

# Spousal Violence and Alcohol/Drug Problems Among Parolees and Their Spouses

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**ABSTRACT.** The relationships of alcohol and drug problems to spousal violence for a sample of male parolees ( $n = 82$ ) and their spouses were investigated. Alcohol problems were present in 76%

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of the parolees and 56% of the spouses. Seventy three percent of the parolees and 40% of the spouses reported using some type of illegal drug on a regular basis. Both parolees and their spouses gave reports on his and her spousal violence. During the three months preceding the interviews, 78% of the parolees and 72% of the spouses perpetrated moderate violence; 33% of the parolees and 39% of the spouses perpetrated severe violence. Regression analyses revealed that his alcohol problems increased the level of his violence when there were no drug problems, and that either of their alcohol problems increased the level of his violence. Given the high rates of spousal violence and the interrelationships with alcohol/drug problems, intervention efforts aimed at addressing family violence are needed.

## INTRODUCTION

Popular culture views alcohol intoxication and alcoholism as one of the causes of family violence. With increased political and popular attention given to drug abuse, there has been a growing concern that family violence is related to patterns of drug abuse as well. The focus of this paper is the interrelationships between spousal violence and alcohol/drug problems for a sample of male criminal offenders and their spouses.

Within the last 10 years, a large body of descriptive data has been generated which suggests that alcohol use and/or intoxication may relate to spousal violence (Byles, 1978; Coleman & Straus, 1979; Hilberman & Munson, 1978; Leonard, Bromet, Parkinson, Day & Ryan, 1985; Van Hasselt, Morrison, & Bellak, 1985). Male batterers and their victims commonly report that the batterer had been drinking or was drunk during many of the abusive incidents (Chimbos, 1978; Gayford, 1975; Gelles, 1972; Nisonoff & Bitman, 1979; Pernanen, 1979). Other studies have assessed whether the male batterer had a drinking problem (Fagan, Stewart, & Hansen, 1983), or whether he was an alcoholic (Roy, 1982).

There has been relatively little information on the role of drugs on domestic violence. In conceptualizing the drug-violence nexus for drug users, Goldstein (1985) identified three major types of violence resulting from drug involvement: psychopharmacological, economic compulsive, and systemic violence. Psychopharmacologi-

cal effects of drugs on behavior may be identified in cases where the offender exhibits irrational, excitable behavior as a consequence of drug ingestion. While domestic violence may result from psychopharmacologic effects, some drug use may actually ameliorate violent tendencies. Economic compulsive violence occurs when the drug user engages in violent crimes to support costly drug use. This type of violence may emerge between spouses when drug users take money from the spouse; further, arguments between spouses about money could lead to violent altercations. Systemic violence refers to the traditionally aggressive patterns of interaction within the system of drug distribution and use. Examples are punishment for selling adulterated or phony drugs or elimination of informers. Domestic violence may be categorized as systemic violence in a limited fashion; for example, if a man discovers that his spouse has acted as an informer he may pursue violence to enforce and protect his operations.

While the majority of these investigations have focused on the batterer's use of substances, the victim's alcohol/drug problems need to be considered in assessing violence between couples (Eberle, 1982; Frieze & Knoble, 1980; Gelles, 1972; Gerson, 1978). Kantor and Straus (1986) reported that 46% of the severely assaulted women in their sample were drunk one or more times during the survey year, contrasted to 36% of the minor violence victims and 16% of the nonvictimized women. In a study comparing alcoholic women with a sample of women in the general population, alcoholic women were significantly more likely to experience spousal violence (Miller, Downs, & Gondoli, in press). Similar relationships between the victim's use of drugs and spousal violence have been found. In a study of drug users and distributors in New York City, Goldstein, Bellucci, Spunt, and Miller (1988) found that 20% of the female regular cocaine users and 31% of the moderate cocaine users experienced violence from a spouse or lover. In contrast, only 2% of the male regular cocaine users had experienced violence from a spouse or lover, while 7% of the male moderate users had experienced such violence. This suggests that female drug users may be at greater risk for spousal violence than male drug

users. Not only has alcohol/drug use of the victim been associated with a greater risk of spousal violence occurring, but also, a greater risk of frequency and duration of abuse, as well as an increased risk of serious injury (Fagan & Wexler, 1985).

