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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Impact and Prevalence of Domestic Violence: Evidence from a Victim Support Service within a Higher Education Institution

Authors' Contribution:
A – Study design;
B – Data collection;
C – Statistical analysis;
D – Data interpretation;
E – Manuscript preparation;
F – Literature search;
G – Funds collection

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Abstract

Background and Aim of Study: *Domestic violence constitutes a serious public health problem, manifesting itself through various forms of abuse, namely physical, psychological, sexual, and economic, affecting people of any age or gender.*
The aim of the study: to characterize violence in intimate relationships in a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area based on the sociodemographic profile of victims assisted by a specialized service, as well as on the characteristics of the violence, the perpetrators, and the criminal proceedings.

Material and Methods: *This quantitative, descriptive, and retrospective study based on the procedural analysis of 206 cases assisted by the Integrated Victim Support Service (SAIV) in a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area between 2022 and 2025. Sociodemographic variables, characteristics of the violence, and data regarding perpetrators and criminal proceedings were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (version 27).*

Results: *The results showed that most victims are female (93.7%), with a mean age of 45.3 years. Violence in intimate relationships is predominantly ongoing (99.5%), with multiple forms of violence being predominant (78.2%), particularly physical and psychological violence. A high prevalence of psychological symptoms was also observed, namely anxiety (25.7%), depression (20.4%), and sleep disorders (15.5%). Perpetrators are predominantly male (93.2%), with an average age of 47.05 years, and a notable prevalence of illicit substance use (64.6%).*

Conclusions: *The data obtained highlight the complexity and multidimensionality of violence in intimate relationships, as well as its significant impact on the mental health of victims, reinforcing the need for integrated and locally adapted responses.*

Keywords: *perpetrator, domestic violence, municipality, cases, victim.*

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Introduction

Violence is, according to the World Health Organization (2002), a serious global public health problem and can be defined as a set of acts that may result in physical, psychological, economic, or sexual harm, with a significant impact on the health and mortality of victims (Oliveira et al., 2023; Olivine, 2022; Uvelli et al., 2024). Violence against women is defined by the United Nations as any act based on gender that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering, including threats, coercion, or deprivation of liberty, occurring in both the public and private spheres (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). In this context, the World Health Organization emphasizes that domestic violence constitutes a violation of human rights and a public health problem, requiring multisectoral responses.

This research focuses on violence in intimate relationships, a concept that refers to interpersonal violence between current or former partners, regardless of the gender of the individuals involved, allowing for a relational and contextual analysis of the phenomenon.

Its epidemiological significance is substantial, with estimates indicating that approximately one in three women and one in four men experience violence over the course of their lives (World Health Organization, 2024), highlighting the need for a gender-neutral approach.

Scientific evidence points to the multifactorial nature of violence in intimate relationships, resulting from the interaction between individual, relational, and sociocultural determinants. Among the main associated factors are early exposure to violence, the intergenerational transmission of abusive patterns, mental disorders, substance use, and the influence of sociocultural norms that reinforce gender inequalities. In contexts marked by more rigid patriarchal structures, violence tends to be more normalized and less reported, perpetuating cycles of violence (Cortez & Sousa, 2010; Oliveira, 2015).

The consequences of violence in intimate relationships are extensive and cut across different dimensions of health, including physical, psychological, and socioeconomic impacts. In addition to physical injuries, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder are common, as are economic consequences associated with loss of autonomy, financial dependence, and costs related to healthcare and therapeutic support (Cassado et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2018). In more severe cases, prolonged suffering may be associated with suicidal behavior.

In Portugal, domestic violence is a public offense under Article 152 of the Penal Code, allowing any citizen to file a complaint and enabling the Public Prosecutor's Office to take action regardless of the victim's wishes. Data from the Annual Internal Security Report (Rede de Apoio às Vítimas e Sobreviventes de Violência Doméstica, 2023) highlight the persistence and significance of this phenomenon, with a high incidence in intimate relationships and a predominance of female victims.

Despite extensive research in this area, gaps remain in the literature, notably a scarcity of studies that analyze, in a local context and among populations supported by specialized services, the relationship between the sociodemographic profile of victims, the characteristics of the violence, the profile of perpetrators, and their exposure to the crime in an integrated manner.

