

Arenas-Arroyo, Esther

**Working Paper**

## The Impact of Non-mandatory Police Reporting on Domestic Violence

IZA Discussion Papers, No. 17698

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

IZA – Institute of Labor Economics

*Suggested Citation:* Arenas-Arroyo, Esther (2025) : The Impact of Non-mandatory Police Reporting on Domestic Violence, IZA Discussion Papers, No. 17698, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA), Bonn

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/314595>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

IZA DP No. 17698

**The Impact of Non-mandatory Police  
Reporting on Domestic Violence**

Esther Arenas-Arroyo

FEBRUARY 2025

## DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

IZA DP No. 17698

# The Impact of Non-mandatory Police Reporting on Domestic Violence

**Esther Arenas-Arroyo**

*Vienna University of Economic and Business and IZA*

FEBRUARY 2025

Any opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and not those of IZA. Research published in this series may include views on policy, but IZA takes no institutional policy positions. The IZA research network is committed to the IZA Guiding Principles of Research Integrity.

The IZA Institute of Labor Economics is an independent economic research institute that conducts research in labor economics and offers evidence-based policy advice on labor market issues. Supported by the Deutsche Post Foundation, IZA runs the world's largest network of economists, whose research aims to provide answers to the global labor market challenges of our time. Our key objective is to build bridges between academic research, policymakers and society.

IZA Discussion Papers often represent preliminary work and are circulated to encourage discussion. Citation of such a paper should account for its provisional character. A revised version may be available directly from the author.

ISSN: 2365-9793

**IZA – Institute of Labor Economics**

Schaumburg-Lippe-Straße 5–9  
53113 Bonn, Germany

Phone: +49-228-3894-0  
Email: [publications@iza.org](mailto:publications@iza.org)

[www.iza.org](http://www.iza.org)

## ABSTRACT

---

# The Impact of Non-mandatory Police Reporting on Domestic Violence\*

Can lowering barriers to public services reduce domestic violence? Exploiting the introduction of a non-mandatory police reporting policy, I find that it significantly reduces domestic violence cases reported to the police while increasing hospital-reported cases of domestic assault. I further show that non-mandatory reporting laws reduce fatal domestic violence cases by facilitating the dissolution of abusive relationships and decreasing violence within intact couples. These findings highlight the importance of alternative support systems in addressing domestic violence.

**JEL Classification:** J12, J78, H76

**Keywords:** domestic violence, intimate partner homicide, criminal justice

**Corresponding author:**

Esther Arenas-Arroyo  
Department of Economics  
Vienna University of Economic and Business (WU)  
Welthandelsplatz 1  
1020 Vienna  
Austria  
E-mail: [esther.arenas.arroyo@wu.ac.at](mailto:esther.arenas.arroyo@wu.ac.at)

---

\* The author is grateful for comments received from Anna Aizer, Anna Bindler, Aria Golestani, Mike Mueller-Smith, Bernhard Schmidpeter, Greg Ridgeway, Melissa Spencer, and conference participants at 2020 APPAM Fall Research Conference, PAA 2021, SOLE 2021, ESPE 2021, ASSA/CSWEP 2022, XIII Transatlantic Workshop on the Economics of Crime and Workshop on the Economics of Crime for Junior Scholars and the European Economic Association 2023.

*“Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development, and peace.”*

*Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, New York*

*New York, March 8, 1999*

## 1 Introduction

The home, often seen as a place of safety, can be one of the most dangerous places for women (UNOC, 2018). Domestic violence remains a global public health crisis and human rights violation, imposing significant economic and social costs. Despite growing awareness, approximately 35% of women worldwide experience some form of intimate partner violence (UNOC, 2018). Moreover, intimate partner violence is a leading cause of violent deaths among women, with intimate partners responsible for around 55% of all female murders in Spain and similar figures reported in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Despite the prevalence of domestic violence, many victims face barriers to seeking help, including fear of retaliation, economic dependence, and distrust in the criminal justice system. Addressing this persistent issue requires a deeper understanding of these barriers and an evaluation of alternative policies that provide effective, accessible support.

