

Domestic abuse cases spike

Downturn drives up desperation

By Bonnie Miller Rubin | Tribune reporter
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A 23-year-old woman pauses after putting her infant daughter down for a nap at the Crisis Center for South Suburbia in Tinley Park. (Tribune photo by David Pierini / April 30, 2009)

A 51-year-old [Wilmette](#) woman met her partner on a dating Web site and everything was humming along until he made some dubious investments. Then the violence began.

"He'd be OK ... but whenever money came up, he'd be totally out of control ... like a plane that was ready to crash," the woman said, adding that the slaps and shoves started in 2008 as his losses mounted.

By March, the abuse became so terrifying that she took out an order of protection.

Though hard times usually won't cause a mild-mannered person to exact revenge or fly into a rage, a spouse or partner with a short fuse can be swept up by the wave of problems currently pounding the nation -- unemployment, home foreclosures,

bankruptcies -- and exacerbating already strained relationships, say those who deal with domestic violence.

The link between intimate partner abuse and economic distress is strong, said Anne Menard of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. Women whose partners experienced two or more periods of unemployment within five years were almost three times more likely to be victims as those with men who had stable jobs. Cash-strapped couples had a rate of violence three times that of those with minimal money worries, she said, citing a 2004 report by the National Institute of Justice.

At the South Suburban Family Shelter, where a support group meets in a bunkerlike room every Monday, no one needs a government study to see the connection. For the first time in recent memory, the [Homewood](#)-based organization has a waiting list for services. Counseling coordinator Carol Gsell calls 2009 the most difficult year she's seen in 20 years in social services.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline saw a 43 percent increase in calls in March compared with the previous March. Chicago posted a 25 percent uptick in the same month, said Leslie Landis of the Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence.

And just when the demand for services is at its peak, domestic violence programs are colliding with other economic factors -- budget shortfalls, hiring freezes and shrinking contributions.

The rise in violence is consistent with what experts know about abuse -- that it is about power and dominance. A perpetrator who has lost the role of breadwinner, fallen behind on house payments and is hounded by creditors has suffered a blow to the ego and will find other ways to exert control.

"People would be shocked with how many cases we are seeing on the North Shore," said Barbara Siegel, clinical director of Shalva, an agency that addresses domestic violence in the Jewish community. "Cases are more complex. ... There are some very dangerous things occurring here."

With money scarce, divorce filings are down and people can't afford to pay an attorney or sell their house, said Karen Kuchar, director of Family Shelter Service in [Wheaton](#).

"They feel like there's no way out," she said. "We've definitely seen an increase -- both in orders of protection and hot-line calls."

Those deciding to escape have fewer places to go with area shelters operating at or beyond capacity. Advocates who used to make a few calls to locate a vacancy now say the task can take hours. Some victims opt for homelessness rather than return to their batterers.

For those seeking refuge with family and friends, the reality can be just as bleak. With so many people out of work "people just don't feel they can rely on those informal sources of support the way they used to," Landis said. "Everybody's hurting."

Even when victims complete programs and feel empowered to go it alone, the dominoes continue to fall across the region.

At the Crisis Center for South Suburbia in [Tinley Park](#), clients at the 35-bed shelter -- which has 43 clients -- can stay up to 60 days, director Edward Vega Sr. said. But when the clock runs out, they discover that rental housing is at a premium because of the foreclosure crisis.

"We've had people go as far as [Hammond](#), Ind., before they could find something affordable -- and that doesn't even count coming up with a security deposit and a month's rent," Vega said.

If housing is the most pressing challenge, jobs run a close second. At the Tinley Park shelter, more than half of the clients are either unemployed or have minimal work experience. "In the best of times, finding those entry-level positions is difficult ... now multiply it tenfold," Vega said.

Add all the other safety nets stretched to the limit -- child care, transportation, health insurance, legal aid -- and it's easy to see why victims bristle at the question, "Why don't you just leave?"

"Women will endure violence because it's so complicated to get out," Raphaelle Cappos, a counselor, told the Homewood support group. "And if you have kids, you're never out."

The importance of money -- or lack of it -- is a constant refrain among the group made up of different ages, ethnicities and ZIP codes.

One woman confessed to a damaged credit history, courtesy of an irate ex on a spending spree. Another shared an anecdote about a partner who heard about her getting a raise and accused her of sleeping with the boss. For Darlene, whose children are grown, her ex-husband's joblessness meant more time at home, more drinking, more fighting.

"As soon as he was out of work, we all started walking on rice paper," said the mother of three adult children. "It wouldn't take much to set him off ... like breaking the spaghetti in half before cooking, or changing the channel."

Inevitably, he would apologize, chastened and charming, and all would be placid. At least until the next time she was overdrawn on the checkbook or late with dinner.

The turning point came when she woke up in an intensive-care unit. That was 10 years ago.

"I stayed because of the kids, and I left because of the kids," she said. "There are lots of obstacles ... but just don't ever give up."

brubin@tribune.com