

Why GAO Did This Study

Research has found brain injuries to be common among victims of intimate partner violence, and that such injuries are under-diagnosed and under-treated.

House Report 115-952 included a provision for GAO to report on the relationship between intimate partner violence and brain injuries. GAO (1) describes efforts to provide education, screen for, or treat brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence; and (2) examines what is known about the prevalence of brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence, including HHS efforts to determine prevalence. GAO reviewed peer-reviewed literature, federal websites, and documentation from HHS and DOJ. GAO also interviewed officials from HHS, DOJ, and 11 non-federal stakeholders, such as domestic violence organizations. GAO identified 12 initiatives, though this list may not be exhaustive, and conducted site visits to three of them.

What GAO Recommends

HHS should develop and implement a plan to improve data collected on the prevalence of brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence and use these data to inform its allocation of resources to address the issue. HHS concurred with our recommendation and is coordinating with its agencies to augment data collection.

View [GAO-20-534](#). For more information, contact Carolyn L. Yocom at (202) 512-7114 or yocomc@gao.gov.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Improved Data Needed to Identify the Prevalence of Brain Injuries among Victims

What GAO Found

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in three adults have experienced domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression. Victims of intimate partner violence may experience brain injury, resulting from blows to the head or strangulation. To address this issue, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) provide grants to state and local entities that work with victims.

GAO identified 12 non-federal initiatives that provide education, screen for, or treat brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence. All 12 developed and distributed education and training materials to domestic violence shelter staff, victims, health care providers, and others. Six of the 12 initiatives used screening tools to identify potential brain injuries among intimate partner violence victims, and two included a treatment component. Additionally, eight of the 12 initiatives received HHS or DOJ grant funding, although agency officials told us the funding had no specific requirements to address brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence.

Excerpt of Educational Materials from Ohio Domestic Violence Network

HAS YOUR HEAD BEEN HURT?
It can affect your life in many different ways. Rest and time help, but you might need additional care, especially if your head has been hurt more than once.

Has your partner...

- Hit you in the face, neck or head?
- Tried to choke or strangle you?
- Made you fall and you hit your head?
- Shaken you severely?
- Done something that made you had trouble breathing or black out?

Are you having physical problems?

- Headaches?
- Fatigue, feeling dazed, confused, or in a fog?
- Changes in your vision?
- Ringing in your ears?
- Dizziness or balance problems?
- Seizures?
- Pain in your head, face or neck?

Are you having trouble...

- Remembering things?
- Paying attention or focusing?
- Getting things done?
- Organizing things?
- Following conversations?
- Feeling motivated?
- Controlling your emotions?

IF YOU SAID YES, YOU MIGHT HAVE A HEAD INJURY.

Source: Ohio Domestic Violence Network. | GAO-20-534

Based on its review of the literature, as well as interviews with HHS officials and other non-federal stakeholders, GAO found that data on the overall prevalence of brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence are limited. HHS officials acknowledged that the lack of data on the prevalence of these issues is a challenge in addressing the intersection of the issues. However, HHS does not have a plan for how it would collect better prevalence data. HHS agencies have some related efforts underway; however, the efforts are limited and generally do not examine the connection between brain injuries and intimate partner violence. Enhancing the health and well-being of Americans is critical to HHS's public health mission. As part of this mission, CDC, within HHS, uses its Public Health Approach, which includes collecting prevalence data to understand the magnitude of public health issues.

With better data comes a better understanding of the overall prevalence of brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence. This, in turn, could help ensure that federal resources are allocated to the appropriate areas and used as efficiently and effectively as possible to address this public health issue.