While these studies suggest an interrelationship between alcohol/drug abuse and family violence, there are many problems with existing studies. First, varying definitions of alcohol/drug problems result in considerable difficulty in comparing findings across studies. Second, previous studies have relied heavily on clinical samples defined by their seeking intervention with regard to alcoholism or domestic violence. More attention needs to be given to specialized segments of the population which are at high risk for family violence but who do not seek treatment for family violence. Third, most studies have based their findings on the self-reports of battered women without collateral data. A fourth complication involves the variation in type of drugs used. Different drugs produce a wide range of physical, psychological, and social effects. Separate analyses of different drugs are difficult because of the small numbers of persons who may engage in different types of drug abuse, the combination of multiple substances by the drug abuser, and the unknown composition of street drugs. Further, the concomitant use of illegal drugs among heavy drinkers appears to be increasingly prevalent. In summary, there appear to be connections, in general, between alcohol/drug abuse and spousal violence. However, whether spousal violence is related to alcoholism, acute alcohol intoxication, drug abuse or specific drugs abused, or interactions among these substances is not clear.

This study focuses on the interrelationships between alcohol/drug abuse and domestic violence for a sample of 82 parolees and their spouses. Parolees represent a sample of offenders who have a wide range of criminal behavior (i.e., both violent and nonviolent crimes) and who reside in the community where domestic violence may take place. We hypothesized that those who had perpetrated a considerable amount of criminal violence would be at high risk for domestic violence. The types and extent of lifetime alcohol and drug abuse problems were identified in detail and obtained in identi-

cal fashion for both parolees and their spouses. The extent of spousal violence was determined by assessing different types of conflict between the couples. Further, by questioning both the parolees and their spouses regarding spousal violence, our study allows consideration of both the victim's and perpetrator's reports of violence.

## METHODS

### *Sample Selection and Contacting Procedure*

The analyses were based upon data collected for a larger study on the interrelationships between alcohol, drugs, criminal and domestic violence across three generations.<sup>1</sup> The subjects were selected from men on parole in Western New York in 1987 for nonviolent and violent offenses.<sup>2</sup> Most subjects (59%) were obtained from direct contact at the parole office. However, for parolees who did not make frequent office reports, letters describing the study were mailed (26% of sample) or handed to the parolee by the parole officer (15% of sample). Among parolees approached in a face-to-face contact, 86% were interviewed. Among parolees contacted through a letter, 41% were interviewed. From the known female partners of male parolees, 86% were interviewed.

To assess whether parolees who were and were not interviewed differed, information was collected from parolee records. There were no significant differences on race, marital or social living status, military history, previous incarcerations, previous revocations of parole/probation, drug/alcohol problems, or current offense variables (e.g., legal status at time, use of weapon or physical force, felony classification code). The one significant difference was that refusers were more likely to have had emotional problems.

A subsample of the larger study was used for the present analyses, consisting of 82 parolees and their spouses/partners.

### ***Instruments: Measures of Alcohol Problems, Drug Use, and Spousal Violence***

The measures for alcohol problems were taken from the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (Robins et al., 1981) and included questions required to make a diagnosis of alcohol dependence or alcohol abuse according to the DSM-III (APA, 1980). For the regression analyses presented in this paper, the number of lifetime drinking problems was considered appropriate as this variable provided interval data as compared to the categorical variable on alcohol diagnosis. Thus, the number of alcohol problems increased our power for detecting differences.<sup>3</sup>

Drug abuse was measured using questions derived from the *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1979* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1981). Questions determined the number of different types of illegal drugs used (i.e., heroin, barbiturates, amphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, LSD, PCP and other hallucinogens) and the frequency of usage over the lifetime. The number of different drugs used on a regular basis formed the drug problems index. Regular drug use was defined as weekly use of a substance for at least one month. However, all but five of the weekly users were also daily users.

Parolees and their spouses completed a revised version of the Conflict Tactics Scale [CTS] (Straus & Gelles, 1986; Kantor & Straus, 1986).<sup>4</sup> Each respondent was asked to report specific acts of moderate and severe physical violence that they had perpetrated or experienced within the past three months. In order to estimate violence not dependent on agreement between the couple, a couple report variable was created.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the couple report for parolee violence was formed by assessing whether either the parolee or the spouse reported any male violence. The couple report for spouse violence was formed in the same way.

