



Economic security and safe relationships

Pathways and actions for partner violence prevention

California Work and Family Coalition Lobby Day, 2017.
Photo provided by Jenya Cassidy.

Economic security and intimate partner violence prevention: what's the connection?

Economic opportunity impacts health and safety, including relationships.

Economic opportunity is a robust predictor of health and safety.¹ When communities have local ownership of assets, accessible and stable employment that pays living wages, and access to investment opportunities, they are more likely to thrive.² However, when communities face high unemployment rates and weak economic and social policies, for example, their risk for multiple forms of violence increases—from intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and child maltreatment to community violence.³

Intimate partner violence (also known as domestic violence or partner violence) is often defined as physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression, including coercive acts, by a current or former intimate partner. According to a 2017 survey by the Blue Shield of California Foundation, nearly 90 percent of Californians view intimate partner violence as a serious, widespread problem and close to 60 percent have been affected—either directly as someone who has survived or perpetrated abuse, or as a friend or family member of someone else who has.⁴ Economic security—the ability to maintain one's standard of living in the present and near future—holds an inverse and bi-directional relationship with partner violence. Economic insecurity increases the risk of experiencing violence and partner violence can create and compound circumstances of economic insecurity.⁵ While many survivors of partner violence face financial struggles that require immediate attention and support, practitioners are also considering how economic security can support safe relationships and prevent partner violence from

occurring in the first place—also referred to as primary prevention.^a Primary prevention is designed to reduce health and safety problems at a population level.

Through the leadership of coalitions like the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (the Partnership) and the California Work and Family Coalition, momentum is already building to promote economic security in support of safe relationships. With that, there is a need to better understand the connections between economic security and partner violence and learn from communities implementing strategies to improve economic security and decrease violence. This brief unpacks these connections and illustrates examples of actions across Prevention Institute’s Spectrum of Prevention. Practitioners in the fields of partner violence prevention, economic development, and other related sectors can use this as a tool to explore opportunities to collaborate with one another and add both effectiveness and efficiency to their work.

Family and community economic insecurity increases the risk for partner violence, while economic security can support safe relationships.

Economic conditions like high unemployment rates,⁶ concentrated poverty,⁷ and neighborhood disadvantage—which we refer to as family and community economic insecurity—is associated with partner violence.⁸ These conditions often overlap with housing insecurity, a growing problem in California as housing costs continue to rise and residents face difficulties with payments, frequent moves and overcrowding living conditions, which are also closely linked to increased risk of partner violence.⁹ Although partner violence occurs in relationships among people living in all socio-economic conditions, evidence indicates that the risk is greater in communities with higher neighborhood poverty and unemployment.^{10, 11}



Alejandra and her mother at the State Capitol participating in a rally in support of AB 2079 (Janitor Empowerment Act) for mandatory sexual harassment prevention training. Photo provided by Alejandra Aguilar.

“Like so many survivors, financial anxiety and dependence kept my mother from leaving my abusive father, with grave impact on her health and safety, her work, and family. As a formerly undocumented immigrant, daughter of two farm workers, and impacted by domestic violence as a child, I recognize the need for culturally sensitive conversations, strategies that foster equity, and policy advocacy efforts that support financial independence as a way to prevent intimate partner violence. These conversations, led by members of marginalized communities, will help change the narrative around paid leave, sick days, and other economic supports for workers. These supports are necessary and earned. They are not handouts.”

—Alejandra Aguilar, Preventionist and Program Specialist at the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence

^a Note: Economic insecurity is one of many interconnected factors that increases the risk of partner violence. Read [An Overview of the Sectors Acting for Equity Approach](#) to learn more.

