of all of the respondents was basically the same.

In deference to time constraints, this study was restricted to female graduate students in two classes, during the Fall 2003 semester, at Texas A & M University in College Station, Texas.

### **Literature Review**

Violence in the world is, and has been, a problem throughout recorded history. Even in this day and time governments are involved in violence against each other, and when that occurs the weaker or lesser prepared loses. This same scenario is carried out on a personal level every minute of everyday, with the same results. Men and women are confronted with violent situations where their escape and /or survival depend on strength and preparedness. Where this conflict is between a man and a woman, the woman normally begins at a disadvantage both in size and preparation for such an encounter. How she can overcome these obstacles is the direction of this research.

In the United Nations (1989) report, the historical records indicate violence against women has always existed. As recent as the 1700s, husbands were authorized by law to discipline their wives as they would their children. This thinking may be contributing to the present day worldwide problem of violence toward women. All countries, both developed and developing, have documented large-scale problems regarding the victimization of women by violent acts. The culture in this country is no exception to this violence toward women. Taeuber (1996) reports violent crimes in the United States rose 46.4% between 1984 and 1994. And in 1994 there were 11,365,000 crimes against persons.

Violence toward women not only affects their physical safety, it moves inside all their considerations about life. With a thought always on the possibility of assault, a woman's decisions must be made, not of free choice or personal preference, but whether each specific choice is appropriate for her own safety. Who she talks to, where she goes, and what she does is

tinted by the fear she harbors of what might happen (Nadeau, 1997; Senn & Dzinis, 1996). This fear, especially in excess, can be psychologically debilitating and produce immobilization in the victim, through either no action or inappropriate action (DeMaris & Swinford, 1996). Battered women have reported that in their situation they feel basically powerless as noted by Forte, Franks, Forte, and Rigsby (1996). Staroneck and Friedman (1997) describe this fear as placing a woman on "red-alert" status and producing characteristics of hypervigilance.

Statistics do not paint the complete picture regarding violence against women in society, but it is a valuable tool to compare specific parameters and identify trends on movements in a particular offense or geographic area. A comparison of the national aggravated assault rate between 1980 and 2000 for all persons indicates an increase of approximately 8.4%. During this same period the rates for the offenses of robbery, forcible rape, and murder all declined. When the known incidence of violence against women (which is roughly 10 points less than that of men) is added to the estimated number of unreported offenses, the numbers present a problem of staggering proportion (adapted from U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Long (1993) notes that all unreported assaults against women exceed the number that are officially reported.

DeMaris and Swinford (1996) identified fear as the primary reason why women initiate action to stop abuse. But fear was also noted as a reason why women hesitated to take any corrective or preventive action. They also recommend that women in abusive relationships need to see how they can have control over their future. A program to build awareness and self-confidence through martial arts and self-defense training, can become the basis for a woman believing and actually taking control of her future (Quigley, 1995). Hollander (2004) notes that such classes can be central to women's lives because they address the three issues central to women: sexual assault, self, and gender. The teaching of survival skills to battered women to

help them escape the violence would be meaningful and socially responsible (Staroneck & Friedman, 1997).

Johnson (1996) and Long (1993) recommend to women that they take control of their lives and become involved in martial arts and/or self-defense courses. Long (1993) suggests that the course be practical and "street smart" in its focus. It should identify the real problems that may occur and provide training to deal with those problems. Her recommendations also include utilizing martial arts training that involves more personal physical contact (body to body) as opposed to those that concentrate more on form or tournament competition. Additionally, a woman's appearance can affect the decision of an attacker to assault her, or move on to someone more vulnerable ("Tis the season," 1996).

Many studies have addressed the violence toward women in a domestic relationship. But most like Aldaronda and Sugarman (1996) have focused more on the abuser than on the victim and addressed the ongoing relationship between the abuser and victim rather than on how the victim can impact the prevention or cessation of violence.