What are the sociodemographic, contextual, and criminal characteristics associated with cases of intimate partner violence recorded in a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area between 2022 and 2025?

The aim of the study. To characterize cases of intimate partner violence recorded in a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area, based on an analysis of the sociodemographic profile of victims, the characteristics of the violence, the perpetrators, and the criminal proceedings.

Materials and Methods

An observational, retrospective, and quantitative study was conducted, based on a documentary analysis of case files of victims of intimate partner violence.

The study was conducted in the Porto Metropolitan Area, with the target population consisting of cases monitored by the Integrated Victim Support Service (SAIV) of a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area, specifically through the services of CESPU and the City Council. The cases analyzed corresponded to victims of intimate partner violence assisted between 2022 and 2025, including ongoing, active, and closed cases.

The sample consisted of 206 cases of victims of intimate partner violence aged 18 or older, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling based on the accessibility of the files available during the data collection period. Cases lacking essential information for coding the variables under study were excluded.

Data collection took place between May and July 2025 through direct documentary analysis of the ongoing cases. Data extraction was performed by one of the researchers using a predefined structured guide for coding the variables. The data were recorded in Microsoft Excel and subsequently transferred to IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27 for Mac) for statistical analysis. Missing data were retained as missing values and treated as non-responses in the statistical analysis. No data imputation was performed.

The statistical analysis was descriptive; no inferential tests were performed. Absolute and relative frequencies were used for categorical variables, and measures of central tendency (mean) and dispersion (standard deviation) were used for continuous variables.

The study obtained institutional approval from the two units of the Integrated Victim Support Service (SAIV) in the municipality under study, and access to the case files was authorized. The data were anonymized during the collection phase, coded, and stored in a secure file, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with ethical principles of personal data protection.

This study may be subject to potential biases, namely registration bias, arising from the information available in the case files, institutional bias associated with the context of data collection, and underreporting of information, which is frequently present in situations of intimate partner violence.

Results

Characterization of Victims

The sample consisted of N=206 case files of victims of intimate partner violence assisted by the Integrated Victim Support Service located in a municipality within the Porto Metropolitan Area between 2022 and 2025. The Table 1 presents the main sociodemographic characteristics of victims.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Victims (N=206)

Variable	Frequency	
	Person	Percentage
Gender		
- Female	193	93,7
- Male	13	6.3
Residence (Municipality)	194	94.2
Nationality (Portuguese)	199	96.6
Marital status		
- Divorced	73	35.4
- Single	56	97.2
- Married	45	21.8
Employment		
- Employed	91	44.2
- Unemployed	34	16.5
Income (Salary)	87	42.2

Note. Missing data were excluded from percentage calculations.

There was a predominance of females (93.7%) over males (6.3%). The average age of the victims was 45.26 years (SD=14.28).

Regarding household size, an average of 2.77 people per household (SD=1.21), with an average of 0.82 minors (SD=0.92).

Regarding area of residence, the majority of victims resided in the municipality of the study area (94.2%), with the remaining cases distributed across other municipalities.

Regarding nationality, Portuguese nationals predominated (96.6%), with the remaining nationalities being residual.

Regarding marital status, there is a higher prevalence of divorced individuals (35.4%), followed by single (27.2%) and married (21.8%) individuals, with 10.2% of cases having no recorded information.

Regarding educational attainment, a high proportion of cases lack recorded information (75.7%). Among cases with available information, secondary education (10th to 12th grade) stands out (10.2%).

Regarding employment status, 44.2% of victims are employed, 16.5% are unemployed, 6.3% are retired, 1.5% are students, 1.0% are self-employed, and 0.5% are on sick leave. There are also 30.1% of cases with no response.

Regarding sources of income, the main source of livelihood is wages (42.2%), followed by social assistance (19.9%). In 30.6% of cases, no information is available.

Regarding the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, current or former intimate relationships predominate, notably ex-spouses (26.7%), spouses (24.3%), ex-partners (23.3%), and partners (8.7%). Family relationships and other forms of closeness are also recorded, although to a lesser extent.

