

Most Women Glad They Resisted

New study says 60% who fought back against attack think it helped

Chronicle Wire Services

Washington

More than 60 percent of women who fought back against an attacker, either with words or force, believe that their actions improved their situation, but experts warn that it is hard to tell when putting up a struggle is wise.

According to a U.S. Justice Department study released yesterday, about 23 percent of female respondents who resisted a rape, robbery or assault by arguing, reasoning or fighting back believed that self-protective behavior did not help their situation, and 16 percent were not sure.

The study also found that more than two-thirds of violent attacks against women in the United States are committed by someone the victim knew, substantially higher than the rate experienced by men.

Moreover, the number of women attacked by spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, parents or their children is more than 10 times the rate for men, according to 400,000 interviews conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics between 1987 and 1991. The bureau estimates that 2.5 million women a year are victims of violent crime.

Attorney General Janet Reno said the findings "underscore the importance of forceful and effective action against the scourge of domestic violence." She noted that the Senate-passed anti-crime bill would strengthen laws protecting women and expand federal grants to deal with the problem.

The National Organization for Women's Legal Defense Fund called the findings "atrocious, but not surprising."

Dead Women Not Included

But there were some criticisms of the findings, too. Dean Kilpatrick, director of the Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina, said that a small but important minority — the 5,000 or so women murdered in each of those five years — were not available to be asked whether they resisted their attackers.

"What if you knew more than 60 percent found resisting left them better off, 20 percent or so were worse off, but some were killed resisting? What would you do?" asked Kilpatrick, a professor of clinical psychology.

If the intent of the attacker is clearly to kill, a woman might as well resist, Kilpatrick said.

"But some sadomasochists are inflamed to greater violence by resistance," he said. "Broad generalizations are not useful."

Trend Toward Fighting Back

Kilpatrick and Diane Alexander, assistant director of the National Victims Center in Arlington, Va., agreed that the results of the

study support a trend in recent years away from uniformly advising women not to resist attacks.

The study found that 4 in 5 women took some protective action when their attacker was a relative or otherwise well-known to them; just under 3 out of 4 did so when an acquaintance or stranger attacked.

Women attacked by an intimate — a boy- or girlfriend, spouse or ex-spouse — were injured 59 percent of the time, compared with only 27 percent of the time when attacked by a stranger.

The report said the incidence of injury was reversed in the case of rape: Strangers caused injury far more often — 60 percent of the time — than intimates or relatives, who hurt their victims 43 percent of the time.

Kilpatrick said the survey grossly underestimates the incidence of family and acquaintance rape. The Justice Department estimates that 133,000 rapes occur a year; Kilpatrick, in a study adopted by the Senate Judiciary Committee last year, put the annual figure at 683,000.

The study analyzed data from cases in which there was a single assailant, which account for more than three-quarters of all attacks against women.