

Graham Tops Counties for Those Charged With Domestic Violence Violations in North Carolina

By Corinne Gretler

Myth: Domestic violence is a personal problem between a husband and a wife. Fact: Domestic violence affects everyone. According to the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence Web site, every third American woman has been physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in her life. In addition to that, 40 percent to 60 percent of men who abuse women also abuse children.

And the numbers have been rising in North Carolina. 2008 is an especially bad year for domestic violence in the state. With 72 domestic violence homicides up until just the third quarter of this year, the number of victims is rising from 71 for all of 2005, and 79 for 2006.

“Christmas time is a bad time for domestic violence,” said Peter Romary, director of Student Legal Services at East Carolina University, who has been representing battered women for the past seven years as a lawyer. “The money is tight, and the stressors are there. This year the economy is in a bad place, so there will be more domestic violence this Christmas.”

An analysis of data representing three crimes, namely misdemeanor and felony domestic violence protective order violations, and also purchasing a firearm in violation of a protective order in the past five years, 2003 to 2007, shows that the less populated counties of North Carolina have the worst statistics.

In Graham County, located in the western part of North Carolina close to the Tennessee border, 68 out of every 10,000 people were charged and 17 out of every 10,000 people have been convicted over the last five years on domestic violence charges. As the third least populated county in North Carolina with its 8,144 residents, those numbers are extremely high.

“One thought would be that Graham County only has one law enforcement agency,” said Peggy Hyde, the executive director of Hopes for Families in Graham County. “We know the people working in the sheriff’s department very well, and we help each other to do our jobs. We work very closely with each other. Bigger counties might have more to keep up with.”

Other counties with disturbing numbers include Tyrrell County, the least populated county in North Carolina, and Haywood and Clay counties. The counties that had the fewest problems were counties such as Camden, Greene and Craven, where both the charge and conviction rates were below 10 out of every 10,000 people. Statewide, 22 out of 10,000 people get charged and 8 out of 10,000 get convicted of violating a protective order or purchasing a firearm while under a domestic violence restraining order.

According to Hyde, the two main reasons for domestic violence in Graham County were the economy, but also methamphetamine abuse. “Methamphetamine abuse is a big one,” Hyde said.

Hyde also said the numbers would be a lot higher for Graham County, or any county in the state for that matter, if women would not refuse to testify or press charges. “A lot of times

women do not want to testify because they do not want to explain to their children that mommy is putting daddy in prison,” said Hyde. This explains the much lower conviction rate in comparison to the charge rate.

The main reason for victims staying with their abusive partners is an economic one. “For many victims, health insurance is a motivation not even to press charges,” said Romary. “And another reason is Christmas. Many women do not know how to explain to their children that there will be no Christmas, no presents. There is absolutely no rational basis for any of this.”

Hyde recalled a particular case that moved her the most. “One woman who had been working for us part time started opening up about her husband,” she said. “He had her so broken, she had no self-esteem.” The woman had quit her job working for Hopes for Families, “probably because she couldn’t handle it,” and in November 2006, after a triple homicide related to domestic violence in Graham County, she decided she was ready to leave her husband and asked her former workplace for help. “She said she did not want that to happen to her,” Hyde said. “We moved her to an out-of-state shelter, and every now and then she calls to say that she is doing alright.”

The woman did not press any charges against her husband, because she knew she would have to come back and testify.

“People with means can step away,” Romary said. “If they are owned by someone else, then they are a prisoner.”

Domestic violence is the second most common crime in the United States. According to Romary, the media is not helping to emphasize the urgency of this issue. “Journalists make up sanitized words, such as ‘domestic violence,’ ‘domestic trespass,’ or ‘date rape,’” said Romary. “We are all to blame. We haven’t said enough is enough. If we don’t take a stand about it, then who will?”