THE VICTIM-OFFENDER RELATIONSHIP AND CALLING THE POLICE IN ASSAULTS*

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The revised National Crime Victimization Survey is used to examine the effects of the victim's relationship to the offender on whether assaults are reported to the police by either the victim or by third parties. The results indicate that the offender-victim relationship affects third-party but not victim reporting. The former effect occurs in part because third parties are unlikely to witness assaults involving people in ongoing relationships, particularly couples, and in part because third parties are reluctant to report minor assaults (i.e., those assaults that involve a threat but no actual attack and no weapon). We discuss possible explanations for why no effect of relationship on victim reporting was found.

The conventional wisdom in criminology is that the social relationship between an offender and a victim is an important determinant of whether an assault will come to the attention of the police. In particular, research in the field of domestic violence suggests that incidents involving intimate partners and relatives are largely hidden from the authorities.1 Both metaphorically and literally, domestic violence tends to occur "behind closed doors" (Black, 1976, 1995; Gelles, 1983; Straus et al., 1980).

Despite the widespread consensus over the hidden nature of domestic violence, the evidence on the effect of relationship on police reporting is actually rather limited. Three studies based on self-reports of violent incidents found the expected association between social relationship and reporting violence to the police (Block, 1974; Felson, 1996, and forthcoming; Gartner and Macmillian, 1995). The evidence from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), in contrast, has been mixed. The early NCVS data did not indicate much of an effect of relationship on police reporting. For example, in 1992, the last year before the redesign of the survey (discussed below), the proportion of assaults reported to the

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1. We use the term “domestic violence” to refer to assaults involving partners (married or unmarried) and relatives other than spouses.
police was roughly similar for incidents involving strangers and non-strangers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992; Gottfredson and Hindelang, 1979; Skogan, 1976). This discrepancy between the early NCVS findings and the studies based on surveys of violence may be due to survey design. As widely noted in the literature, the design of the original NCVS resulted in an appreciable under-reporting of assaults, especially those that occur between persons acquainted with one another (Garofalo, 1990; O'Brien, 1985; Skogan, 1984, 1986). These assaults are likely to be precisely the kinds of incidents that go unreported to the police. Hence, the "censoring" of assaults among relatives and acquaintances in the original NCVS may have suppressed the effect of relationship on calling the police.

Recently, the NCVS has been redesigned to reduce the undercounting of assaults, especially those involving persons involved in ongoing relationships. The new methodology encourages more complete reporting in several ways. The survey questions substitute behavior-specific language for criminal justice terms to prompt respondents to report experiences even if they are uncertain as to their criminal status. The screening questions "cue" respondents by enumerating in greater detail situations in which victimizations might have occurred. In addition, interviewers probe for victimizations by nonstrangers by explicitly calling attention to the tendency for people to fail to recall "incidents committed by someone they know."

Preliminary comparisons of results based on the two designs indicate that the new methodology yields appreciably more incidents of assault, particularly less serious "simple" assaults, and assaults involving non-strangers (Bachman and Saltzman, 1995; Kinderman et al., 1997; Perkins et al., 1996). Moreover, with the reduction in the censoring of violent incidents between intimates, the data from the redesigned survey yield results more consistent with theoretical expectations, at least as reflected in comparisons across broad relationship categories. The proportion of stranger assaults reported to the police is higher than that of nonstranger assaults—43.3% versus 36.4%, respectively (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997a:85).2

In the present study, we further explore the effect of social relationship on calling the police using the data on assault from the redesigned NCVS. Our analyses go beyond previous work in four important respects. First, we employ a more detailed classification of relationship based on the redesigned NCVS than has been used in the preliminary reports. These reports have been limited to comparisons of "stranger" and "nonstranger" categories. Second, we examine separately the tendency for victims to call