In recent years, many countries have introduced policies to address violence against women, often prioritizing criminal justice interventions. These measures typically require victims to report abuse to law enforcement to access support services (Amaral et al., 2014). However, criminal justice-focused approaches often fail to fully meet victims’ needs and may impose additional emotional and economic burdens (Epstein and Goodman, 2019; Gillis et al., 2006). Fear of retaliation, distrust in the legal system, and the psychological toll of legal proceedings further discourage victims from reporting abuse (Rennison, 2001; Kwak et al., 2019). National victimization surveys show that only 26% of women experiencing intimate partner violence report incidents to the police, while 45% seek assistance from support services instead (Gutiérrez, 2015). This disparity highlights the need for alternative approaches that reduce reliance on mandatory police reporting.

This study examines the impact of allowing victims to access economic, legal, and social resources without *first* engaging with the criminal justice system. Providing assistance without requiring legal intervention may empower victims to leave abusive relationships and prevent further escalation of violence. Social and legal support

---

<sup>1</sup>Data for Spain is available at [Gender-Based Violence Statistics](#). See also (Petrosky et al., 2017) for U.S. statistics.

outside the criminal justice system may also create pathways to more formal types of help ([Kaukinen, 2004](#)). By analyzing a policy enacted in Spain that removes mandatory police reporting for victims seeking support, this paper evaluates an alternative approach to addressing intimate partner violence.

To identify the effects of this policy, I exploit temporal and geographic variation in its implementation across Spanish states. My findings show that the introduction of non-mandatory police reporting laws reduces domestic violence cases reported to the police. These laws also lead to an increase in hospital-reported cases of domestic assault, which may reflect either a rise in domestic violence or a shift in victims' behavior. If victims are more likely to seek help from healthcare providers instead of engaging with law enforcement when alternative support services are available, it would suggest that the increase is driven by improved access to support rather than an actual rise in abuse. My results support this explanation.

I further show that non-mandatory reporting laws reduce fatal domestic violence cases by facilitating the dissolution of abusive relationships and decreasing violence within intact couples. This effect is particularly pronounced among highly educated women and mothers, who are more likely to leave abusive relationships after the policy's implementation. For highly educated women, leaving without public disclosure reduces stigma and social costs, easing their exit from abusive relationships. These findings suggest that removing legal and administrative barriers to support allows victims to escape abuse earlier, preventing domestic violence from escalating to lethal outcomes.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature. Prior research has examined the criminal justice system's response to domestic violence. Mandatory criminal policies—such as arrest laws, no-drop policies, and police demographics—can influence reporting and domestic violence rates ([Iyengar \(2009\)](#), [Aizer and Bó \(2009\)](#), [Miller and Segal \(2019\)](#)). For instance, mandatory arrest laws have been shown to increase intimate partner homicides due to increased retaliation by abusers and reduced reporting by victims ([Iyengar, 2009](#)). [Miller and Segal \(2019\)](#) find that the integration of women into U.S. police departments increases reporting by victims and subsequently reduces intimate partner homicides.<sup>2</sup>

While prior research has largely focused on interventions where the criminal justice system plays a central role, this study evaluates an approach that removes legal barriers to assistance.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>There is a growing literature on the impact of women's police stations on domestic violence (see, for example, [Amaral et al. \(2014\)](#)).

<sup>3</sup>[Koppensteiner et al. \(2024\)](#), using a randomized controlled trial, provide evidence on how improving access to non-police support services affects victims' reporting behavior. Their intervention assigns a caseworker to victims of police-reported domestic violence, guiding them in accessing non-police

This study contributes to the literature by examining alternative responses to domestic violence that do not require engagement with law enforcement and identifying potential mechanisms. By doing so, it provides new evidence on intervention strategies beyond the criminal justice system. The current approach relies heavily on policing and legal action, yet early-stage detection by doctors and social workers may offer victims support before abuse escalates to a fatal outcome.

Finally, this research contributes to the broader literature on how external support options shape domestic violence dynamics. Prior work demonstrates that improving a victim's socioeconomic position within a marriage reduces domestic violence. Increasing women's relative economic standing compared to men has been linked to lower rates of intimate partner violence ([Aizer \(2010\)](#), [Anderberg et al. \(2016\)](#)). Similarly, expanding access to divorce strengthens women's bargaining power and decreases abuse ([Brassiolo \(2016\)](#), [Stevenson and Wolfers \(2006\)](#)). This paper builds on this literature by examining how removing barriers to social and economic services affects domestic violence outcomes. I show that allowing victims to receive protection and assistance without engaging with the legal system reduces female homicides by facilitating the dissolution of abusive relationships and making the threat of leaving more credible.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 examines the interaction between non-mandatory police reporting laws and domestic violence. Sections 3 and 4 describe the data and identification strategy. Section 5 presents the main findings and robustness checks. Section 6 discusses the mechanisms behind the results. Finally, Section 7 summarizes the findings and concludes the study.