Characterization of Violence

The majority of cases involve situations of ongoing violence (99.5%). Regarding the type of violence, multiple forms of violence predominate (78.2%), followed by psychological/verbal violence (13.1%), physical violence (2.9%), sexual violence (0.5%), and economic violence (0.5%).

The use of weapons was identified in 5.3% of cases. Regarding the location of the incident, the shared residence stands out (79.1%). With regard to reporting, 91.7% of victims filed a formal complaint (Table 2).

Table 2

Characteristics of Violence (N=206)

Variable	Frequency	
	Person	Percentage
Ongoing violence (Yes)	205	99.5
Violence		
- Multiple	161	78.2
- Psychological/verbal	27	13.1
- Physical	6	2.9
- Sexual	1	0.5
Weapon use (Yes)	11	5.3
Shared residence	163	79.1
Complaint filed (Yes)	189	91.7

Characteristics of First Contact with Services

The first contact with SAIV was mostly in person (97.6%). All cases were reported by the victim themselves. Regarding referrals, 46.6% of cases did not result in any coordination with other entities. Among the remaining cases, referrals for psychological support (12.6%) and to the Commission for Protection to Child Abuse (6.3%) were most common. Regarding the progress of cases, 54.9% remained active, while 45.1% were closed. Table 3 presents the characteristics of the first contact with the Victim Support Service.

Table 3

First Contact and Case Management Characteristics (N=206)

Variable	Frequency	
	Person	Percentage
Contact type (in person)	201	97.6
Referral		
- None	96	46.6
- Psychological support	26	12.6
Case status		
- Active	113	54.9
- Closed	93	45.1

Note. Some categories are not mutually exclusive due to multiple referral types per case.

Characteristics of the Perpetrator

Regarding the gender of the perpetrator, males predominated (93.2%), with a mean age of 47.05 years (SD=11.69).

Table 4 presents the main characteristics of the perpetrator.

Most perpetrators reside in the municipality of the study area (40.3%), although there is a distribution across other municipalities and countries. In 51.9% of cases, no information is available.

Regarding nationality, perpetrators of Portuguese nationality predominate (95.5%), with the remaining nationalities being residual.

Regarding marital status, there is a higher prevalence of single individuals (27.2%), married individuals (22.8%), and those married but in the process of divorce (2.9%), with 13.6% having no information available.

Regarding cohabitation with the victim, 27.7% lived with the victim, while 66.0% did not.

Regarding educational attainment, there is a high proportion of missing information (92.2%). Among cases with available data, primary and secondary education levels predominate.

Regarding employment status, 15.5% are employed, 2.9% are unemployed, 4.4% are retired, and 0.5% are on medical leave, with 76.7% lacking information.

Regarding substance use disorders, 20.4% have an alcohol dependence, 64.6% have an illicit substance dependence, and 4.4% have a dependence on multiple substances. Additionally, 7.8% have a mental disorder.

Regarding access to firearms, 3.9% of cases indicate positive access.

Regarding criminal history, 6.8% have a history of domestic violence, 2.9% have a history of other crimes, and 80.6% have no criminal history.

Table 4

Characteristics of Perpetrators (N=206)

Variable	Frequency	
	Person	Percentage
Gender (Male)	192	93.2
Cohabitation (No)	136	66.0
Dependence		
- Alcohol	42	20.4
- Illicit substance	133	64.6
Criminal history (None)	166	80.6
Firearm access (Yes)	8	3.9

Note. Missing data are present in several variables and may affect.

Criminal Case Characteristics

Regarding the characterization of the criminal proceedings (N=206), it was found that electronic monitoring was applied in 25.7% of cases, while in 72.8% it was not implemented.

Regarding the provisional suspension of proceedings, this occurred in 3.4% of cases and was not applied in the majority (93.7%).

Regarding coercive measures, they were applied in 16.5% of the cases, while in 34.5% they were not applied, and in 49.0% no information is available.

As for the judicial outcome, 13.1% of cases resulted in the defendant's conviction, 9.7% did not result in a conviction, and 8.7% were still pending trial, with 68.4% of cases lacking updated information.