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2. A study based on a small telephone survey in Georgia also found that victims of personal and property crimes are more likely to report nonstrangers than strangers to the police (Ruback, 1994). Bachman (1998), using data from the redesigned NCVS, found no difference in the tendency for victims to report rapes committed by nonstrangers and strangers.
the police and for third parties to call the police. Research shows that third parties and victims sometimes respond differently (Felson, 1996, and forthcoming). Third, we use a multivariate analytic framework that explicitly controls for the gender of the victim and of the offender. This is important because gender is likely to be related to both the relationship between offender and victim and the likelihood of calling the police. For example, research shows that violence against women is more likely to involve a family member than violence against men (e.g., Browne and Williams, 1993; Reiss and Roth, 1993), and men are generally more reluctant to call the police than women (Goldberg and Ruback, 1992; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1980). Isolating the distinctive effects of social relationship on calling the police thus requires that the gender of both antagonists be taken into account. Finally, we explore possible interactions between gender and social relationship. Previous literature suggests, for example, that certain types of incidents, such as incidents in which husbands attack their wives, are especially likely to escape the attention of legal authorities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our most general research question pertains to the effect of the social relationship between antagonists in assaults on decisions to call the police. Are victims of nonstrangers less likely than victims of strangers to call the police, once the gender of the adversaries has been taken into account? The conventional wisdom in criminology suggests such an association should be observed.

A second research question is this: Are victims of assaults reluctant to call the police on any offender with whom they have an ongoing social relationship, or is this response unique to certain kinds of relationships? Perhaps victims of domestic violence are reluctant to call the police, and victims of violence by acquaintances exhibit no such reluctance, in comparison with victims of strangers.

Another possibility is that calling the police is particularly unlikely in an incident in which the victim is a woman and the offender is her husband or male partner. This pattern would be expected if women have special concerns about abusive male partners. For example, wives may be particularly reluctant to call the police on their husbands if they are economically dependent (e.g., Pagelow, 1984). They may fear that reporting the incident will reduce their husbands' capacity or willingness to provide financial support. In addition, they may be reluctant to report their husbands to the police because of fear of reprisals (Frieze and Browne, 1989; Pagelow, 1984). The observation of a statistical interaction between the offender's gender (male), the victim's gender (female), and the offender-
victim relationship (intimate partner) on the victim’s calling the police would support these arguments.

We raise analogous questions about the responses of third parties to assaults. Are third parties less likely to report incidents involving husbands and wives to the police than incidents involving strangers? Third parties, like victims, may tend to view spousal altercations as private matters. Shotland and Straw (1976) found that witnesses were less likely to intervene in a staged fight involving a couple than a fight involving strangers. The subject witnesses were less likely to believe that the woman wanted help or would be seriously hurt if the man attacking her was her husband than if he was a stranger. On the other hand, it may be that any tendency for third parties to “look the other way” is characteristic of all incidents involving domestic relations or all incidents involving nonstrangers.

With respect to third-party calling, we can address an additional question. Are any effects of the social relationship between victim and offender on third-party calling direct, or are they indirect, operating through the presence of third parties at the incident? Our arguments above imply that third parties are less likely to report nonstranger assaults than assaults involving strangers to the police because they are reluctant to intervene in these incidents. However, third parties are often not present during assaults, and it is reasonable to expect that the social relationship between victim and offender will be associated with the likelihood that third parties are present. For example, incidents involving couples may go unnoticed if they occur in private dwellings, or if the offender intentionally acts in such a way as to conceal them. In addition, partner violence is more likely to involve violence against women, which offenders may also prefer to conceal (Felson, 1982; 1996, and forthcoming).

This discussion suggests that, in addition to any direct effect, social relationship affects third-party reporting indirectly through its effect on whether witnesses are present. The direct effect (with the presence of witnesses controlled) reflects the effect of the offender-victim relationship on the third party’s decision to report the incident to the police. The indirect effect involves the effect of relationship on whether the assault is witnessed by third parties in the first place, and the effect of the presence of a witness on third-party reporting. Accordingly, in addition to our analyses of the determinants of calling the police, we also examine presence/absence of witnesses as a dependent variable.

Finally, the effects of victim-offender relationship on calling the police (by both victims and third parties) may vary depending on the seriousness of the incident. Serious assaults may be reported to the police no matter how close the offender is to the victim. An assault in which someone is severely injured, for example, is unlikely to be viewed as a private matter.
On the other hand, citizens are likely to use more discretion in reporting relatively minor assaults, such as incidents involving threats but no physical attacks. We include a control for seriousness in our analysis of the total sample of incidents, and we estimate the effects of social relationships on the likelihood of police reporting for serious and minor incidents separately.

**DATA AND METHODS**

The analyses are based on data from the incident files of the redesigned NCVS. The NCVS collects information on victimizations from a nationally representative sample of households in the United States. Our data file includes victimization incidents from the latter part of 1992 through 1994. Incidents in which victims report having been attacked or threatened were selected for analysis. To avoid ambiguities in the classification of incidents with multiple victims and offenders, we follow the precedent of past research on interpersonal violence and restrict attention to victimizations with a single victim and a single offender (cf., Williams and Flewelling, 1988). Incidents involving robbery, rape, or burglary were excluded from the analyses.