Moderate and severe violence indices were formed from the specific items, following definitions by Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (1980) and Kantor and Straus (1986). Moderate violence items included the following: threw, smashed, hit or kicked something; threatened to hit or throw something at spouse; threw something at spouse; pushed, grabbed, or shoved spouse; slapped spouse. Severe

violence items included the following: kicked, bit, or hit with fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up; choked; burned or scalded; threatened to use knife or gun; used knife or gun; forced sex. Thus, the possible range was 0-5 for the moderate violence index and 0-8 for the severe violence index.

## RESULTS

### *Sample Characteristics*

*Demographics.* As indicated in Table 1, two-thirds (67%) of the parolees and 82% of the spouses in the sample were under 36 years of age. Half of the spouses and half of the parolees were black. Almost half (48%) of the parolees defined themselves as married, as opposed to cohabiting. Approximately one-quarter (29%) of the parolees and 38% of the spouses had less than a high school education. Nearly two-thirds of the parolees (61%) and spouses (65%) were unemployed, having neither a full- or part-time job. Nearly half (49%) could be described as in the lower socioeconomic status as defined by the Hollingshead Index (Hollingshead, 1975).

*Alcohol and drug problems.* Both parolees and their spouses were heavily involved in alcohol problems and illegal drug abuse. Approximately three-fourths of the parolees (76%) and over half of the spouses (56%) reported alcohol problems. Nearly three-fourths of the parolees (73%) and 40% of the spouses reported drug problems. The total number of different alcohol and drug problems reported by parolees and their spouses over their lifetime also revealed considerable problems. Parolees had an average of 5.09 (s.d. = 5.11) alcohol problems and 1.74 (s.d. = 1.65) drug problems. Spouses had a lower average of alcohol problems (2.44, s.d. = 3.22) and drug problems (0.60, s.d. = 0.93).

*Spousal violence.* Approximately three-fourths (78%) of the parolees and spouses (72%) exhibited some form of moderate violence toward their partner in the previous three months. Approximately one-third of the parolees (33%) and spouses (39%) had perpetrated some form of severe violence in the same time period. Five items from the moderate and eight items from the serious violence subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale were combined to form

TABLE 1. Demographics

	Parolees	Spouses
<b>Age</b>		
< 25 years	23%	38%
26-35 years	44%	44%
36+ years	33%	18%
<b>Race</b>		
Black	50%	50%
White	38%	42%
Hispanic	12%	6%
Other	-	2%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	48%	46%
Cohabiting	52%	54%
<b>Education</b>		
Some High School	29%	38%
High School degree	33%	18%
Trade School or some College	35%	40%
College Graduate	2%	4%
<b>Employment</b>		
Full or Part-time Job	39%	35%
Unemployed	61%	65%
<b>SocioEconomic Status</b>		
Lower	49%	49%
Lower Middle	40%	40%
Middle	6%	6%
Upper Middle	2%	2%
Upper	1%	1%

the physical violence index for our analyses, with a possible range of 0-13.<sup>6</sup> The total average number of physical violence items exhibited by parolees and spouses was slightly less than three (2.74 and 2.63 respectively). These scores were used as the dependent measures in the multiple regression analyses.

### ***Regression Analyses of Alcohol/Drug Abuse and Family Violence***

Multiple regression analyses were performed to predict parolee-to-spouse and spouse-to-parolee violence, using the total number of

violence items endorsed by the couple as the dependent variable. In our first multiple regression analysis, his violence to her was predicted, testing the main and interaction effects of his alcohol and his drug problems (see Table 2). Demographics (his age, his race, and socioeconomic status) were entered on the first step. Next the main effects of his alcohol and his drug problems were entered, followed by the interaction effect of his alcohol and his drug problems. Both age and the interaction of alcohol and drug problems were significant upon entering the equation. The final equation produced an adjusted  $R^2$  of .18.

The interaction between parolee alcohol and parolee drug problems was examined more closely following the procedure outlined by Cohen and Cohen (1983). In this procedure, the full equation is used to generate separate regression lines. The separate regression lines represent the predictor-criterion relationships at high (+ 1 SD)

TABLE 2. Parolee Alcohol and Drug Problems Predicting Parolee-to-Spouse Violence

	Multiple R	Increment in $R^2$	Entry Beta Weight	Final Beta Weight
<b>Covariates (Parolee's)</b>	.3995	.1596**		
Age			-.3205**	-.4399
Race			-.1762	-.2008
SES			-.1632	-.1680
<b>Parolee Substance Problems</b>	.4382	.0324		
Alcohol Problems			.1795	.5540
Drug Problems			.0599	.2600
<b>Interaction</b>	.5363	.0956		
Alcohol x Drug Problems			-.5810**	-.5810

**Overall Equation**

$R^2 = .2242$   
 Adj  $R^2 = .1786$   
 $F = 5.05, p = .0002$

\*\* $p < .01$

and low ( $-1$  SD) levels of the variables involved in the interaction. The resulting regression lines are shown in Figure 1. As illustrated, the most parolee-to-spouse violence occurred when the parolee scored high on alcohol problems but low on drug problems. Among drug abusers, alcohol had no influence. Thus, alcohol problems increased violence only in the absence of other drug abuse.

