

Poverty, Domestic Violence, and Intimate Partner Homicide in the United States

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### Abstract

I investigated quantitative changes in reported domestic violence incidents, poverty, and intimate partner homicides over time in the United States. I hypothesized that the number of reported incidents of domestic violence in the United States would correlate with the rise and fall of national poverty between the years 1997 to 2011. A secondary hypothesis was that a relationship between intimate partner homicides and poverty would be evident as well. I expected that the years that demonstrated the lowest number of reported incidents of domestic violence would be concomitant with the years that demonstrated lower poverty. This research also indicated that the years with the highest reported number of domestic violence incidents was concomitant with the years that demonstrated the highest poverty and the highest number of intimate partner homicides. Theories such as Social Exchange Theory and Bargaining Theory were identified as factors that could be related to this prevalent social issue.

*Keywords:* Domestic violence, poverty

### Poverty, Domestic Violence, and Intimate Partner Homicide in the United States

Domestic Violence is a social issue that has been widespread in the United States and across the globe. Bassuk, Dawson, and Huntington (2006) studied differences in domestic violence incidents over time, and explored the possibility of a relationship between domestic violence and poverty. Bassuk and colleagues claimed that in spite of higher rates of domestic violence in the lives of poor women, few studies have investigated patterns of violence that occur over time, or the economic and other factors involved that could serve as possible predictors of the potential for domestic violence to occur. Domestic violence is physical, mental, sexual or emotional abuse in an intimate relationship (Alabama Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2013). In the case of the current study the statistical analysis is confined to acts of domestic violence that have been reported to a city or state government agency. According to the Alabama Coalition against Domestic Violence this crime occurs when one person uses abusive tactics that may include physical force to gain power and control over a partner or former partner. Extreme instances of domestic violence can lead to intimate partner homicides, which are fatal violent attacks perpetrated by intimate partners, and are often the extreme and unplanned consequence of abusive relationships (Norman & Bradshaw, 2013). Poverty (a factor that often exists in conjunction with domestic violence) is described by Bassuk and colleagues in their study as an economic state which is characterized by a severe lack of material possessions or money. Bassuk and colleagues (2006) postulated that trends in domestic violence change over time, and that there are many factors that could be related to those changes. Poverty has been shown to be a common factor in many relationships that are affected by domestic violence.

Investigations into the possible relationship between domestic violence and poverty have

emerged as a more frequent topic of interest over the last few decades. Bassuk and colleagues (2006) hypothesized that poverty could be a predictor for a high risk of domestic violence. They reviewed several national surveys and found that severe violence against women is greatest among families with low incomes. Bassuk and colleagues did not review state or national poverty in relation to incidents of domestic violence or incidents of intimate partner homicide. They did not, however, collect data from any governmental authority that collects information and compiles national reports on such matters from city, county, or state-level agencies or access information from the Census Bureau or The Bureau of Justice Statistics within their study. Rather they reviewed already completed surveys that were compiled from various studies that were relevant to their research. Bassuk and colleagues did investigate other factors. They explored belief systems that indicated that low-income status was not only an economic condition but also a social condition that included beliefs about the acceptability of violence and fostered the breakdown and loss of crucial social supports. In a study of particular cases over time, they found that incidents of domestic violence were highest among the extremely poor and homeless women, and that poverty was a reliable predictor of risk for intimate partner violence among these individuals. The data, though not exactly generalizable across geographic regions, indicated that a relationship between poverty conditions and domestic violence was possible. The results also indicated that financial interventions may decrease risk.

