

## **Funding Women's Human Security: The Interaction of State Domestic Violence Policies and Federal Grants**

Domestic violence is one of the most pervasive threats to women's human security in the United States, yet it remains among the least visible. It cuts across age, income, race, and education, with one in four women and one in nine men experiencing severe abuse from an intimate partner. Despite the scale of the crisis, responses to domestic violence vary widely across states.

These disparities were the focus of a November 14, 2025, American Politics Speaker Series event. Wendy J. Schiller, the Alison S. Ressler Professor of Political Science at Brown University, presented research examining how federal policy interacts with state-level action on domestic violence. Hosted by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Center for American Political Studies, the event featured findings from a recent paper by Schiller; Kaitlin N. Sidorsky, associate professor of political science and public policy at Ramapo College of New Jersey; and Emma Stroupe of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Their work explores how federal funding through the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) intersects with state domestic violence policies and whether funds encourage alignment across levels of government.

Schiller began with a brief history of federal domestic violence policy. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), enacted in 1994 and reauthorized multiple times since, first recognized domestic violence as a public crime and a federal policy priority. It also laid the groundwork for establishing the OVW within the Department of Justice. OVW administers hundreds of millions of dollars annually to support law enforcement training, victim services, transitional housing, legal assistance, and programs serving specific demographics, including tribal nations and rural communities. From its inception, VAWA paired funding with policy requirements, such as recognizing protective orders across state lines, to encourage states to adopt policies aligned with federal law.

Because Native American women face particularly high rates of domestic violence, VAWA includes provisions to address jurisdictional gaps. For example, Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdictions allow tribal nations to prosecute non-Native offenders and access OVW funding.

Schiller and her co-authors analyzed OVW grant funding from 2006 to 2021 to assess whether federal financial support functions as a policy lever, encouraging the adoption of policies aligned with federal law and responding to state efforts to implement those policies. In particular, their research focused on whether states that adopt domestic violence firearm laws (DVFLs) — restrictions on gun possession for individuals convicted of

domestic violence offenses or subject to restraining orders — receive more funding. DVFLs are especially consequential: the presence of a firearm increases the likelihood of intimate partner homicide by 500%.

The analysis found that states adopting DVFLs tend to receive higher OVW funding, particularly through discretionary grants. Funding is responsive to the number of women killed by family members but not to mass shootings. While federal grants do not explicitly require DVFL adoption, states with laws aligned with federal policy are more likely to secure funding.

Political and institutional factors also shape funding. States with more tribal nations receive significantly more OVW grants; in 2021, tribal nations received more than \$47 million in OVW grants, reflecting both heightened need and the availability of targeted programs. States led by Republican governors under Republican presidents receive more discretionary funding, while Democratic governors under Democratic presidents see no consistent effect. Senate representation on the Appropriations committee matters for formula grants, particularly when Democratic senators share party affiliation with a Democratic president. House representation has limited influence, with one exception: states with a Republican House Appropriations member sharing the president's party receive less overall OVW funding.

Regional disparities also persist, with Southern states and more populous states receiving less funding on average. States with greater fiscal capacity tended to receive more formula funding but less discretionary funding, highlighting differences in grant-writing capacity and program eligibility.

Overall, the findings suggest OVW funding responds to both state-level policy adoption and local need, particularly gun-related domestic violence, rather than serving as a coercive tool. States that adopt DVFLs may receive more funding in part because they are better positioned to meet grant criteria and support a broader range of OVW-funded programs. The greater flow of discretionary funding to Republican-led states under Republican presidents may also reflect acute need among nongovernmental organizations in states with higher rates of domestic violence gun homicides and less developed policy infrastructure.

The OVW was created through legislation sponsored by then-Senator Joseph Biden, a Democrat, and passed with bipartisan support under a unified Democratic government in 1994. While one might expect states with stronger Democratic representation to benefit more consistently from OVW funding, Schiller concluded, the results instead reflect the underlying geography of gun-related domestic violence, which is more prevalent in

Republican-leaning states. In that sense, funding patterns appear driven less by partisan intent than by concentration of need.