Conversely, family and community economic security includes the existence of local wealth, such as local ownership of assets, as well as the availability of sustainable living wages and other investments that improve the ability of a family and community to securely meet basic needs. Improving family and community economic security holds great potential in preventing partner violence through a few different hypothesized mechanisms:

1. When families and communities are able to meet their basic needs, they have lower levels of stress, dissatisfaction, conflict, and instability, which in turn may reduce the likelihood of partner violence.^{12, 13, 14}

Partner violence perpetration is more common when families face financial stressors, such as housing or utilities nonpayment.¹⁵ In fact, partner violence is three times more likely to occur among couples who face high levels of financial stress.¹⁶

2. Economic security and autonomy reduces financial dependence on a partner and cultivates norms that support gender equity in relationships, both of which are associated with a decreased likelihood of violence.¹⁷

For example, research suggests that closing the gender wage gap (pay equity) or increasing family-supportive policies may boost women's workforce participation and help to decrease the risk of intimate partner violence.^{18, 19} Norms surrounding gender inequities related to economic and decision-making power in relationships are particularly associated with partner violence. A study of 90 different societies found that physical partner violence against women is perpetrated more frequently in societies in which men have greater economic and decision-making power in the household.²⁰

3. Economic security may allow community members to dedicate resources toward social capital-building activities. This can support connections to positive social networks in communities that are associated with decreased risk for partner violence.²¹

Social disorganization

theory describes how concentrated disadvantage and residential instability disrupt social connections and collective activity between neighbors and increases the risk of violence.²² For instance, when someone working multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet lives in a community where many others are facing similar circumstances, it can affect community dynamics. Based on this theory, we can extrapolate that economic security can contribute to the ability of a community to dedicate resources toward activities that build social capital. When families earn living wages and neighborhoods are stable and affordable, positive social connections in the community can benefit, bolstering safety both in relationships and the community.

Promoting safe relationships through economic security: Using Spectrum of Prevention

Strengthening family and community economic security can occur through a range of wealth-building strategies that decrease levels of family and community stress, conflict, and instability. From living wages, secure employment, and paid family leave to tax benefits and retirement savings, solving the issue of economic instability requires coordinated actions that support family stability. Many communities are also thinking about how to create positive work environments that sustain the employment of those who might be at higher risk for partner violence and other negative health and social outcomes. No one organization, sector, or policy can improve economic opportunities and prevent partner violence alone. Policymakers, government agencies, partner violence prevention advocates, businesses, community members, and other actors working together have the collective capacity and responsibility to address the issue.

Using Prevention Institute's Spectrum of Prevention can help practitioners in violence prevention, economic development and other sectors consider comprehensive actions that can result in improved economic security and support safe relationships. For over two

decades, community coalitions, health departments, and policymakers across the nation have used the Spectrum of Prevention to coordinate comprehensive approaches to addressing public health issues like violence prevention, healthy eating and active living, and traffic safety. The Spectrum of Prevention outlines six levels of interrelated action ranging from policy and organizational practice change to individual and community engagement. The following examples of action to improve economic security are organized under specific levels of the Spectrum of Prevention, but—in the real world—these activities interact across levels. For example, passing a policy usually requires coalitions, education and more, or educating providers might be part of changing organizational practices. Using the Spectrum, those in the fields of partner violence prevention and economic development can strategically position their existing efforts within a broader movement and identify the types of work and partnerships needed to create long-term change within communities, organizations, institutions, and in the political sphere.

Spectrum of Prevention



Influencing Policy and Legislation

Public policy development is a powerful tool for shaping conditions that influence health, safety, and equity. Policies affect large numbers of people by establishing

population-wide requirements and standards, reflecting or challenging community norms, and directly influencing resources, actions, and behaviors. Opportunities for legislation exist at the federal, state, and local levels. Research on the connections between economic security and safe relationships points to several promising policies, such as paid parental, caregiver, and sick leave, comparable worth policies (equal pay for equal skill and work), tax credits, childcare subsidies, and more.²³

Example: Passing of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in California²⁴

Through significant organizing from *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* and the California Domestic Workers Coalition, a grassroots domestic worker organization, the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights (AB 241) was signed into permanent law in 2016. Supporting domestic workers, this law extends overtime protections with the right to both daily and weekly overtime for personal attendants working in homes to support thousands of individuals and families across the state. These types of protections help prevent wage theft and increase the economic security of nannies, private healthcare aides, and other domestic workers who often are low-wage earners and are at greater risk for multiple forms of violence, including partner violence.