The effects of financial interventions in households that have experienced domestic violence have been studied extensively. Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, and Duncan (2005) examined the relationship between poverty and domestic violence by using data from two randomized evaluations of welfare-to-work programs in order to examine the influence of financial and employment assistance on domestic violence incidents. Gibson-Davis and

colleagues hypothesized that financial and employment assistance would reduce the risk of domestic violence for poor women. They espoused the Bargaining Theory of Economics (Binmore, 1986; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996) that places an emphasis on how partners use their power over resources to bargain for positioning and respect in a household. From this theoretical perspective, increasing a woman's economic resources enables her to either bargain for better treatment for herself, or threaten to leave. Their emphasis on bargaining predicts that increasing employment and reducing poverty for the victim could reduce a woman's risk of abuse. They performed their study using single mothers on welfare. Their results showed that increases in employment and income (through a program that allowed participants to keep a portion of their welfare income as earnings rose) were a likely explanation for lower levels of abuse. The results indicated that providing employment through welfare-to-work programs appeared to lead to a reduction in the probability of domestic violence, which served to support Bargaining Theory predictions. These results also supported the idea that poverty could work in conjunction with other social factors and could possibly predict a woman's likelihood of experiencing domestic violence. The immediate and long-term effects of domestic violence on families have been devastating and indicate a need for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies to assist those who are most vulnerable to domestic violence.

Social divisions such as poverty, class, and minority status create a variety of vulnerabilities to violence. Hetling and Zhang (2010) conducted a study during which survivors of domestic violence were interviewed. Survivors reported that successful transitions to violence-free and independent lives are often made with the assistance of social services such as shelters, counseling, and public cash assistance. The central research question was to discover whether

domestic violence was related to poverty factors and to discover whether survivors indicated that financial assistance would reduce the risk of domestic violence. The results of their interviews indicated that the respondents believed that economic independence decreased the likelihood of domestic violence and also supported the idea that that domestic violence and poverty are frequently factors that exist together in such relationships. The data highlight the importance of creating resources to facilitate the transition to independent life.

Poverty has been indicated as a factor that is often present in conjunction with partner violence (Bassuk, Dawson, & Huntington, 2006). According to the National Poverty Center, the number of persons living in poverty in the United States in 2004 were less than the number living in poverty for 2001 or 2007. The percentage of people living in poverty in the U.S. in those years was recorded as 13.5 % of the total population in 2001, 9.3 % in 2004, and 15.9 % in 2007. A sensible step in thinking would be that individuals may tend to commit fewer acts of violence when financial stressors are of a lower magnitude. The year that had the lowest poverty rate may be concomitant with the year that had the lowest number of reported incidents of domestic violence, which could be indicative that a lower poverty rate in the United States could have a relationship with a decrease in reported domestic violence incidents.

Contradictory to the results of Hetling and Zhang's (2010) study, other evidence in the area of domestic violence and financial stressors indicated that when women are empowered with the ability to choose to leave their abuser, they are in more danger. This means that their chances of assault, and possible death due to an attack, are increased. Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, and Duncan (2005) applied Social Exchange Theory in relation to domestic violence and found an opposing sociological framework that offers multiple explanations for domestic violence and abuse (Homans, 1958; Ekeh, 1976; Riger & Krieglstein, 2000; Tichenor, 1999).

Exchange theory proposes a different prediction than Bargaining Theory, in that Exchange Theory suggests that violence can occur as a result of an imbalance of power within a relationship, in particular, financial power and control. From this perspective, domestic violence occurs more often when abusers lose their status as a breadwinner. This is exacerbated if the abused partner gains economic resources, and these circumstances could increase the likelihood of the occurrence of domestic violence. An intimate partner may resort to violence in order to compensate for lack of employment and economic control and for frustrations when a previously dependent, controlled partner takes on the role of sole financial support in a relationship. According to this theory, financial power stressors may be factors that could increase the likelihood of a domestic violence incident, and may also increase the prevalence of this social issue in society. Limitations of this study were that the use of a short time span and participant variables put limits on the significance and generalizability of the results. Future research could eliminate these limitations by employing the method of the current study on a larger scale, by collecting archival data for a 40 year time span, thus identifying risk markers as well as trends in domestic violence over time.