## **2 Institutional Background and Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1 Background on Non-Mandatory Police Reporting Policy**

The murder of Ana Orantes in 1997 marked a pivotal moment in Spanish society, transforming domestic violence from a private family matter to a public concern. Orantes was killed by her husband after appearing on television to describe the abuse she had endured, despite filing 15 official complaints without receiving protection.<sup>4</sup> This tragedy ignited protests and calls for legislative reform, leading central and local governments to adopt measures to protect women from abuse. While local governments in Spain cannot change criminal law, they have enacted policies to facilitate access to support services for victims.

---

support. However, access to these services remains conditional on an initial police report. In contrast, this paper examines the real-world impact of removing the police barrier entirely.

<sup>4</sup>See [NYT 1997](#).

In 1998, the first Comprehensive Plan Against Domestic Violence was implemented, introducing measures to guarantee victims' basic rights, such as access to social housing and the establishment of specialized police units for domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> As a result, victims across the country gained access to standardized social, economic, and free legal assistance.<sup>6</sup>

Between 2001 and 2004, five states introduced policies allowing victims to access economic and social assistance without engaging with the criminal justice system. In 2019, this approach became universal across Spain, enabling all victims to receive support without filing a police report, regardless of their place of residence.

Figure A1 illustrates the two scenarios victims face, depending on whether non-mandatory police reporting policies are in place. In states with these policies, victims can disclose their situation to social workers, doctors or be identified as victims by doctors. Once their case is evaluated, they are granted access to social, legal, and economic assistance without involving others, such as the offender or family members.<sup>7</sup>

In states without non-mandatory reporting policies, victims must first file an official report with the police and obtain a judicial verdict or protection order. This process requires them to testify before police officers, judges, attorneys, and defense attorneys, imposing significant psychological costs. Victims may also fear reprisal from their abuser, further discouraging them from seeking help.

## 2.2 Non-Mandatory Police Reporting Policy and Domestic Violence

The impact of non-mandatory police reporting policies on domestic violence is theoretically ambiguous. Following the rational choice framework (Becker, 1968; Miller and Segal, 2019), victims are expected to seek help when the perceived benefits of reporting or leaving outweigh the associated costs.

Mandatory police reporting can deter victims from seeking help due to the high emotional, social, and psychological costs of engaging with the criminal justice system. Reporting often involves disclosing abuse to strangers, bringing private matters into the public sphere, and facing potential retaliation from the offender. Stigma and shame can also be significant barriers, particularly in traditional societies.<sup>8</sup> Addition-

---

<sup>5</sup>The plan was later integrated into the Organic Law 1/2004 on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender-Based Violence, which was unanimously passed by the Spanish Parliament. This law emphasized prevention and expanded victims' rights, including social, economic, and legal assistance (Official State Bulletin No.313 of 29 December 2004).

<sup>6</sup>Free legal assistance is provided under Law 1/1996 (BOE 1996); economic support is available under Law 35/1995 (BOE 1995).

<sup>7</sup>The law applies specifically to women abused by their husband, boyfriend, or ex-husband.

<sup>8</sup>21% of women cited shame or embarrassment as reasons for not reporting abuse Gutiérrez (2015). See also Xie and Baumer (2019).



ally, more educated women may face higher stigma costs due to progressive views on gender roles.<sup>9</sup>

Non-mandatory police reporting policies provide victims with an alternative path to access support. By removing the requirement to involve the police, these policies lower the barriers to seeking help. Victims can choose to engage with support services without fear of public scrutiny or retaliation, allowing them to seek assistance before violence escalates. Support services may also become more effective at identifying abuse under these policies. Consequently, we might observe a reduction in intimate partner homicides as victims leave abusive relationships without escalating conflicts through legal processes.

These policies could also influence the behavior of offenders. If abusers perceive the removal of mandatory reporting as a reduction in accountability, domestic violence might increase. Conversely, the availability of support services could strengthen victims' bargaining power within relationships, reducing violence. According to bargaining models, improving victims' outside options decreases violence by shifting power dynamics in their favor ([Aizer, 2010](#); [Farmer and Tiefenthaler, 1996](#)).