Changing Organizational Practices

Workplaces, including government agencies, community-based organizations, and businesses can examine and modify internal policies, procedures, and norms to support economic security and make preventing partner violence a workplace issue. This can even start with partner violence and economic development organizations looking internally and asking how they can better support their staff. Employers, along with unions and worker-led organizations, have a role to play in creating family-friendly workplaces and cultivating positive work climates that support staff members. For example, employers can foster organizational cultures that support utilization of family leave and related policies and practices for caregivers.

Coalition-building is often a starting place and priority for many advocates as social change, including improving economic conditions, requires a deep understanding and commitment by a broad group of partners.

Example: Creating organizational practices that support low-wage workers²⁵

Futures Without Violence is working with employees and employers, community associations, and anti-violence advocates to develop workplace policies and trainings within low-wage industries where women, people of color, undocumented immigrants, and people of low income are overrepresented. Through the Low Wage, High Risk pilot site program, employers in retail, food service, hotel, homecare, and agricultural industries are catalyzing organizational change at sites in Immokalee, Florida; Towson, Maryland; and New York City. For example, in New York City, COLORS and Amali restaurants have instituted organizational policies to pay employees fair and living wages rather than subjecting workers to a tip-dependent system that increases reliance on tips and exposure to exploitation, discrimination, and sexual harassment. At the same time, together with their partners, these restaurants are promoting inclusive workplace cultures through practices and procedures related to safety and respect in the workplace and preventing gender-based violence. Workplace policies and practices to promote worker safety and economic security are critical in industries where extreme power differentials create openings for exploitation and abuse.²⁶ When workplaces support safety and fair wages, workers are better able to sustain their economic security, which is protective against partner violence.

Fostering Coalitions and Networks

Coalitions and networks of partners can leverage resources, gain greater access to decision-makers, and have broader visibility and reach than any single organization could attain on its own. Coalition-building is often a starting place and priority for many advocates as social change, including improving economic conditions, requires a deep understanding and commitment by a broad group of partners. Members of a coalition or network bring different approaches and unique strengths to the table, enabling the group to more comprehensively address economic security for partner violence prevention in their collective work. Having representation of practitioners in partner violence prevention and economic development brings together expertise that can better address and prevent factors that contribute to violence, including economic insecurity.

Example: Supporting economic security through the California Work and Family Coalition

The California Work and Family Coalition convenes a diverse group of legal experts, public health officials, community organizers, labor leaders and government representatives to advance state and regional work-family policies. This coalition has had several policy successes including leading the passage of California's groundbreaking paid family leave and paid sick leave laws. Bringing together partners who approach economic security from different angles, they can be able to dive deeper into areas like breastfeeding supports, anti-racism, immigration rights, caregiving and more. Most recently, the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence has brought a partner violence prevention lens to the coalition's work, specifically on increasing access to paid leave. See more details under "Promoting Community Education."

Example: Closing the Women's Wealth Gap Initiative²⁷

This initiative is a network of over 200 organizations working to advance practical strategies that build wealth among women with low-income levels and women of color. The network looks beyond addressing income inequality and instead broadens its view to

encompass closing wealth gap—considering women’s ability to save for college or a secure retirement, invest in a home or business or pass on funds to the next generation. Through working groups, the network mobilizes around policies, practices, research, and communications to strengthen economic security for women. They advocate for pay equity and paid leave policies, help women build credit scores, expand opportunities for women to buy homes and build home equity and more. While the network doesn’t explicitly frame their work around preventing violence, they are poised to address inequitable gender norms and promote women’s long-term economic self-sufficiency, which can support safe relationships.

Example: Addressing the gender wage gap in Wyoming

Wyoming consistently has one of the largest gender pay gaps in the United States, with women on average earning 64 cents for every dollar a man earns. Men whose highest level of education is a high school diploma earn more than women with a bachelor’s degree.^b The Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault is challenging the local narrative that the wage gap is a matter of “choice” and is employing a collective impact model to organize and advocate for pay equity. Together with the Wyoming Health Council, these organizations are acting as the backbone of the movement for pay equity, bringing together partners from across the state to organize around the common goal of closing the gender wage gap. The team in Wyoming is using a social network analysis to better understand connections and relationships each partner has and is determining next steps through the lens of shared risk and protective factors.