Three principal independent variables are included: the relationship between the offender and victim, the gender of the victim, and the gender of the offender. Relationship is classified as a series of dummy variables: spouse, ex-spouse, romantic partner (including ex-partners), other family members, friends, other well-known people (including neighbors, roommates, schoolmates, and people at work), acquaintances, and strangers (the reference category). The gender of the victim and the gender of the offender are also dummy variables. Preliminary analyses revealed interaction effects of the gender of the antagonists. To capture such effects, we employ a four-category variable representing the logical combinations of gender: male attacks female, female attacks male, female attacks female, and male attacks male. The first three categories are entered into the analyses, with male-on-male incidents serving as the reference category.

We treat calling the police as a trichotomous-dependent variable. Incidents are classified whether the victim called the police, third parties called the police, or no one called the police. Multinomial logistic regression is used, in which not calling the police is the comparison category.

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3. The nature of the relationship between romantic partners may very well differ from that for ex-partners. Unfortunately, the NCVS assigns the same code to these two categories. We thus consider romantic partners separately from spouses rather than creating a combined category for intimates partners.

4. Although it is logically possible for both the victim and a third party to notify the police, the NCVS does not permit multiple codes for who reported the incident. An
As noted above, we also examine the effect of gender and relationship on whether a witness was present during the assault.\textsuperscript{5} Logistic regression is used to assess the hypotheses concerning this dichotomous dependent variable.

We include several control variables for demographic characteristics of the antagonists and for special features of the incident. The demographic characteristics are: victim's age (measured in years), estimated offender's age (under 12; 12–14; 15–17; 18–20; 21–29; 30+); victim's race; and offender's race. The race variables are dummy coded as black, white, or other, with white serving as the reference category. We also control for history of past assaults (prior attack by the offender versus no prior attack) and victim precipitation (victim hit first versus victim did not hit first). Both of these factors might affect decisions to call the police, especially for victims.

To measure the seriousness of the incident offense, we adapt the Sellin-Wolfgang scale (1964). This scaling procedure assigns points for two dimensions of seriousness: intimidation and injury. An incident received two points for verbal threats, four points for the presence of a weapon, one point for minor injuries, four points for receiving professional medical treatment, and seven points for hospitalization. The intimidation and injury scores are summed to give a total seriousness score that ranges from zero to 11 for our sample of incidents.

The regression analyses are based on a weighted sample, using the incident weights provided in the data file.\textsuperscript{6} The weighted sample has been “normed” so that the weighted “\textit{N}” is identical to the actual number of incidents in the data set (see Frankel, 1983:46).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Victims called the police in a quarter of the incidents (25.1%), and third-party calls were made 14.4% of the time. Thus, the police were called by someone in about 40% official of the Bureau of Justice Statistics has informed us in a personal communication that such an incident would likely be coded as “victim called.”

5. The measure for presence of witness is based on responses to the question: Was anyone present during the incident besides you and the offender (other than children under age 12)? The measure for third-party reporting is based on responses to the question: How did the police find out about it? Third-party reporting is coded 1 if respondent answered “other household member,” “someone official,” or “someone else,” and 0 otherwise. (Victim reporting is coded 1 if respondent answered “respondent” in response to this question and 0 otherwise.)

6. The original collector of the data, ICPSR, and the relevant funding agencies bear no responsibility for uses of this collection or for interpretations or inferences based on such uses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997b).
of the assaults. In most cases, the offender was someone outside the family. Almost half of the assaults involved a male assailant and a male victim.

VICTIM AND THIRD-PARTY REPORTING

In Table 2, we present the central results from our analyses of determinants of calling the police. In the first equation, we examine determinants of whether the victim calls the police. In the next two equations (2 and 3), we examine determinants of whether third parties call the police. Equation 2 does not include the variable for presence of witnesses, whereas Equation 3 does. A comparison across these columns indicates the extent to which the presence of a witness mediates the effects of gender and relationship on third-party calling the police.

With respect to victim reporting (Equation 1), only one of the effects representing social relationship is statistically significant, and it is in the opposite direction of that predicted: Victims are more likely to call the police when the offender is an ex-spouse. Thus, contrary to expectations, the data offer no support for the idea that victims are especially reluctant to report assaults by intimate partners or anyone else that they know.