Non-mandatory reporting policies may also indirectly increase police involvement. Victims who initially seek support through non-criminal channels might eventually engage with the criminal justice system after receiving legal aid and support. This could lead to an increase in reported cases and a more strategic engagement with law enforcement.

In summary, the effects of non-mandatory police reporting policies on domestic violence depend on a balance of factors, including victims' willingness to seek help, offenders' responses, and the effectiveness of support services. This study explores these dynamics to shed light on alternative approaches to addressing intimate partner violence.

### 3 Data

This paper examines the impact of non-mandatory police reporting on domestic violence. To this end, I combine administrative data, survey data, and self-collected policy data.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>[Agüero and Frisancho \(2022\)](#) show that highly educated women are more likely to experience abuse but less likely to report it.

<sup>10</sup>The policy data is gathered from the [Official State Gazette](#).

### 3.1 Data on Domestic Violence

I digitized domestic violence data from the Ministry for Home Affairs' Statistical Yearbooks (1997–2018). These yearbooks provide detailed information on reported cases and homicides, including the relationship between the victim and the offender since 1997.<sup>111213</sup>

Using this information, I construct two key measures of domestic violence: the number of police-reported domestic violence cases per 100,000 women and the number of female homicides committed by a husband or ex-husband.<sup>14</sup> This dataset provides a comprehensive record of police reports and intimate partner homicides over the period 1997–2018.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 Data on Hospital Records

I also use administrative hospital records on female hospitalizations due to assault to analyze the impact of non-mandatory reporting laws. These data, spanning 1997–2015,<sup>16</sup> provide a systematic and reliable measure of domestic violence incidents, unlike social service records, which vary across regions due to decentralized data collection. Hospital records follow standardized definitions, ensuring comparability over time and across locations. While direct data on social service usage is unavailable, hospitalizations serve as a reliable proxy for victims seeking medical assistance. The data come from the *Specialized Care Activity Register (RAE-CMBD)*, managed by the Ministry of Health.

### 3.3 Data from the Survey on Violence Against Women

To explore the mechanisms underlying my results, I use data from the Survey on Violence Against Women, a national survey conducted by the Spanish Women's Institute in 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011.<sup>17</sup> This survey is nationally representative of women liv-

<sup>11</sup>Since 2004, the State Observatory on Violence against Women has collected more detailed homicide data, but I rely on the Statistical Yearbooks to ensure consistency over time. These yearbooks provide the number of homicides committed by a husband or ex-husband in each province. However, they do not include additional details such as the victim's age or immigration status.

<sup>12</sup>Spain is divided into 52 provinces.

<sup>13</sup>I exclude the Basque Country and Catalonia from my analysis, as these regions do not report intimate partner homicide data to the Ministry for Home Affairs. This restriction results in a final sample of 45 provinces.

<sup>14</sup>I focus solely on female homicides committed by a husband, as male homicides by a wife cannot be consistently identified after 2004.

<sup>15</sup>I use provinces as the geographic unit of analysis, as they represent the smallest available level of disaggregation. Most states that enacted non-mandatory reporting policies consist of a single province. Results are robust to using states as the geographic unit instead.

<sup>16</sup>This is the available period for identifying these cases consistently.

<sup>17</sup>I focus on the period 1999–2011 because the survey questions changed significantly in 2014.

ing in Spain and provides rich information about their demographics, relationships, and experiences with violence. From this survey, I construct three key measures of domestic violence. The first measure, self-reported violence, is based on whether a woman perceives herself as a victim of domestic abuse by an intimate partner. This binary variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent reports having experienced domestic violence and 0 otherwise. The second measure, technical abuse, is based on 13 expert-identified indicators of abuse (Alberdi and Matas, 2002) (see Table A3). This binary variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent reports experiencing any of these behaviors “frequently” or “sometimes.” The third measure captures relationship dissolution due to abuse. This binary variable equals 1 if a woman reports ending her last relationship due to abuse, including reasons such as her partner threatening her, hitting her, preventing her from seeing family or friends, or constantly criticizing her. While this survey provides valuable insights into domestic violence experiences and outcomes, one limitation is that it does not include information on whether victims reported their abuse to law enforcement or social services during the study period.