Educating Providers

Educating providers increases their capacity to champion partner violence prevention through their own work and networks. Providers, in this context, refer to anyone who can help support economic opportunities

for others, such as employers and workforce development agencies. It can also refer to other trusted individuals that community members interact with, such as faith leaders and teachers.

Example: Trainings for employers to improve workplace climate

STANDING FIRM engages employers in understanding their role in a community response to partner violence through organizational attention, policy development, trainings for staff, managers and human resources, and resource provision. These approaches have the potential to challenge norms that suggest partner violence is a private family matter by encouraging disclosure, normalizing help-seeking, and increasing tangible aid and social support to employees, thereby protecting against partner violence. In addition, these strategies can facilitate positive changes in workplace climate, increase feelings of safety, and reduce perceived tolerance of violence towards intimate partners among managers and employees in the workplace. STANDING FIRM makes the case that partner violence affects employers through staff performance and productivity, staff turnover, absenteeism, employee health, staff morale, and financial costs, such as medical care and mental health services. The organization offers a [Partner Violence Cost Calculator](#) to tabulate the financial costs for employers, and is deliberate about calling “domestic violence,” “partner violence” to remove the assumption that the burden is only felt at home.

Promoting Community Education

Community education provides information, resources, and skills to the public and/or specific sub-populations. Popular education and community organizing galvanize collective awareness and action on the conditions that shape people’s health, safety, and access to opportunity. Meaningful education and engagement build connections and self-determination—critical threads in the fabric of a healthy, resilient community. Education can range from making sure people know their rights

^b Connolly, C. (2016). The Wage Gap between Wyoming’s Men and Women. Retrieved September 28, 2017, from Wyoming Women’s Foundation [website](#)

and benefits in the workplace to organizing on what is missing at the policy level and informing efforts across the Spectrum of Prevention.

Example: Increasing the use of paid leave and other related benefits (parental, caregiving, sick, vacation, etc.) in California

Paid leave has been shown to reduce financial stress and associated relationship discord, improve egalitarian parenting practices, and support gender equity, as well as promote healthy bonding and development.²⁸ In California, paid leave and other related benefits exist, but lack of access and use of them is a prevailing issue. Employment Development Department data indicates that the lowest-wage groups use paid leave at lower rates than other earning groups. The California Coalition to End Domestic Violence is trying to increase awareness and use of paid leave and other related benefits among low-wage earners and immigrants and in communities with high rates of partner violence. In collaboration with the California Work and Family Coalition and Employment Development Department, they are developing a curriculum on how to cultivate behaviors that are at the core healthy relationships (e.g., healthy communication and respect), while addressing the role of work and family benefits. California Coalition to End Domestic Violence believes that domestic violence organizations are well-positioned in communities to address awareness and utilization of paid leave and also partner with other organizations and coalitions working toward the same goal.

Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills

Transferring information and know-how can help increase an individual's capacity for health and safety. Workforce development efforts that already focus on job skills and readiness could infuse existing trainings with content related to social-emotional skills, promotion of healthy norms and culture, workplace safety, and employee rights and responsibilities related to harassment and violence.

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Example: Pairing microfinancing with job skills training and discussions on gender norms

Family economic security can be enhanced for partner violence prevention by increasing access to loans for income-generating projects by groups most affected by partner violence such as women living in areas of concentrated poverty. In addition to this microfinancing strategy, other income and asset development efforts—such as providing support with earned income tax credit filing or financial management training—can also help improve economic security for families. Evidence shows that pairing microfinancing with job skills and entrepreneurship training, along with efforts to directly address social issues like gender norms, partner violence, and safer sex practices, can help decrease the incidence of partner violence.²⁹ A South African effort titled Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) found microfinance paired with specific training on gender norms and health improved indicators of empowerment and decreased the incidence of intimate partner violence by half in two years.³⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that these types of programs hold promise for partner violence prevention in the US context.³¹

A Path Forward

This brief offers a starting point for individuals interested in working at the intersection of violence prevention and economic security. Realizing the vision of family and community economic security through a partner violence prevention lens will require drawing clear connections between these issues and implementing comprehensive action across the Spectrum of Prevention. These actions necessitate collaborations between partner violence prevention practitioners, who bring a deep understanding of the issue, associated norms and groups most affected, and