The effects of social relationship on third-party reporting are presented in Equations 2 and 3. In Equation 2, witness presence during the incident is not included in the equation. In this equation, all of the effects of social relationship are in the predicted direction, but only the effects of spouse, romantic partner (or ex-partner), and friend are statistically significant. When the presence of witnesses is controlled (Equation 3), the effects of spouse and romantic partner are reduced below the level of statistical significance. The results indicate that the effects of these kinds of social relationships are indirect (effects on witnessing will be discussed below). In contrast, the effect of friends remains significant with the presence of witness controlled.

Gender effects are also observed in Table 2. Victims are more likely to report an incident when a female is involved in the incident as either an offender or victim (Equation 1, rows 8, 9, and 10). These results suggest that violent disputes between men tend to be handled privately. Turning to third parties, one gender effect emerges: Third parties are more likely to call the police in incidents in which a man attacks a woman than in incidents involving men (the eighth row of Equations 2 and 3). Third parties also appear to be more likely to call the police when a woman assaults

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[7] Including or excluding the witness variable has little effect on the coefficients for victim calling. Hence, we report a single equation for victim calling in Table 2 with all predictors.
Table 1. Frequency Distributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calling the Police</td>
<td>No Call</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victim Call</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Party Call</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Distance</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ex-Spouse</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partner or Ex-Partner</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Family</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Well-Known</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Combination</td>
<td>Male Offender/Male Victim</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male Offender/Female Victim</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female Offender/Male Victim</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female Offender/Female Victim</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Offender</td>
<td>Under 12</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12–14</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18–20</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–29</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of Victim</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Non-white</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of Offender</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Non-white</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Attack</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim-Precipitated</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>99.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Party Present</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cases</td>
<td>5,570</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a man, but the effect is not statistically significant. These effects do not depend on whether witnesses are present.

We also explored statistical interactions between gender and social relationship by adding a multiplicative term representing female victimization by male partners to Equations 1 and 2 (results not shown in tabular form). This term was coded 1 if the victim was a female and the offender was
male and her husband, ex-husband, romantic partner, or ex-partner; it was
coded 0 otherwise. The coefficients for the multiplicative term are not
statistically significant for either victim calling or third-party calling ($b = .26, p = .32; b = -.31, p = .35$). Neither victims nor third parties are less
likely to call the police if a woman is assaulted by her male partner than if
she is assaulted by someone else (net of the effects of other variables).

THE PRESENCE OF WITNESSES

The effects of relationship on the presence of witnesses are also
presented in Table 2 (Equation 4). The results show that third parties are
significantly less likely to be present in incidents involving married
couples, ex-spouses, and partners (or ex-partners) than in incidents involv-
ing strangers. The coefficients for assaults involving other ongoing rela-
tionships are small and statistically nonsignificant. Thus, the results offer
support for the idea that violence involving intimate partners tends to be
hidden from third parties.

One of the gender coefficients in the equation for presence of witness is
statistically significant. Men who assault women are less likely to do so in front of witnesses than men who assault men (the eighth row of Equation 4). Neither of the other gender combinations involving women differs significantly from incidents involving men only. In analyses not presented, we included a multiplicative term representing assaults on women by male partners. Similar to the findings for calling the police, this term was statistically nonsignificant \( (b = .00, p = .99) \).\(^8\)

REPORTING MINOR INCIDENTS

We hypothesized that social relationships might have stronger effects on the reporting of minor incidents of assault. To assess this hypothesis, we considered various conceptualizations of a “minor” assault and reestimated our equations with subsamples for such incidents. We examined whether offenders merely threatened victims but did not actually attack them, whether offenders were unarmed, whether victims were not injured, and whether victims experienced minor injuries. Only one type of incident produced results that differed substantially from the results presented for the total sample—incidents in which the offender verbally threatened but never actually attacked the victim. These verbal threats constituted approximately one-third of the total cases.\(^9\)

We present the results for third-party reporting of minor assaults (i.e., those involving verbal threats) in Table 3. The patterns for victim reporting and witnessing are similar to those for the total sample and are therefore not reported.