With 21,000 domestic crimes reported against women in the United States every week in 1991 and 13% of surveyed women being assaulted by their partner (Feminist Majority Foundation, 1995), the level of domestic violence against women is considerable in scope. Bachman and Saltzman (1995) report the number of assaults on females 12 and older during 1992 and 1993 reached almost 5 million, and in 75% of the single-attacker situations the victim knew the assailant. Of all domestic violence against females, 2 in 3 of the victims knew their assailant. Women that had been victimized by an intimate were 6 times less likely to report the assault to the police than if the assailant had been a stranger. These incidents of assault by known assailants average 572, 032 per year costing \$3 to \$5 billion in medical expenses and



another \$100 million in losses to the victim's employers ("National Clearing House," 1996). And between 1983 and 1991 domestic violence reports increased almost 117%.

Violence against women is not limited by age and, in fact, may be more devastating for the older victim. In situations where the victim is older she may not have available the assistance, social interactions (Lempert, 1996), or resources necessary to escape the abusive situation and be limited in her access to those avenues for help (Seaver, 1996). Some women in their 80s have reported suffering various forms of abuse for up to 50 years ("Meeting the needs," 1996). The need for clear direct action regarding domestic violence is concisely stated by Caplan and Thomas (1995, p. 34), "Because the consequences of domestic violence are so serious, very often brutal, and sometimes irreparable...." Aldarondo (1996) notes that in domestic violence there is a downward spiral of repeated violence that continues until there is legal intervention or separation. Where neither of these occur, death can be the result. Each year, in this country alone, 1,500 women are murdered by past or present intimates (Marvin, 1997).

The statistical information on the physical actions involved in assaults on women is difficult to obtain. Forte et al. (1996) found 23% of their respondents reported slaps to the face and head. This statistic may be higher than reported here based on information received from the Family Violence Unit, Houston Police Department, Houston, Texas (J. Meanix-Garza, Sgt., personal communication, February 27, 2004). Houston's experience places strikes to the face as a very common factor in the approximately 2,700 family violence cases they handle each month. Bachman and Carmody (1994) report that 1.8 million women experience assaults such as kicking, punching and choking, with all three having the potential to cause serious bodily injury.

The level of statistics that address the broader areas of assaults on women is significant and increasing, but the detailed, and act specific, information is not being effectively compiled or distributed. Until that is accomplished, the development of self-defense techniques that accurately address the needs of women in this area will be a hit-or-miss situation. Likewise, accurate information from which women can make intelligent decisions will not be available until this information can be captured.

Research Major Question: What actions are involved in assaults perpetrated against women, and what are the specific techniques used in these assaults?

Related Question: Is there a difference between the beliefs of women that have never been physically assaulted and the experiences of women that have been physically assaulted?

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The population of this study consists of female college students at the graduate level. Male graduate students, and both male and female undergraduate students, were not included in this study. No distinction was made between full-time and part-time students.

### **Sample**

The focus of this study was to survey female graduate students attending the Fall, 2003 semester at Texas A & M University in College Station, Texas to determine their experience level with personal physical assault or their concern for a potential physical assault and specific action that might be committed against them. Sixty (60) questionnaires were distributed to these students (with 53 returned) and a return rate of 88.3%. A convenience sample was used for this study because of limitations on time and money. The type of study to be used, if there were

sufficient resources, would be a systematic random sample. Systematic random sampling would be accomplished by: acquiring a list of all female graduate students at Texas A & M University in a particular semester and selecting the sample based on a set interval.

### Study Design

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was provided to a faculty member who then distributed the instrument to the participants. The students were asked immediately prior to receiving the questionnaire to participate in this study. Oral instructions were given to the participants, including an assurance of confidentiality. The participants completed the questionnaire in two groups on two separate days. Each day a receptacle was available for the anonymous return of the questionnaires.

A total of 60 questionnaires were distributed and 53 were returned (88.3% response). All questionnaires were distributed to female graduate students while in a class at Texas A & M University during October 2003.

