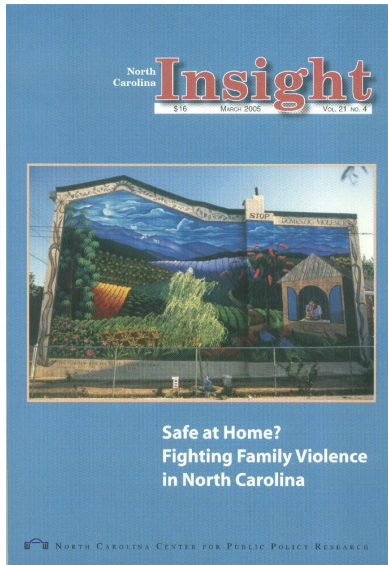




From The Center Out

The Newsletter of the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research ... A voice for good government
January – April 2005

CENTER OUTLINES STEPS TO FIGHT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



North Carolina must do more to fight domestic violence and punish offenders, while assuring that the rights and interests of children also are adequately protected, says the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in a new report released March 31. Our study documented more than 70 domestic murders a year in each of the last three years. However, we found conviction rates for domestic violence charges range from a low of 12.7 percent in Avery County to a high of 56.9 percent in Bertie and Hertford counties. Meanwhile, demands for services have jumped almost 27 percent over the last five years.

The Center outlined nine recommendations to address these problems. The recommendations included asking the General Assembly to examine the reasons for the wide variance in conviction rates and to take actions to improve conviction rates in counties that lag. Another recommendation was to create mid-level misdemeanors in state criminal law as acts of aggression escalate. To meet the rising demand for services, the Center called for expansion of the family court model that is now in only 16 counties and more supervised visitation and exchange centers where children can be visited or safely exchanged between parents who have joint custody. Finally, we recommended that the Chief Justice of the N.C. Supreme Court create a study commission to examine child custody issues, and that the 2005 General Assembly

create a joint House and Senate study commission to continue the legislature's work in preventing domestic violence and punishing offenders.

"The 2004 N.C. General Assembly took strong steps both to prevent family violence and punish and rehabilitate offenders, but more is needed," said Mike McLaughlin, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, the Center's journal where the research is published. "In some counties, conviction rates are extremely low for those charged with domestic violence. In others, there are too few services available for victims and their families. Geography should not be the determining factor in who gets justice."

Domestic Violence Crimes and Conviction Rates

The Center's study catalogues all domestic violence-related deaths in North Carolina since 2002, as tabulated by the nonprofit N.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence. As of February 2005, there were 78 such deaths in 2002, 71 in 2003, and 75 in 2004, with deadly weapons ranging from guns to knives to baseball bats, as well as strangulation. According to the nonprofit Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C., North Carolina has been among the top 10 states in homicide rates for females murdered by males in five of the six years from 1997 through 2002.

Moreover, conviction rates on domestic violence charges differ widely among North Carolina's 100 counties. Eight counties – six of which are in the East – have conviction rates above 50 percent – Madison, Jones, Washington, Person, Hyde, and Northampton, plus Hertford and Bertie counties which are tied for the highest conviction rates at 56.9 percent. Five counties – three of which are in the West – have conviction rates below 20 percent – Yancey, Randolph, Martin, and Henderson, plus Avery County the lowest at 12.7 percent.

Rising Demand for Services

Based on data from the N.C. Council for Women and Domestic Violence Commission, a state agency, the demand for services by victims of domestic violence is rising. The Commission determined that 44,895 victims sought help through one of the state 90 local domestic violence agencies in 2002-2003 – an increase of almost 27 percent over the last five years. The commission says 7,500 children spent time in domestic violence shelters in 2002-2003.

Seventeen counties have no shelters. In others, such as Pasquotank and four surrounding counties served by the Albemarle Hopeline, the shelter is too small to meet the need. This shelter provided 4,000 overnight stays for individuals in 2003, but about 360 women who qualified for shelter had no place to go because the 12-bed facility was full.

Abuser treatment programs are available in only 66 of 100 counties. Counties without abuser treatment programs range from Craven in the East to Cabarrus in the Piedmont to Watauga in the West.

Children Affected By Family Violence

Children are also victims when there is violence in the home. This is one reason the Center says the state needs to expand the number of family courts and supervised visitation and exchange centers. In family courts, families are assigned to a case manager who helps them secure services such as mediation, substance abuse counseling, and pre-divorce education and address the many legal and social issues associated with domestic violence.

Family courts are available in only eight judicial districts in 16 counties – Anson, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cumberland, Durham, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, Pender, Richmond, Stanly, Union, and Wayne counties. And, only 16 counties have safe places to exchange children and honor custody and visitation orders. For example, one woman and her attorney were assaulted when an exchange of two children was attempted in a McDonald's restaurant in Durham.

The Center's research on family violence in North Carolina was funded in part by a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust in Winston-Salem, N.C. Copies of this issue of *North Carolina Insight* are available for \$20, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or email tbromley@nccppr.org.

CENTER RELEASES NEW CITIZENS' GUIDE TO THE LEGISLATURE

The numbers of women and African Americans serving in the N.C. General Assembly are at record highs in 2005, said the Center in a news release accompanying our new citizens' guide to the legislature. Meanwhile, rates of turnover among legislators remain high – averaging close to one-fourth of the House and a fifth of the Senate every two years since 1984. And, our survey of legislators, lobbyists, and capitol news reporters finds the same committees are viewed as the most powerful from session to session.

You can find these and other legislative trends in *Article II: A Guide to the 2005-2006 North Carolina Legislature*. This edition marks the fifteenth legislative session the Center has published the guide. Authored by Center policy analyst Sam Watts, this citizens' guide contains profiles and photos of each of the 170 members of the General Assembly, including business and home addresses; telephone and fax numbers; counties in their districts; the number of terms they have served in the legislature; and their educational and occupational backgrounds. For members who served in the previous session, the *Guide* lists five bills they introduced in the 2003-2004 session, their votes on 12 bills of statewide interest, and their rankings for attendance, roll call voting participation, and effectiveness. We also included demographic and occupational trends for the General Assembly since 1985 and ranking of the 50 most influential lobbyists.

A pocket-sized *Supplement to Article II* contains important information for citizens, lobbyists, and reporters, including all committee assignments and each legislator's political party affiliation, home county, legislative office address and telephone number, e-mail address at the General Assembly, and legislative seat number. The supplement also contains seating charts, committee meeting schedules, and deadlines for introducing various kinds of bills and resolutions.

Copies of *Article II: A Guide to the 2005-2006 N.C. Legislature* and the *Supplement* with committee assignments are available for \$25 a set, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or email tbromley@nccppr.org.

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