Lacking in the literature is a comparison of poverty, reported incidents of domestic violence, and intimate partner homicide over time. In this study I examined poverty, domestic violence incidents and intimate partner homicide that were reported to the United States Census Bureau and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the United States; I hypothesized that reported incidents of domestic violence would correlate with the rise and fall of domestic violence incidents, and intimate partner homicides. I expected that those years that had a lower number of reported incidents would also have lower numbers of individuals living in poverty and would also demonstrate lower incidents of intimate partner homicide. An ancillary study was conducted

with a smaller sample to verify that there was a significant change in reported incidents of domestic violence over time. The primary and secondary hypotheses for the current study are based on the Bargaining Theory of Economics (Binmore, 1986; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996) and are fueled by the findings of Bassuk and colleagues (2006) who stated that domestic violence trends change over the years. In these years poverty in combination with other social factors could be a predictor for the prevalence of domestic violence and intimate partner homicide. This study was performed in order to discover if there was a quantitative change in reported domestic violence incidents over time, and if national poverty in the United States could have a relationship with the risk of domestic violence incidents or intimate partner homicides, an issue that may occur more often in families that could possibly endure exacerbated stress due to financial strain complicated by other socio-economic, environmental, and social factors.

National socio-economic information is kept by the United States Census Bureau, and this information is provided for the public in an annual national report. Domestic violence statistics as well as statistics on intimate partner homicides are kept in multiple databases by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Bureau of Justice Statistics collects this data from state and city agencies across the country, and compiles them into an annual national report. According to the literature, poverty and domestic violence are often concomitant therefore it would be a rational step to consider investigating national data concerning these factors simultaneously. Missing in the research has been a study that compared information from these sources to discover if there was evidence of any relationship between the national numbers. The current study was a compilation and subsequent correlational analysis of archival data that were collected from the afore-mentioned databases (made available by these agencies) in order to perform a statistical

comparison of poverty, reported incidents of domestic violence, and intimate partner homicides. The statistical analyses were calculated in order to discover whether there could be a correlation between any of these social factors. This information could supplement current information concerning the social issues of domestic violence and intimate partner homicides by identifying factors that are often present in conjunction with these circumstances, therefore providing a direction in which to search for more effective treatment and prevention protocol. This new information could possibly lead to better awareness, intervention, treatment, and prevention strategies for domestic violence in the United States.

### **Method**

#### **Observations**

The reported incidents of domestic violence and intimate partner homicide in the United States as recorded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics by year were accessed and recorded. The values recorded were from incidents that were reported from within the total population. The number of victims from each category was correlated with national poverty as reported by the United States Census Bureau.

#### **Materials**

The years 1997 to 2011 were chosen due to corresponding data availability from all three conditions. Data were accessed and recorded using the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) Victimization Analysis Tool at <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=navat>. Information was obtained from the most recent intimate partner violence report at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipv9310.pdf> and can be seen in Figure 1. Also accessed and recorded was data from the most recent 2011 Criminal Victimization report at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv11.pdf>. Data was collected and recorded from the most

recent homicide trends report at <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf> and can be seen in Figure 1. Data for the national poverty in the United States for the year 1997 to 2011 were gathered from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/>. National Poverty Center data can be seen in Figure 1.

### **Procedure**

Data were accessed online and results were organized on an excel worksheet. Multiple databases were accessed online between December 2012 and October 2013. The violent victimization by victim-offender relationship was viewed and 5-year, 10-year, and long-term trends were selected. Custom tables were also selected using the variables of personal victimization, the type of crime, years, and other variables of interest (including victim-offender relationship). Reported incidents of domestic violence were recorded from the years 1997 to 2011. The reported numbers of intimate partner homicides were retrieved and recorded for a smaller sample due to the availability of national homicide reports. Poverty statistics were retrieved and recorded from the years 1997 to 2011.

### **Results**

The statistic for this study was a one-tailed Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (Poverty, Domestic Violence reported incidents, and Intimate Partner Homicide). Reported incidents of domestic violence were recorded, Poverty statistics were recorded and Goodness of Fit Chi Square was also performed. Alpha was set at .05.

As can be seen in Figure 1 there was a positive correlation between domestic violence and poverty,  $r(13) = .75, p = .001$ , indicating that years that exhibit higher national poverty

correspond with the years that have higher reported incidents of domestic violence nationally.