## 4 Empirical Approach

To identify the effects of non-mandatory police reporting on domestic violence, I use an event study approach, leveraging temporal and geographic variation across states in the adoption of these laws from 1997 to 2018. The main empirical specification is:

$$y_{a,t} = \alpha_a^{ES} + \sum_{\substack{a=-2 \\ a \neq -1}}^3 \delta_a \mathbb{1}(t - C_a = a) + \delta_{-3} \mathbb{1}(t - C_a < -2) + \delta_{10} \mathbb{1}(t - C_a > 9) + X'_{a,t-1} \Gamma^{ES} + \theta_t^{ES} + \alpha_a^{ES} + \epsilon_{a,t}^{ES}, \quad (1)$$

where  $C_a$  is the year when the non-mandatory reporting law was introduced in area  $a$ . To address limited observations in years far from the treatment year, I group all time periods more than three years before or ten years after the policy’s introduction.

The dependent variable,  $y_{a,t}$ , is the logarithm of domestic violence (DV) cases reported to the police per 100,000 women in area  $a$  and year  $t$ . The vector  $X_{a,t}$  includes area-level characteristics that may influence domestic violence, such as the share of natives, the share of low-educated women, the female-to-male employment ratio, and the unemployment rate (Aizer, 2010). It also accounts for whether the state has con-

trol over justice administration and whether the province has specialized domestic violence tribunals.<sup>18</sup>

Equation 1 includes geographic fixed effects ( $\alpha_a^{ES}$ ) to control for unobserved, time-invariant area characteristics and temporal fixed effects ( $\theta_t^{ES}$ ) to account for aggregate shocks, such as the 2008–2009 economic downturn. Standard errors are clustered at the province level, and results are robust to clustering at broader geographic levels.<sup>19</sup>

This specification enables an assessment of both pre-trends and the persistence of policy effects. The absence of significant pre-trends supports the parallel trends assumption, a key requirement for identification.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, the ten-year study window allows me to examine whether *NML* delays police contact, providing insight into how victims adjust their help-seeking behavior following the policy change.

## 5 Non-Mandatory Police Reporting and Domestic Violence

### 5.1 Main Findings

Figure 1 plots the coefficients  $\delta_a$  from Equation 1, showing three years before to ten years after the introduction of non-mandatory reporting laws. Two key findings emerge. First, pre-policy estimates are both statistically insignificant and economically small, supporting the validity of the parallel trends assumption. Second, after the policy's enactment, there is a gradual decline in cases reported to the police, suggesting that *NML* either reduces violence or shifts victims away from official reporting channels. Specifically, *NML* led to a 20% decrease in demand for police services during this time period.

My results align with those of [Koppensteiner et al. \(2024\)](#), who conducted a randomized controlled trial on improving access to non-police support services conditional on police reporting for domestic violence victims and found that the intervention reduced victims' statements to police by 19%. Overall, this suggests that *NML* reduces victims' reliance on law enforcement after implementation, as they are more likely to seek support through alternative channels once these options become available.

With a longer time span of ten years, I also examine whether *NML* delays police contact. If *NML* postponed victims' engagement with law enforcement, we would

<sup>18</sup>See Appendix A1 for details on variables. During this period, the administration of justice was transferred to some states. The Organic Law 1/2004 introduced specialized domestic violence tribunals.

<sup>19</sup>Results are robust to clustering at broader geographic levels.

<sup>20</sup>Appendix A2 includes alternative difference-in-differences estimates to account for treatment effect heterogeneity.

expect an initial drop in reports followed by an increase in the long run. However, Figure 1 does not support this hypothesis. Instead, it indicates that when support is available outside the justice system, victims might be less likely to engage with law enforcement.

Before further examining the effects of *NML*, I address potential concerns regarding the validity of these findings. First, to account for potential biases from treatment effect heterogeneity, I apply the estimator from Sun and Abraham (2021). Figure A2 confirms the main result: *NML* adoption leads to a sustained reduction in intimate partner homicides.

Second, the validity of my results relies on key assumptions. One critical assumption is that the adoption of non-mandatory reporting laws is not driven by area-specific characteristics correlated with changes in domestic violence. To test this, I examine whether pre-existing trends in intimate partner homicides predict the timing of policy adoption. Specifically, I estimate:

$$Y_a = \alpha + X_a^{1997-1998}\delta + Z_a^{1997-1998}\mu + \epsilon_a, \quad (2)$$

where  $Y_a$  is the year in which the policy was enacted in area  $a$ ,  $X_a^{1997}$  includes average domestic violence cases from 1997–1998, and  $Z_a^{1997-1998}$  includes other control variables. Errors are clustered at the province level.