The following research design was selected:

1. Reviewed and collected literature at several public and university libraries, from First Search, and on the Internet.
2. Conducted telephone interview with the supervisor of the Houston Police Department's Family Violence Unit.
3. Designed questionnaire based on steps 1 & 2 above.
4. Identified convenience sample due to limitations of resources.
5. Distributed instrument with assistance of research class instructor.
6. Performed analysis of results for all participants and for two sub-groups.
7. Drew conclusions from fifty-three responses received.

## Instrumentation

In this descriptive study of female graduate students' experience with physical assaults, or in the absence of personal experience, perception of possible physical assaults, the testing was a paper and pencil questionnaire (Appendix B). Content validity for the questionnaire was accomplished by pre-testing to determine if the questions solicited the proper response. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire could not be determined from this study.

The instrument was an original creation of the researcher. The instrument contains three component parts. The first part was an introduction and instruction section designed to give the participant information on the purpose of the questionnaire and instructions on how to proceed through the instrument. It also included a question for the respondent to answer that would determine which of the two succeeding parts would be completed - a "yes" answer for part two or a "no" answer for part three. The remainder of the questionnaire was divided into these two parts.

The first of these (part 2) began with a defining question that determined whether the participant should continue in this portion or go to the second portion. A participant's "yes" answer would indicate continuing in this portion, otherwise the respondent would move to the second portion. The following three unnumbered questions were on demographics. The next seven questions (numbered 1-7) were close-ended, yes/no with additional information requested with a yes answer. With a "yes" answer the respondent was asked to identify the direction from which the attack came: F (front, S (side), or B (back). These seven questions were to identify, for those that had experienced a physical assault, specific action or circumstances that occurred during the assault. Two open-ended questions followed. The first solicited the respondent's

experiences of actions or circumstances not included in the previous questions, and the second requested comments and observations.

The third part of the instrument began with a defining question that determined whether the participant should continue in this portion or go back to the second portion. A participant's "no" answer would indicate continuing in this portion, otherwise the respondent would return to the first portion. The following three unnumbered questions were on demographics. The next seven questions (numbered 1-7) were to identify the strength of the participants' beliefs. They addressed specific actions or circumstances that might be used by an aggressor in a physical assault situation. These were scored on a 4-point Likert scale - where 4 is strongly agree, 3 is agree, 2 is disagree, and 1 is strongly disagree. Two open-ended questions followed. The first solicited other concerns or circumstances not included in the previous questions, and the second requested comments and observations.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of the data will be performed using descriptive statistics. Data will be analyzed according to the following divisions: respondents with personal physical assault experience and those with no physical assault experience. Answers to each yes/no question will be reported as percentage of responses. Likert scale responses will be reported as the mean for each question. Conclusions will be drawn based on the percentages and means. Selected comments from the open-ended questions will be reported as anecdotal information in the Conclusion.

## **FINDINGS**

There were 60 questionnaires distributed to female graduate students at Texas A & M University. Of the questionnaires distributed, 53 were completed and returned. The descriptive

personal information provided by the respondents is relative to the time of the assault. Of those returned, 9.4% (n=5) were YES responses (indicating a personal experience of physical assault) and 90.6 % (n=48) were NO responses (indicating no personal experience with a physical assault). The YES respondents ranged in age from 11 years to 20 years, at the time of the assault, with an average age of 15.4 years. The ethnic makeup was 20% (n=1) other, 60% (n=3) white, and 20% (n=1) unknown. Martial status was 60% (n=3) single, 20% (n=1) married, and 20% (n=1) unknown. Their responses to questions numbered 1 through 7 are listed below with the Yes percentage first and the No percentage second.

Question #1 - 60% / 40%

Question #5 - 0% / 100%

Question #2 - 0% / 100%

Question #6 - 0% / 100%

Question #3 - 20% / 80%

Question #7 - 20% / 80%

Question #4 - 60% / 40%

These responses indicated 60% of the participants had, and 40% had not had, their arms held or hair pulled as a controlling or hurting action during an assault. Four-fifths (80%, n=4) had been either punched/slapped in the face or had their arms twisted/held – 20% (n=1) had not experienced those actions. Three responses indicated the direction from which the assault came. The attack directions were front 67% (n=2) and back 33% (n=1). One of the incidents (20%) was reported to the police.