As can be seen in Figure 1, there is also a significant relationship between poverty and intimate partner homicide,  $r(9) = .80, p = .003$ , indicating that high national poverty did correspond with intimate partner homicide in the United States for the selected years 1997 to 2007.

### **Discussion**

The primary hypothesis of this study was that the number of individuals living in poverty in the United States would correlate with reported incidents of domestic violence for the years 1997 to 2011. The secondary hypothesis was that the same correlation would be exhibited for poverty and intimate partner homicide over time. Both of these hypotheses were supported by the statistical results of this study, and indicate that more research in the area of economic and emotional stress in families that could be more at risk is required. This information serves to support common knowledge that financial pressures, deficits and stressors could have a significant relationship with the risk of domestic violence and intimate partner homicide. The results of this study suggest that when the nation is experiencing more poverty domestic violence and intimate partner homicide are reported more often, and that these reported incidents correlate with the fluctuation of poverty across the nation. The results of the current study might also indicate that the intensity (i.e., domestic violence incidents that escalate, resulting in intimate partner homicide) of domestic violence could have a relationship with the poverty rate, as evidenced by the strong correlation between poverty and intimate partner homicide. The results of this study indicated that it would be reasonable to investigate the relationship between poverty, domestic violence and intimate partner homicide further.

Domestic violence has been an issue in the United States and all over the globe for

centuries. Bassuk and colleagues (2006) investigated differences in domestic violence incidents over time and explored the possibility of a relationship between domestic violence and poverty. They found that incidents of domestic violence were highest among extremely poor and homeless women, and that poverty was a reliable predictor of risk for intimate partner violence. In the current study this concept was taken a leap further in that national numbers were compared to verify the relationship, and other factors such as intimate partner homicides were investigated as well. The results of this study indicated that there is a relationship between intimate partner homicides, domestic violence incidents and poverty.

Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, and Duncan (2005) examined the relationship between poverty and domestic violence by using data from two randomized evaluations of welfare-to-work programs. They found that the factor of poverty could possibly predict a woman's likelihood of experiencing domestic violence. Hetling and Zhang (2010) conducted a study where survivors of domestic violence were interviewed. Survivors reported that successful transitions to violence-free and independent lives are often made with the assistance of social services such as shelters, counseling, and public cash assistance. Contradictory to Hetling and Zhang's (2010) findings Gibson-Davis, Magnuson, Gennetian, & Duncan (2005) applied Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Ekeh, 1976; Riger & Krieglstein, 2000; Tichenor, 1999) in order to try to understand the relation to domestic violence and found an opposing sociological framework that offers multiple explanations for domestic violence and abuse. This framework also indicates that emotional problems may occur in these domestic violence relationships, as evidenced by the participants who indicated that counseling was a necessary factor in facilitating recovery.

Emotional problems in conjunction with domestic violence have been examined in the

past. Klama and Egan (2011) wrote about a topic that could be related to the emotional state of domestic violence victims when she investigated a relationship between neuroticism and fear of violent crime. Klama and Egan were able to compare the personalities of participants who fear crime against the personalities of previously victimized individuals. Klama and Egan found that high neuroticism in particular demonstrated a propensity for both fear of crime and previous victimization. These findings suggested that individuals that exhibited high neuroticism had a higher probability of victimization, possibly due to the factor of perceived vulnerability that is often concomitant with neuroticism. The findings of Klama and Egan indicated that individuals that ranked high in neuroticism are more likely to be victims of violent crimes, like domestic violence and intimate partner homicide. This interpretation by Klama and colleagues could also be construed as evidence that persons who are victimized (i.e., as they are domestic violence incidents) may exhibit neuroticism. This evidence is indicative of a need for further research into a possible relationship between domestic violence and emotional states such as neuroticism.

Poverty has been indicated as a factor that is often present in conjunction with domestic violence, and both can have significant effects on an individual's emotional state. Gawali (2012) indicated that women are more likely than men to exhibit neuroticism (emotional states such as anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability).