Finally, regarding the imposition of ancillary sanctions, these were not imposed in 81.1% of cases, while in 18.9% no information was recorded.

The characterization of the criminal case is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Judicial and Procedural Characteristics (N=206)

Variable	Frequency	
	Person	Percentage
Electronic monitoring (Yes)	53	25.7
Provisional suspension (Yes)	7	3.4
Coercive measures (Yes)	34	16.5
Conviction (Yes)	27	13.1
Case pending	18	8.0

Note. Large proportion of missing or pending judicial information.

Associations between Variables

To explore descriptive patterns among relevant variables, we analyzed possible relationships between different dimensions of the study.

Regarding the relationship between the perpetrator's gender and the type of violence committed, a predominance of psychological/verbal violence and multiple forms of violence associated with male perpetrators was observed.

Regarding the presence of minors in the household and the continuity of violence, it was found that ongoing violence is present in nearly all of the cases analyzed, regardless of the household composition. However, it is observed that households with minors tend to be associated with more complex contexts of violence.

Regarding the relationship between the victim's marital status and the type of violence, it is observed that situations of multiple violence are predominant across all marital statuses analyzed, with particular emphasis on divorced and married individuals.

Discussion

Given the objectives of this study, the results obtained allow for a comprehensive understanding of violence in intimate relationships within a municipal context in the Porto Metropolitan Area, revealing patterns consistent with national and international literature, but also contextual specificities that must be considered.

Overall, the data indicate a predominant pattern of violence perpetrated by males against females in the context of current or past intimate relationships, with a high prevalence of ongoing violence and multiple forms of abuse. This pattern suggests that the intimate partner violence analyzed does not correspond to isolated

episodes, but rather to prolonged relational processes, often marked by dynamics of control and dependency.

The predominance of female victims is consistent with national data from RASI (Rede de Apoio às Vítimas e Sobreviventes de Violência Doméstica, 2023) and with the international literature, which identifies women as the primary group affected by violence in intimate relationships. This pattern has been linked to structural gender inequalities and the persistence of patriarchal social norms that perpetuate asymmetrical power relations (García-Moreno et al., 2020).

The concentration of cases in the middle-aged adult group suggests that intimate partner violence frequently occurs during life stages associated with family, economic, and parenting responsibilities, which can make it difficult to break the cycle of violence. Nevertheless, these data should be interpreted descriptively and do not allow for the inference of causal relationships.

Regarding socioeconomic conditions, the results indicate a diversity of employment situations and sources of income, data that align with those from the Commission on Citizenship and Gender Equality (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género, 2024; 2025), which demonstrates that violence in intimate relationships spans different social strata. However, dependence on social assistance and situations of economic fragility can act as factors of increased vulnerability, limiting victims' autonomy and hindering the process of ending the relationship.

Regarding the mental health of victims, there is a high incidence of anxiety and depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances, and suicidal ideation. These findings reinforce the scientific evidence that violence in intimate relationships has profound and lasting impacts on the mental health of victims (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima, 2025; World Health Organization, 2023). Furthermore, these data suggest that violence should not be understood solely as a criminal problem, but also as a public health issue, requiring multidisciplinary responses.

As for perpetrators, the predominance of males and the significant prevalence of alcohol and illicit substance use should be interpreted with caution. Although the literature associates these factors with an increased risk of aggressive behavior, they should not be considered direct causes, but rather elements that can exacerbate situations of violence in contexts already marked by power inequalities and coercive control (Dutton, 2007; Tur-Prats, 2021). The average age of perpetrators, falling within working-age adulthood, reinforces the relational and prolonged nature of the violence.

A relevant aspect is the ongoing nature of the violence and its occurrence primarily within the shared domestic space. This pattern highlights the centrality of the private sphere in the production and maintenance of violence, which contributes to its invisible nature and to the difficulty of reporting and breaking the cycle of abuse. For this reason, domestic violence can be understood as a phenomenon deeply rooted in the daily lives of victims.