The results in Equation 1 indicate that third parties are much less likely to call the police if the offender and victim are a couple (whether married, formerly married, or unmarried). The coefficient for other relatives is also statistically significant but smaller in magnitude \( (b = -.79) \). The other coefficients for social relationship are in the predicted direction, but they are small and statistically nonsignificant.

As with the total sample, the presence of witnesses exhibits a significant

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8. Some control variables also exhibit statistically significant effects in these equations (these results are not reported in Table 2). The strongest effects involve age: Older victims are more likely to call the police, and victims are more likely to call the police on older offenders. Black victims are more likely to report assaults than white victims, and black offenders are more likely to be reported.

9. Incidents involving threats but no attack were assigned a score of “2” on the Sellin-Wolfgang seriousness scale. This scaling procedure gives extra weight to an incident when an intimidation factor is present, and thus threat-only incidents were scored as more serious than incidents involving physical contact but no injury (scored “0”) and physical contact with minor injury (e.g., cuts and bruises; scored “1”). A cross-tabulation of calling the police by seriousness score revealed that threat-only incidents were the least likely to be reported to the police (30%), in comparison with incidents assigned other scores on the seriousness scale.
Table 3. Logistic Regression Coefficients, Minor Cases, 
$N = 1,851$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>-1.96*</td>
<td>-1.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-spouse</td>
<td>-1.42*</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Partner</td>
<td>-1.15*</td>
<td>-.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Family</td>
<td>-.79*</td>
<td>-.74*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Well-Known</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Offender-Female Victim</td>
<td>.90*</td>
<td>.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Offender-Male Victim</td>
<td>1.14*</td>
<td>1.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Offender-Female Victim</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness Present</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.76*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.63*</td>
<td>-3.34*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Equations include controls for age of victim, age of offender, race of victim, race of offender, prior attack, and victim precipitation. *p < .05

effect on third-party calling. In addition, the coefficient for each category of relationship with a significant effect is reduced when the presence of a third party is controlled. However, the presence of witnesses mediates only part of the effect of social relationships on third-party reporting for these threat-only assaults—the coefficients for a spouse and other relatives remain significant in Equation 2.

Finally, the gender effects are much stronger in this subsample. The coefficients for the mixed gender incidents are significantly positive and appreciable in magnitude. In other words, third parties are much more likely to call the police when they observe men and women threaten each other than when the offender and victim are of the same sex.

**DISCUSSION**

Our analyses of the effects of social relationship on the reporting of assaults to the police yield both expected and unexpected results. Consistent with the conventional wisdom on the hidden nature of domestic violence, social relationships have significant effects on third-party reporting. These effects are primarily indirect in the analyses based on the total sample of incidents. Third parties are less likely to report assaults involving
couples than assaults involving strangers because they are much less likely to witness such assaults. The tendency for these assaults to occur "behind closed doors" lowers the likelihood that third parties will report the incident. For the subsample of incidents involving unarmed threats but no attack, spouse and other relatives also exhibit direct effects on third-party reporting. These direct effects evidently indicate a reluctance on the part of third parties to call the police when they observe intimate partners or other relatives threaten each other.

These findings are consistent with the claim that third parties view relatively minor conflicts between partners and other domestic relations as private affairs that do not require police intervention (Rosenthal, 1964; Shotland and Straw, 1976). If no one has actually been attacked and if no weapon has been drawn, third parties are less likely to report domestic violence. On the other hand, third parties generally do not view more serious assaults as private matters, no matter how close the offender is to the victim. The results suggest that a witness's perception of a conflict as a private matter apparently depends on judgments of seriousness as well as the social relationship between those involved in the conflict.

Two caveats about the analysis of third-party reporting deserve mention. First, in some instances, third parties may be unaware of the social relationship between victim and offender. Limited knowledge about the victim-offender relationship probably attenuates any effect of this variable on third-party calling. Second, not all third parties who called the police actually witnessed the incidents. Therefore, it is possible that the effects of offender-victim relationship on third-party reporting reflect the decisions of victims to tell third parties about the incident, and possibly to instruct them to call the police, rather than the decisions of third parties themselves. For example, victims may be less likely to tell third parties about an incident if the offender is a family member or nonstranger. This scenario does not appear to be typical, however. Witnesses were present in about 80% of the cases in which third parties reported an assault.10

Surprisingly, we find no inhibiting effects of social relationship on the victim's decision to report an assault to the police. These results are contrary to those obtained from surveys of violent behavior, showing that domestic violence is less likely to be reported to the police than violence between strangers (Block, 1974; Felson, 1996; Gartner and Macmillian, 1995). We suspect that these discrepancies across studies are due to the methodological issue raised earlier. The violence surveys focus on violent