The NO respondents' ages were listed in only the first three of the six age categories. None of the respondents were in categories 4 (45-54), 5 (55-64) and 6 (65+). The listed categories are noted below with the number of respondents in each.

Category 1 (15-24) = 30

Category 2 (25-34) = 14

Category 3 (35-44) = 4

Using the mid-point of each category as the mean age for those respondents, the mean age for the NO group is 24.08 years. Three respondents did not indicate their ethnicity and one did not indicate marital status. The ethnicity of the group was distributed as: Hispanic 8.3% (n=4), White 64.7% (n=31), Other 20.8% (n=10), and Unknown 6.2% (n=3). Marital status was indicated as: Single 83.3% (n=40), Married 10.4% (n=5), Divorced 4.2% (n=2), and Unknown 2.1% (n=1). The mean response to the seven numbered questions are noted below:

Question #1 - 2.2      Question #2 - 3.2      Question #3 - 2.8

Question #4 - 2.9      Question #5 - 2.9      Question #6 - 2.7

Question #7 - 1.5

On average the respondents agreed arm grabbing, hair pulling, slapping or punching, choking or strangling, and the use of a weapon would be common possibilities in a physical assault. They disagreed that most physical assaults come from the front and that physical assaults are always reported to the police.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on this sample's data, this researcher concludes that women that have not personally been involved in a physical assault (NO group) perceive the specific actions that might occur in such an assault differently than the actual experiences of assault victims (YES group). There is little information in the literature to address the level of action that is described in this study. Most of the available literature discusses the offense that is committed, not the step-by-step method by which the assailant executes an assault. Two basic areas need to be considered and integrated into any program to help women prepare for, and deal with, physical assault.

The first of these is the actual physical actions of an aggressor a woman may reasonably have to contend with in an assault. It would be naïve, and dangerous, to assume that all assaults follow the same plan or pattern. However, it is beneficial to identify any common characteristics in assaults, so that preventive measures and defense strategies can be developed. The second would involve a woman's perception of what to expect in an assault, whether realistic or not. A woman's concern about remote possibilities, to the exclusion of closer and significantly greater probabilities, does not serve a woman's actual survival needs. The conflict between these two positions is exemplified in the responses of the YES and NO groups to their respective Question #5. It relates to the use of choking or strangling in an assault. This question received a positive overall mean agreement (2.9) from the NO group. Of the 48 respondents in this group, 72.9% (n=35) of them agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In contrast the YES group indicated this not occurring in their experiences. Whichever group is ultimately correct is not the issue; the conflict between the two positions is what poses the problem. Can we say that a woman should not be concerned with being choked? We certainly cannot. However devoting time and energy, both mental and physical, to a less likely possibility at the exclusion of spending that time and energy preparing for a more probable possibility, is the concern at this time.

This research indicates agreement between the two groups that holding/grabbing arms and being punching were actions requiring defense tactics. These were rated highest in actual occurrences and highest in perceived actions.

Further research in this area is needed to confirm the specific problems women face in a physical assault situation, so that the most effective techniques are taught and the most accurate



information is available. The concern for these problems is appropriately presented in comments by two of the respondents.

"I would be scared to death (if assaulted)."

And

"You don't even have time to react."

No one should have to live her life under these fears. It is this researcher's desire that this study be the catalyst for further research on this subject. A life without fear or anxiety may not be realistic, but efforts to minimize those concerns through accurate information and proper prevention and preparation are worthy goals. Toward that end this study is directed.

### Limitations

The results of this study are limited by a convenience sampling technique. As a result, any generalizations to a larger population are questionable. It is the opinion of this researcher that the data acquired indicates a need for a greater random sample to be obtained and the target population expanded. Even though the size of the sample obtained was viable for the size of the target population, the population itself may not be representative of the broader cultural population, thereby limiting any generalizations to only female graduate students at Texas A&M University.