Relationships that are emotionally unstable could be considered more at risk for domestic violence, and victims of domestic violence may exhibit these negative emotional states. These behaviors could possibly be symptoms of emotional stress or violence. Often these emotions contribute to the factor of social isolation in domestic violence, which is a common method for an abusive person to gain power and control over another. The theoretical perspective of neuroticism in women was addressed by Gawali in an effort to establish a relationship between

gender and personality factors. The results of the study make sense because it is a reasonable theory that individuals who exhibit these personality traits could feel fearful in their situations, and may be more likely to stay in an abusive relationship due to economic and emotional issues. These symptoms of emotionality and behaviors could possibly continue even after a successful transition from an abusive situation due to the environmental, emotional and economic stressors of being the sole provider for a family. Clearly what is needed is a long-term support network to enable an individual to recover both economically and emotionally to facilitate a successful situational transition to a life without partner violence.

Economic recovery for families who have suffered from domestic violence can be complicated and difficult. Child-care expenses are a serious economic issue related to income and poverty, and can prevent an economically dependent individual who has children from leaving an abusive situation and being able to support themselves and provide for their dependents. Data from the United States Census Bureau has shown that individuals with children under five spent an average of \$522 per month for child-care in 2002 (Forry, 2009). Forry claimed that child-care cost may in reality be lower for low-income families, but proportionally it may also use up a higher percentage of their already low incomes (an average of 25% of the net income of those living below the poverty level with children in 2002). Forry indicated that there has been some evidence that a child-care subsidy decreases the cost and stress of securing adequate, affordable child care. The cost of daycare for an infant and a 4 year old child per month may cost more than rent, more than food, and may also rival the cost of sending a child to college. Child care for persons that live below the national poverty level have been indicated as often being of lower quality and of higher cost than child-care that is available to those persons not living in poverty. These factors in combination with other individual issues such as weak or

non-existent support networks, education level, and a deficit in vocational skills can contribute to a person's inability to escape and recover from domestic violence. This economic issue of child care expense can also be theorized as being related to poverty.

I investigated the relationship between poverty, reported incidents of domestic violence, and intimate partner homicides in the United States. I found that there was a significant correlation between these factors in this country. I reviewed literature that indicated that assisting victims of domestic violence (either with no-welfare-penalty employment or child-care subsidies or both) may have the potential to increase the victim's ability to overcome their circumstances by decreasing poverty (and possibly increasing stability) for the victim and their children (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Bassuk et al., 2006; Forry, 2009). The literature also suggested that empowering domestic violence victims financially may decrease their risk of experiencing violence (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Hetling & Zhang, 2010). The idea that poverty and domestic violence have a relationship is not a new one; what is new in this study is the idea that poverty, domestic violence incidents and intimate partner homicides do correspond on a national level, which suggests that the yearly number of reported incidents of domestic violence and intimate partner homicides could possibly be predicted by the number of individuals living in poverty in this country. If this evidence is consistent over time as these results appear to indicate, reducing poverty through assistance programs such as welfare-to-work, no-welfare-penalty employment, and/or child-care subsidies for persons most at risk for poverty and domestic violence could be a new, improved, and much-needed strategy for the treatment and prevention of this prevalent social issue in the United States today.

Future directions in this area of research should be to assess common factors that

frequently exist within family situations that are experiencing poverty and domestic violence. Some suggestions for variables of interest might be education levels, support system availability, individual self-esteem, child-care availability, income and vocational availability and skills. This could possibly be accomplished through anonymous surveys at homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters or counseling centers. What has been missing in the historical literature, and in more recent literature as well, are rational suggestions for a program that addresses a recurring set of issues that are common to domestic violence victims. This gap in knowledge is a future direction that should be considered in order to increase public understanding, and to facilitate future prevention and intervention strategies in our communities to contend with this complicated social issue.