The high reporting rate observed in this study may reflect not only the severity of the cases but also the proximity and accessibility of SAIV structures in the area under analysis, which may facilitate the formal reporting of incidents. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that underreporting remains a structural problem in this type of crime, so these results should be interpreted with caution (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).

When compared with national data from RASI (Rede de Apoio às Vítimas e Sobreviventes de Violência Doméstica, 2023), the results obtained are generally consistent regarding the predominance of female victims and the centrality of domestic violence. However, the high concentration of cases in a single municipality should be interpreted in light of local specificities. This pattern may reflect not only a potentially higher incidence but also factors such as the greater effectiveness of local reporting and follow-up structures, as well as the institutional proximity of support services. Thus, the results may also reflect a reporting bias associated with the institutional capacity of the region, rather than an absolute difference in the prevalence of violence. From a socio-territorial perspective, it is important to consider that economic dynamics, family networks, and characteristics of the social fabric of the Porto Metropolitan Area may influence both the occurrence and visibility of cases of violence in intimate relationships, reinforcing the importance of contextualized and territorially situated analyses. This study has several limitations that must be explicitly acknowledged. First, this is an analysis based on secondary data from institutional records, which implies dependence on the quality and completeness of the existing records. Of particular note is the high non-response rate for key variables, such as educational attainment (75.7%), which significantly limits the analysis of social determinants of violence. Additionally, the absence of standardized data collection and the lack of double validation of the data may introduce recording bias. Another relevant aspect is the study's geographical restriction to a single municipality, which limits the generalizability of the results. The absence of data on individuals under 18 is also a significant limitation, as it obscures a potentially relevant dimension of violence in intimate relationships. Finally, it is important to consider the possibility of underreporting and institutional bias, given that the data reflect only the cases recorded and monitored by the structures analyzed, and may not represent the full reality of violence in intimate relationships in the region. In summary, this study provides a characterization of intimate partner violence within a specific municipal context, revealing patterns consistent with the literature while also highlighting the importance of territorial, institutional, and structural factors in understanding the phenomenon. The results reinforce the need for integrated interventions that coordinate social, judicial, and health responses, as well as the strengthening of public policies for prevention and protection at the local level.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that intimate partner violence in a municipality in the Porto Metropolitan Area is a persistent, complex phenomenon with significant impacts at the individual, family, and social levels. The predominance of situations of ongoing and multiple violence reinforces the understanding of violence in intimate relationships as a prolonged process of violence, sustained by dynamics of power, dependency, and coercive control.

In this context, the findings reinforce the need for an integrated and coordinated response across different levels of intervention—namely social services, health, and justice—adopting an approach focused not only on protecting the victim but also on preventing recidivism and intervening within the family context. Evidence of children's and adolescents' exposure to domestic violence further underscores the importance of intergenerational preventive strategies, given the emotional and behavioral impacts of such exposure (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017).

The results obtained also have direct implications for the formulation of local public policies. In particular, they reinforce the importance of strengthening the existing response network in the municipality, specifically by improving the accessibility and continuity of SAIV services, creating faster emergency responses, and ensuring effective coordination with other entities in the intersectoral network.

Additionally, the data suggest the importance of investing in community prevention strategies and public awareness campaigns, with the aim of increasing social literacy regarding violence in intimate relationships, reducing the normalization of violence, and strengthening the capacity for early identification of at-risk situations.

It is important to acknowledge that this study has limitations associated with the use of secondary data, the geographical scope, and the presence of underreporting and missing data on key variables, which limit the depth and generalizability of the results.

Despite of these limitations, this study provides relevant insights into intimate partner violence within a specific municipal context and may serve as a useful foundation for developing local public policies and intervention strategies better tailored to the local reality. Incorporating these findings into the design of responses by the intersectoral network could contribute to more effective, preventive actions focused on protecting victims.

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Ethical Approval

All ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants were strictly observed, particularly those related to confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of personal data. Prior authorization was obtained from the relevant institutions before access to the records was granted. The analysis of the records was conducted following informed consent procedures, and all collected information was coded to ensure participant anonymity and data confidentiality. Throughout all stages of the study, legal requirements concerning personal data protection were fully respected, in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 (General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR), as well as all applicable national legislation.

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