

The January 2005 issue of Research on Social Work Practice contains an article titled "Do Batterer Intervention Programs Serve African American and Caucasian Batterers Equally Well? An Investigation of a 26 - Week Program," by Fredrick Buttell and Michelle Carney. These researchers took a random sample of 168 men who completed a 26 week batterer intervention program in Columbia, South Carolina. These men were court ordered into the program, usually after an arrest for domestic violence. "The intervention program is cognitive - behavioral in orientation and is consistent in organization and focus to those programs described in the literature." "This batterer treatment program incorporates confrontation, therapy and educational components." It is a "structured, intensive, 26- week group treatment program that focuses primarily on anger management and skill development." The program "challenges the batterers' beliefs and values." "The sessions are designed to help clients restructure their thinking by modifying the beliefs that promote violent behavior."

This study found few positive therapeutic effects for either African American or Caucasian men participating in this batterer intervention program (BIP). "The findings from this study suggest that the BIP that participated in this research evaluation is reaching African American and Caucasian participants equally poorly." "The findings from this study suggest that the BIP successfully targeted passive aggressive behaviors but failed to meaningfully alter levels of assertiveness, controlling behaviors, and propensity for abuse for either African American or Caucasian participants."

What is most interesting in this article is the author's discussion of the legal context of batterer's treatment programs. "...more than 30 states have legislation governing program standards for BIPs, and several more have legislation pending." "Recent research on the effectiveness of BIPs has created an interesting situation in which states are mandating programs for batterers at precisely the same time that empirical research that challenges the effectiveness of these programs is being published." "Consequently, many states have adopted legislation governing structure and length of BIPs and, at least in terms of the latest evaluation research, many states appear to be institutionalizing programs that either do not work or that are only marginally effective." "The fear among treatment providers is that their efforts to engage in alternative interventions or in creative quality improvement will be hampered by legislation governing what they must do in terms of state standards."

The authors consider the possibility that states are mandating certain types of BIPs because of ideology instead of science. "As Richard Gelles, one of the architects of the National Family Violence Surveys and a prolific author on family violence, has argued, ideology has trumped empirical research in the field of domestic violence." "...states continue to legislate standards for BIPs despite the accumulating body of empirical

findings suggesting that institutionalizing a specific treatment model at the current time would be premature."

A cautionary lesson for the evidence based practice movement in child welfare is contained in this article. Legislating evidence based practice may backfire, especially if states are too quick to regulate specific practices at a time when researchers are questioning existing practices. Well meaning advocates may push for the institutionalization of treatment standards based on ideological assumptions at odds with scientific findings. Once standards are legislated they may be difficult to change. Regulatory frameworks may impede knowledge development rather than embody current knowledge, a danger which legislative bodies should consider before attempting to mandate evidenced based practices in child welfare.