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10. The NCVS data indicate whether a witness was present and whether a third party called the police. However, the data do not reveal whether the third party calling the police was in fact a witness to the incident, although this seems likely in these instances.
behavior in general, while the NCVS is a criminal victimization survey. Although the redesign of the NCVS encourages respondents to report nonstranger assaults, even when the respondent is uncertain about the criminal status of the incident, it seems likely that some censoring still takes place: Incidents that are not perceived to be crimes by the persons attacked are probably not fully reported to NCVS interviewers. Many of these excluded incidents are likely to involve conflicts between intimates in which neither participant calls the police because neither believes that a "real" crime has occurred.\footnote{Another possible explanation for why we do not find effects of relationship on victim reporting is that respondents who do not report domestic violence to the police tend to hide such incidents from interviewers (even if they perceive the incidents to be crimes), and therefore these incidents are left out of our sample. However, reluctance to report incidents of domestic violence to interviewers cannot explain why studies that focus on violence rather than crime do find effects. Respondents in the violence surveys should be just as reluctant to report domestic violence to interviewers as respondents in the crime victimization surveys, and perhaps more so, since in the latter, they perceive themselves to be victims.}

We thus caution that our results about victim calling do not necessarily apply to domestic violence in general. Rather, these results are best understood as pertaining to the subpopulation of incidents in which respondents believe they have been (or may have been) the victims of a crime. Nevertheless, the patterns observed for this restricted sample of incidents are substantively important. They suggest that if people believe that they are possibly the victim of a violent crime, whether the offender is a spouse, a family member, a friend, or an acquaintance does not inhibit them from calling the police.

Why is it that social relationship has no inhibiting effect on the victim reporting, given perceptions of victimization? Perhaps researchers have focused too much on factors that discourage victims from calling the police on family members (e.g., privacy concerns, fear of reprisal) and have neglected possible countervailing processes. Several such processes are plausible. First, the need for police protection may be greater when the victim knows the offender. Continuation of the assault and future assaults are possible when one knows the offender, particularly if the offender is one's partner. Additional assaults from strangers, on the other hand, are unlikely. Although it may be a civic duty to report assaults by strangers, victims are more likely to be concerned with protecting themselves than with protecting others. Second, an alternative strategy for handling conflict is to avoid an adversary (Baumgartner, 1988); it is more difficult to avoid family members and other known offenders. Third, police action is likely to be more effective when the victim can identify the offender. Reporting strangers may seem futile. Finally, victims may be particularly
angry and aggrieved at offenders whom they know and have a stronger desire to see them punished. Grievances with known offenders are more likely to be longstanding, and a person assaulting a friend or family member has violated expectations for mutual support that are supposed to characterize such relationships (Ruback, 1994).

This line of reasoning is consistent with research on victims' motives for reporting and not reporting assaults to the police (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997a). The two most common reasons victims give for going to the police, after "because it is a crime," are to stop an ongoing assault and to prevent future assaults; a concern over privacy is the most common reason for not going to the police. Victims' desires for self-protection may offset their desires for privacy when the offender is a partner, relative, or friend, producing no overall effect of social relationship on victim reporting.

Our analyses also reveal several noteworthy gender effects. In general, the results suggest that incidents in which women are involved as either offender or victim are more likely to be reported to the police than incidents between men. The effects are particularly strong for the minor assaults (those with an unarmed threat but no attack), presumably because more discretion is involved in the response to these incidents (see Ruback, 1994).

The effects of gender offset to some extent the effects of social relationship on third-party reporting. Partner violence (and other domestic violence) is much more likely than stranger violence to target females. Third parties are more likely to report male violence against females, but they are less likely to report domestic violence. As a result, the ability of police to protect women from male violence is limited since assailants of women are often their partners or family members (Felson, 1996). Police intervention is also limited because violence against women is less likely to be witnessed by third parties who might report the incident.

In sum, social relationship probably matters most for incidents that are not included in crime victimization surveys. Many of these incidents are probably minor or involve mutual combat with no clear victim. Our results show that when people believe they have been the victim of a crime, their social relationship to the offender does not appear to affect whether they report the incident to the police.

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CALLING THE POLICE IN ASSAULTS

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