The next multiple regression analysis tested the main and interaction effects of spouse and parolee alcohol problems on his violence to her using the same stepwise procedure described above (see Table 3). Both age and the interaction of parolee and spouse alcohol problems were significant upon entering the equation. The overall equation produced an adjusted  $R^2$  of .19, similar to the equation with both his alcohol and his drug problems. The interaction effect was analyzed in the same manner as described previously (see Figure 2). For spouses with no alcohol problems, the number of parolees' alcohol problems significantly increased the amount of violence that spouses experienced. For spouses with alcohol problems, parolees' alcohol problems did not increase the violence. Overall,

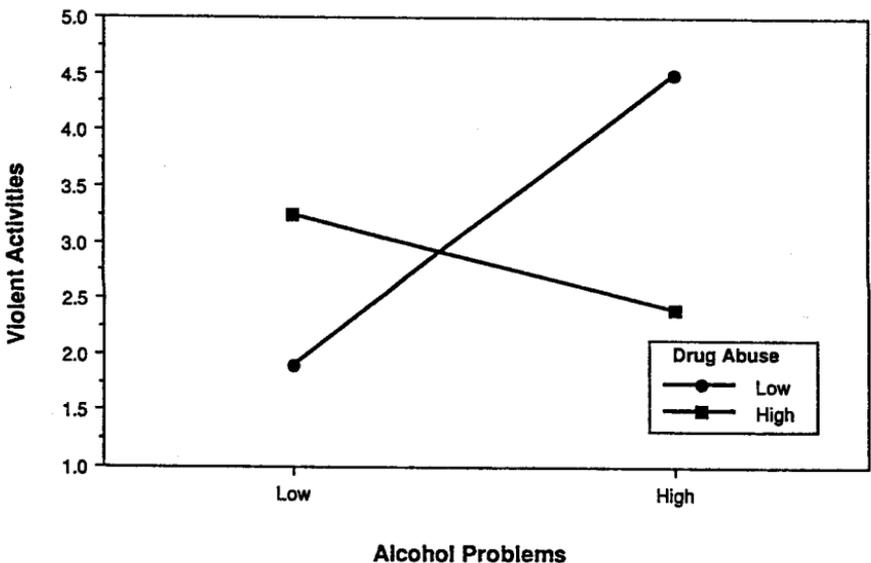


FIGURE 1. Parolee-to-Spouse Violence by Parolee Alcohol and Drug Abuse

TABLE 3. Parolee Alcohol and Drug Problems Predicting Parolee-to-Spouse Violence

	Multiple R	Increment in R <sup>2</sup>	Entry Beta Weight	Final Beta Weight
<b>Covariates (Parolee's)</b>	.3995	.1596		
Age			-.3205**	-.3535
Race			-.1762	-.2222
SES			-.1632	-.1350
<b>Parolee and Spouse Alcohol Problems</b>	.4349	.0295		
Parolee Alcohol Problems			.1820	.3892
Spouse Alcohol Problems			.0150	.3015
<b>Interaction</b>	.4981	.0590		
Parolee x Spouse Alcohol			-.4455*	-.4555
<b>Overall Equation</b>				
R <sup>2</sup> = .2481				
Adj R <sup>2</sup> = .1880				
F = 4.125, p = .0012				

\*p < .05  
\*\*p < .01

when either or both had alcohol problems, violence increased as compared to when neither partner had alcohol problems.

Neither the main nor interaction effects of parolee and spouse drug abuse contributed significantly to the equation for predicting his violence to her. Further, neither the main nor interaction effects of her drug and her alcohol problems were significant in predicting his violence to her.<sup>7</sup> Main and/or interaction effects for alcohol/drug problems only predicted his violence to her and did not predict her violence to him.

