

# research snapshot

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## Do Welfare Reforms Make Abused Women Safer?

### What is this research about?

In 1995, the government cut welfare benefits for Ontarians by 21.6%. One effect of the cut is that many women remain in abusive relationships out of financial necessity. A new definition of 'spouse' introduced at about the same time (and changed a bit later) has also been a problem for women who live on their own and try to qualify for benefits. While "workfare" is supposed to help welfare recipients move from welfare to work, many women find workfare programs not to be helpful at all. Sometimes participating in workfare programs can lead to more violence, as abusive men fear they will lose control if their partners upgrade their skills or get employment. In addition, women are often humiliated by workers in the welfare system. This, too, is a kind of abusive relationship. In short, recent changes to welfare have done harm to the safety and equality of abused women.

### What did the researcher do?

Professor Janet Mosher, at Osgoode Hall Law School, together with Professor Margaret Little (Queen's), Pat Evans (Carleton), the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses and the Ontario Social Safety Network set out to explore the impact of the welfare reforms of the late 1990's on the lives of abused women. They interviewed 64 women who had been abused by their intimate partners and who had received welfare benefits. They also took

### What you need to know:

Welfare reforms over the last decade have sustained, and even enhanced, the power of abusive men.

demographics and ethnicity into account to see if they made a difference. They also sent a questionnaire to all area administrators of welfare and received a large response (73%). It was designed to find out what policies are in place to protect abused women. After drafting a report of their findings and suggestions, the researchers arranged a full day meeting with front line service providers and women who had participated in the project to make sure that the findings were accurate and to work on solutions.

### What did the researcher find?

Women who try to flee abusive relationships and seek welfare support often have great difficulties. More specifically, the researchers found that:

- Abused women are staying with or returning to violent spouses because of inadequate welfare relief.
- Abusive men often call the welfare 'snitch' line to maintain control over their spouses.
- The definition of 'spouse' used for welfare (which is

different from that used in family law) allows men to dominate women.

- Both past and on-going abuse interfered with the ability of women to take part in the workforce.
- Women are rarely informed of special welfare policies that are aimed at women who experience domestic violence.
- Women are often required to pursue child support from their abusive partners, exposing them to potentially severe danger.
- Most welfare offices lack the knowledge and training that is needed to deal with abused women.
- Women draw many parallels between their experiences on welfare and their relationships with their abusive partners.

### How can you use this research?

This This research lets us see that good welfare policies and practices – and more broadly good anti-poverty strategies – are critical to the safety of women. It will help policymakers to better respond to the problem of domestic abuse. It is also consistent with recent American research, which draws a connection between poverty and domestic abuse. In general, poverty should not be seen as the fault of lazy, unmotivated people. A supportive and well-funded welfare system is needed to eliminate both the dependence of women on abusive men and the oppression of women who receive social assistance. Anti-poverty strategies can improve women's safety.

In terms of research, more work is needed on the number of abused women who receive welfare benefits. Welfare offices need to continuously monitor their training practices and how they impact on abused women.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

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