Potential Partnerships



Together, it is possible to create environments in which people have wealth and economic security that can support healthy and safe relationships, families, and lives.

other sectors like economic and workforce development that understand the intricacies of economic policies and practices. Already, the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence and the California Work and Family Coalition are building efficiencies to work on improving access to paid leave benefits using this lens. In addition to joining existing coalitions or forming new partnerships, other initial steps groups can take include reviewing internal organizational policies and practices to assess how to better support safety at work and in the home and learning about policies and practices that are gaining traction locally that may increase economic opportunities among populations at a higher risk for partner violence. For efforts already underway to improve economic security, there are opportunities to evaluate these efforts from a health and safety perspective, in addition to tracking traditional indicators like employment rates. This can help build the evidence base connecting economic security and safe relationships and make that case that a good solution can solve multiple problems. Together, it is possible to create environments in which people have wealth and economic security that can support healthy and safe relationships, families, and lives.

Resources

[A Health Equity and Multisector Approach to Preventing Domestic Violence: Toward Community Environments that Support Safe Relationships in California](#): This report by Prevention Institute offers research, analysis, and frameworks to understand the factors in the community environment that support safe relationships and a reduction in domestic violence (DV). It identifies opportunities for 13 sectors to engage in DV prevention and offers a method for multiple sectors to identify joint strengths, strategies, and outcomes. The [accompanying brief](#) provides an overview of the Sectors Acting for Equity (SAFE) approach outlining the key elements of the approach and examples of communities applying the elements in their effort to prevent partner violence.

[Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices](#): This resource by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers the best available evidence to prevent intimate partner violence, including strategies to strengthen economic supports for families.

[Widening the Lens: The Bi-directional Pathways between Domestic Violence and Society Factors](#): This brief by JSI Research and Training Institute, Inc., synthesizes research on the relationships between domestic violence and economic instability, housing insecurity, and substance misuse.

[PreventConnect Web Conference Guest Profiles](#): These PreventConnect and Prevention Institute written profiles showcase what communities are doing to prevent sexual and domestic violence in their locales. The profiles highlight work to advance health equity, change alcohol environments, encourage participatory action in schools, support economic opportunity and more.

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Prevention Institute (PI) is a national nonprofit with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Our mission is to build prevention and health equity into key policies and actions at the federal, state, local, and organizational levels to ensure that the places where all people live, work, play and learn foster health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1997, we have partnered with communities, local government entities, foundations, multiple sectors, and public health agencies to bring cutting-edge research, practice, strategy, and analysis to the pressing health and safety concerns of the day. We have applied our approach to injury and violence prevention, healthy eating and active living, land use, health systems transformation, and mental health and wellbeing, among other issues.

The **Sectors Acting For Equity (SAFE) project** promotes community environments that support safe relationships in partnership with communities that are engaging community members and collaborating across sectors and social movements. To learn more about the SAFE approach, please visit www.preventioninstitute.org/projects/safe.

The **California Partnership to End Domestic Violence** (the Partnership) is California's recognized domestic violence coalition, representing over 1,000 survivors, advocates, organizations and allied individuals across the state. Working at the state and local levels for nearly 40 years, the Partnership has a long track record of successfully advocating for over 200 pieces of legislation on behalf of domestic violence victims and their children. The Partnership believes that by sharing expertise, advocates and legislators can help end domestic violence. Through our public policy, communications and capacity-building programs, we create system-wide change that supports survivors and invests in prevention. Every day we inspire, inform and connect all those concerned with this issue, because together we're stronger. With offices in Sacramento, the Partnership's member programs span the entire state. For more information, visit www.cpedv.org. To get involved in the Partnership's efforts to strengthen economic supports for families, contact Alejandra Aguilar (alejandra@cpedv.org).

The **California Work & Family Coalition** is a statewide alliance of community organizations, unions, non-profits, healthcare and advocacy organizations focused on winning and implementing policies that help families thrive. We are working toward a world where all people have the time, resources, and support systems to care for themselves and their families and lead happy, healthy, meaningful lives. We work on passing workplace laws through advocacy, education and organizing.



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