We hypothesized that combining all drugs under one drug problem score might diminish the importance of individual types of drugs to spousal violence. For three drug categories (heroin, cocaine, marijuana) there were sufficient numbers of abusers identified to allow separate regression analyses following the procedures

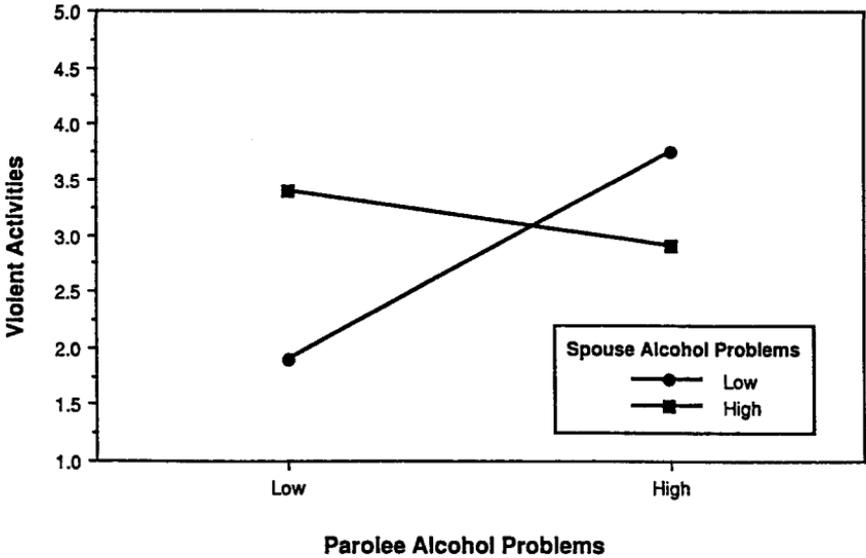


FIGURE 2. Parolee-to-Spouse Violence by Parolee and Spouse Alcohol Problems

outlined for all drugs. The findings from the separate drugs were virtually the same as for all drugs combined.

### IMPLICATIONS

Both parolees and their spouses reported considerable numbers of alcohol and drug problems. Previous literature has indicated high levels of drug and alcohol abuse among the offender populations (Miller & Welte, 1987). Less information has been provided about the drug and alcohol problems of spouses of offenders. Our data clearly indicate that these problems were evident in the immediate family and suggest that efforts to intervene with the alcohol/drug problems of offenders might be more successful if spouses were involved in treatment as well.

The amount of spousal violence reported by the parolees and their spouses was quite high. One-third of the parolees reported severe violence to their spouses in the previous three months. In

comparison, nationwide survey data have indicated that only 3.0% of the husbands reported perpetrating some form of severe violence towards their spouses in a given year (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Over one-third of the spouses reported engaging in acts of severe violence towards their spouses during the previous three months. In comparison, 4.4% of the wives in the same nationwide survey engaged in severe violence to their spouses in a year (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Clearly, the levels of family violence were extraordinarily high in this sample of parolees and their spouses, indicating that this is a high risk population for spousal violence.

The regression analyses indicated that the relationships between alcohol/drug problems and spousal violence are not simple relationships. The interactions of drug and alcohol problems and the interaction of victim/perpetrators' alcohol problems were critical to understanding these interrelationships. When parolees reported no drug problems, alcohol problems increased the level of violence. However, alcohol problems did not increase the level of violence when the parolee engaged in drug problems. One possible explanation is that drug use may have ameliorated the violence that was associated with alcohol problems. In a similar vein, it may be that combined alcohol and drug abuse could lead to a situation where the individual is incapable of responding aggressively. Coleman and Straus (1979) reported a decline in domestic violence among men who were almost always drunk, possibly for a similar reason. Additionally, the spouse of a combined alcohol/drug abuser may avoid any confrontations or conflicts, since any productive communication may be futile, thereby reducing the domestic violence. Other variables not collected in this study should also be considered. The context in which the drugs were taken might have offered further insight into these relationships. Perhaps there was more likely to be concomitant alcohol use between parolees and spouses than concomitant drug use, which again might have affected the outcome of the behavior.

The interrelationships between spouses' and parolees' alcohol use and spousal violence, offered further illumination of the complexities. From these analyses, alcohol problems by either member appears to have increased the level of violence. Again, there are

several potential explanations. Alcohol problems, in one or both, could serve as an additional family stress, heightening the conflict in the couple. Lifetime alcohol problems may serve as a marker indicating that when the couple is interacting, one or the other of the members or both is likely to be intoxicated. Intoxication has been hypothesized to affect marital interactions in such a way as to produce intense conflict, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence (Leonard & Jacob, 1988).