The importance of the data from a study of this nature to all women in our society requires that, not only research in this area continue, but that the sampling be as broad as possible to provide the greatest level of generalization from the results obtained

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# Appendices

Appendix A - Operational Definitions

Appendix B - Questionnaire

**Operational Definitions**

1. Age - (NO Group) - Self reported, present age, in one of six categories: 1= 15-24 years, 2= 25-34 years, 3= 35-44 years, 4= 45-54 years, and 6= 65+ years.
2. Age - (YES Group) - Self reported, as age at the time of assault.
3. Ethnicity - Self reported in one of four categories: Black, Hispanic, White, and Other. No other options were offered.
4. Marital Status - Self reported in one of three categories: Single, Married, or Divorced. No other options were offered.
5. In definitions 1 through 4 above, if the respondent did not select one of the options the response was listed as "Unknown" and the appropriate numbers for that response were indicated.
6. Participant - Female graduate students attending Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas the Fall semester 2003.
7. Physical Assault - Contact, unsolicited by the recipient, that is used as a means of control through the execution of pain or the impeding of motion.
8. Physical Assault Experience - A physical assault that was actually perpetrated against the participant.
9. Self-defense - The deliberate action(s) by an individual to protect herself or others from harm. It involves developing or acquiring strategies to prevent, discourage or overcome force or other controlling mechanisms.
10. Woman - Describes a person of the female gender 15 years of age or older. The designation of female is used synonymously.

# QUESTIONNAIRE

## Appendix B

This questionnaire is designed to develop an accurate picture of two areas. The first is to clearly define the actual physical actions that were involved in assaults against women. The second is to identify the concerns held by women, that have not been assaulted, regarding a possible physical assault. PLEASE COMPLETE THE COLUMN BELOW THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR PERSONAL ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, "AS AN ADULT, I HAVE BEEN PHYSICALLY ASSAULTED."

If your answer is <b>yes</b> , please continue in this column.	If your answer is <b>no</b> , please continue in this column.
Please consider only your <b>first</b> assault, if there was more than one. Your age then _____	Please check your age: 15-24 ____, 25-34 ____, 35-44 ____, 45-54 ____, 55-64 ____, 65+ ____
Please circle your race: B H W Other	Please circle your race: B H W Other
Please circle your marital status at the time of the assault: Single Married Divorced	Please circle your present marital status: Single Married Divorced
Please answer the following questions by circling <b>Yes</b> or <b>No</b> , depending on whether or not the actions occurred in your assault. Also circle F (front), B (back), or S (side) to indicate the direction the attack came from.	Please circle the answer that most reflects your personal beliefs regarding that following questions. With the ratings: 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. All the statements are regarding assaults against women.
1 – Were your arms held to control you? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	1 – Most physical assaults come from the front. 4 3 2 1
2 – Was your hair pulled to control or hurt you? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	2 – Arm grabbing is common in physical assaults. 4 3 2 1
3 – Were you punched in the face or slapped? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	3 – Hair pulling is a common control tactic in assaults. 4 3 2 1
4 – Were your arm/arms, twisted to hurt or control you? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	4 – Slapping or punching in the face is common in physical assaults. 4 3 2 1
5 – Were you choked/strangled to control or hurt you? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	5 – Choking or strangling, by hand, is common in physical assaults. 4 3 2 1
6 – Was a weapon used in the assault? Yes ___ No ___ F B S  If yes, circle which was used. Handgun Knife Club Other _____	6 – Some form of weapon is common in physical assaults. 4 3 2 1
7 – At the time of incident, was it reported to the police? Yes ___ No ___ F B S	7 – Physical assaults are always reported to the police. 4 3 2 1
continue on the back	continue on the back

Are there other acts in the assault that you would like to list? Please do. \_\_\_\_\_

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Any other comments or observations would be appreciated. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Thank you for your help.**

Are there other acts in a physical assault you are concerned about? Please list. \_\_\_\_\_

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Any other comments or observations would be appreciated. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Thank you for your help.**