



## **ASA NEWS**

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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **Women Who Petition for Restraining Orders Against Abusers Typically See Decreased Earnings**

WASHINGTON, DC, March 11, 2015 — “Why doesn’t she just leave?” is a timeworn question about women trapped in relationships with men who physically and/or emotionally abuse them. Economic dependence is clearly part of the story — many women lack the financial means to leave and find themselves trapped by both poverty and abuse.

One way women can protect themselves and their children from abuse, harassment, threats, or intimidation is to petition a judge for a civil restraining order, also called a Protection From Abuse (PFA) order. Research shows that PFAs can promote women’s safety and help women manage the threat of abuse. Moreover, in the type of virtuous cycle policymakers hope to jump-start through PFAs, increased safety at home should promote women’s economic independence through employment.

However, a new study by two University of Pittsburgh sociologists shows that turning to the courts may carry a considerable price.

Professor of Sociology Lisa Brush and Associate Professor of Sociology Melanie Hughes, both of the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, have co-authored “The Price of Protection: A Trajectory Analysis of Civil Remedies for Abuse and Women’s Earnings,” which appears in the most recent issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

The study reports findings from their analysis of changes in women’s earnings before and after they petition the courts for a restraining order. Although one might theorize that such an order would clear the way for women to increase their work hours, seek higher-paying work, or otherwise increase their earnings, Brush and Hughes found overwhelming evidence that the period around the time they are petitioning is accompanied by serious financial instability, vulnerability, and hardship for women. In fact, the researchers estimate that women lose anywhere between \$312 and \$1,018 dollars in the year after petitioning and further analysis indicates the women are not recouping these losses later.

The study is the first to assess what happens to women’s earnings before and after petitioning for a restraining order.

The researchers studied records of 3,923 women in Allegheny County who had reported any earnings between January 1995 and December 2000 and who had petitioned for a PFA order between January 1996 and December 1999. They looked for changes in earnings growth before and after petitioning. They also took into account whether the women were on welfare prior to or after petitioning, and whether they secured just the initial PFA of usually 10 days or were also granted a hearing, a necessary step for a long-term restraining order. (In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, judges can grant petitioners a temporary 10-day restraining order and then a longer 12-to-18-month renewable order.)

“Our study convincingly shows that women’s petitioning for a PFA does not come with either short- or long-term increases in earnings growth,” said Hughes. “We cannot offer women a restraining order as a tool to stop abuse and then walk away. We need to offer women other forms of support, especially economic ones, during this unstable time.”

“The study is significant,” adds Brush, “because it starkly demonstrates the inadequacy of the three

mechanisms — work, welfare, and protective orders — that we expect women to use to escape from abusive relationships. Sometimes, a woman can't afford to 'just leave.' Sometimes, a protective order is just a piece of paper. Sometimes, abusers sabotage women's employment, run up their bills, or take their paychecks. And sometimes, the turmoil of abuse and the petitioning process causes not just a short-term shock but a decline in earnings that takes years to make up."

The researchers say their study is just a first step toward unpacking the costs of women's efforts to end abuse. They say the economic losses women experience when petitioning for a PFA is a call out to researchers, advocates, and policymakers to develop strategies to enhance women's safety, solvency, and economic stability.

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The American Sociological Association ([www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society. The *American Sociological Review* is the ASA's flagship journal.

The research article described above is available by request for members of the media. For a copy of the full study, contact Daniel Fowler, ASA Media Relations Manager, at (202) 527-7885 or [pubinfo@asanet.org](mailto:pubinfo@asanet.org).

Sharon Blake, University of Pittsburgh News Services, wrote this press release. For more information about the study, members of the media can also contact Blake at (412) 624-4364 or [blake@pitt.edu](mailto:blake@pitt.edu).