Further study is needed to identify the role of alcohol/drug abuse in the actual incidents of spousal violence. We have focused on lifetime drug and alcohol problems and the current level of spousal violence. Thus, our measures of drug and alcohol problems extend beyond those of our spousal violence. There may have been insufficient time in the relationships or since incarceration for the highest levels of family violence to emerge.

This study adds to the growing body of literature that addresses the interrelationships between alcohol/drugs and family violence. Parolees appear to be an especially high risk group for family violence. Alcohol/drug problems are prevalent in this group as well. Intervention strategies for family violence should be implemented that address the drug and alcohol problems of both partners. Finally, this study has demonstrated the need for subsequent research to address the interactions between alcohol and drugs in influencing the family violence scenario.

## NOTES

1. Blane, H.T., Miller, B.A., Leonard, K.E., Nochajski, T.H., Bowers, P.M., & Gondoli, D. *Intra- and Inter-Generational Aspects of Serious Domestic Violence and Alcohol and Drugs*. (National Institute of Justice Grant No. 86-IJ-CX-0035). Report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, December, 1988.

2. We defined violent offenses to include crimes such as murder, manslaughter, robbery, arson, assault, rape, sodomy, sexual abuse, and sexual assault and nonviolent offenses to include crimes such as burglary, grand larceny, petit larceny, forgery, car theft, and criminal possession of stolen property. Some individuals' most recent crimes did not clearly fit within the violent or nonviolent categories (e.g., youthful offender, DWI, reckless endangerment, possession of a weapon with no other associated offenses, possession or sale of illegal drugs) and these individuals were excluded from our sample.

3. The items that comprise the alcohol problems index were as follows: family objections to drinking too much; think you're an excessive drinker; drink a fifth of liquor in one day; drink at least 7 drinks/day for 2 weeks; friends/others tell you you drink too much; wanted to stop but couldn't; make promises to control drinking; job or school troubles; lose a job; trouble driving because of drinking; arrested for drinking; gotten into fights while drinking; gone on binges or benders; neglected responsibilities while on benders; blackouts while drinking; need a drink when waking up; had the shakes after stopping/cutting down; had fits/seizures after stopping/cutting down; had D.T.'s when quit drinking; seen/heard things not there after cutting down; drank with a serious illness; need a drink to do well.

4. The present study used an updated version of the spouse form of the CTS. A description of this updated version can be found in Kantor and Straus (1986), and differs from the original spouse form of the CTS (see Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980), by the addition of "choked." We added "burned or scalded" to our spouse form, an item that Gelles and Straus (1985) have recently added to their parent-to-child form only. In addition, we added three items to our spouse form, independent of Straus et al. revisions. These items were: threatened to abandon you, threatened your life in some manner, and forced sex.

5. Since both the parolee's and his spouse's reports were available for both her and his violence, analyses were completed to examine the rate of agreement between their reports. Previous research has found that most of the agreement in couple reports of violence was due to couples who report no violence (Jouriles & O'Leary, 1985). Occurrence agreement, which is calculated after excluding the cases which agreed there was no violence, allows for the assessment of agreement among those couples in which at least one partner reported violence. Comparing both his and her reports of the parolees' moderate and severe violence to the spouse, the occurrence agreement rate was 59% and 19%, respectively. Comparing both his and her reports of the spouses' moderate and severe violence to the parolee, the occurrence agreement rate was 45% and 22% respectively. While not high, the rates of occurrence agreement in our sample were similar to the rates of agreement found in other studies of conflict in marital relationships (e.g., Jouriles & O'Leary, 1985).

6. The rationale for aggregating the severe and moderate violence subscales into an overall violence subscale is from Straus and Gelles (1986). Also, the correlations between the moderate and severe violence subscales were relatively high ( $r = .612$  for parolee-to-spouse; and  $r = .677$  for spouse to parolee).

7. We also examined whether the main or interaction effects were different for his or her drug or alcohol problems when her violence to him was controlled. We found that the same main and interaction effects were significant. However, we did not retain her violence to him as one of the independent variables because to do so, would imply that we considered her violence to precede his violence. Indications were that high correlations between his and her violence were indicative of reciprocal violence.

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