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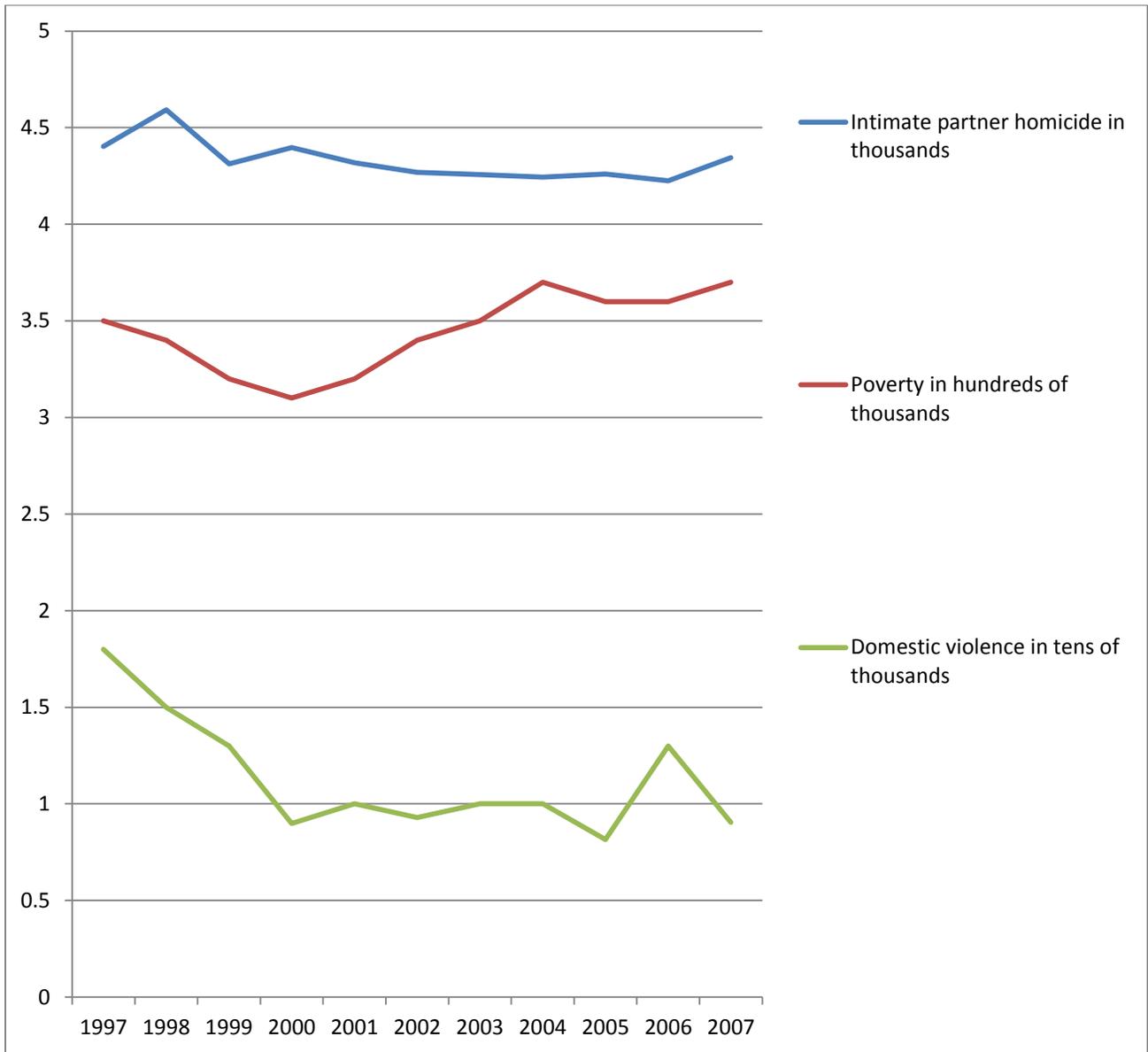


Figure 1. This figure shows the relationship between intimate partner homicides, poverty and reported domestic violence incidents in the United States for the years 1997 to 2011.