Table A4 presents the results. Across all specifications, the coefficient  $\delta$  is statistically insignificant, indicating no evidence that areas with higher pre-policy domestic violence levels systematically adopted non-mandatory reporting laws. This supports the assumption that the policy adoption is not endogenous to prior trends in domestic violence.

## 6 Mechanisms

Having established that non-mandatory police reporting laws significantly reduce reported domestic violence incidents, I find that when victims can receive support without involving the criminal justice system, they might be less likely to engage with law enforcement. This raises important questions: Does the decline in police reporting correspond to a decrease in intimate partner homicides, as victims leave abusive relationships earlier? Or does it increase IPH by reducing offenders' perceived accountability? This section explores these questions.

## 6.1 Preventing Escalation

By removing the requirement to involve the police, these policies lower barriers to seeking help. Victims can access support services or healthcare providers without fear of public scrutiny or retaliation, allowing them to seek assistance before violence escalates. Therefore, if victims are more likely to engage with healthcare providers or social services, we would expect an increase in cases reported to health care providers such as hospitals or social services after the introduction of non-mandatory reporting laws (NML). To test this, I analyze administrative hospital data on female hospitalizations due to assault.<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> These data offer a key advantage over social service data-collected reports of violence, as they are consistently recorded over time using uniform definitions across Spain's decentralized healthcare system.

To estimate this effect, I use the following specification:

$$y_{a,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 NML_{a,t-1} + X'_{a,t-1}\beta_2 + \gamma_a + \theta_t + \epsilon_{a,t}, \quad (3)$$

where  $y_{a,t}$  represents the female hospitalization rate per 100,000 women in local area  $a$  and year  $t$ . The key independent variable,  $NML_{a,t}$ , is an indicator for the presence of non-mandatory reporting laws.  $X_{a,t}$  includes demographic and economic controls, while  $\gamma_a$  and  $\theta_t$  account for area and year fixed effects, respectively. Standard errors are clustered at the local area level.

Table 2 shows that non-mandatory reporting laws led to a 50% increase in hospital-reported cases of domestic abuse. To ensure these results are not driven by unrelated factors, I conduct a falsification test using male hospitalization data. Columns (3) and (4) of Table 2 show no significant effects on male hospitalization rates, reinforcing the validity of my findings.

Taken together, the results on police reporting and hospital utilization suggest that when alternative support services are available, victims might be more likely to use them instead of engaging with the criminal justice system. If support and healthcare services are effective in identifying abuse, they may help victims leave abusive relationships earlier, potentially reducing intimate partner homicides by preventing escalation. However, if these services are less effective than the criminal justice system, or if offenders perceive a reduction in the cost of violence, we might expect an increase in abuse. The following analysis tests these hypotheses.

<sup>21</sup>While data on social service use is unavailable, hospital administrative records provide a systematic alternative spanning 1997–2015. Social services are decentralized, so each state/locality collect their own data under different criterias since 2005.

<sup>22</sup>Source: Ministerio de Sanidad. Subdirección General de Información Sanitaria. Registro de Actividad de Atención Especializada – RAE-CMBD.

First, I analyze the most extreme form of domestic violence: intimate partner homicides. To do so, I estimate Equation 1, replacing  $y_{a,t}$  with the IPH rate per 100,000 women in area  $a$  and year  $t$ . Table 1 shows that non-mandatory reporting laws reduced IPH rates by approximately 40%. Columns 6 and 7 show no significant effects on non-intimate partner homicides, reinforcing the robustness of the results. This result suggests that victims either left abusive relationships before escalation or that overall violence within relationships declined. In the following sections, I further explore both mechanisms driving this effect.

## 6.2 Facilitating Relationship Dissolution

To investigate whether the dissolution of abusive relationships contributes to the decline in intimate partner homicides (IPH), I use survey data from the Survey on Violence Against Women and estimate the following model:

$$y_{i,a,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 NML_{a,t} + X'_{i,a,t}\beta_2 + Z'_{i,a,t}\beta_3 + \gamma_a + \theta_t + \epsilon_{a,t}, \quad (4)$$

where  $y_{i,a,t}$  is a binary variable indicating whether a woman ended her last relationship due to domestic abuse.<sup>23</sup>  $X_{i,a,t}$  captures individual characteristics such as age, education, employment, and number of children, while  $Z_{i,a,t}$  includes partner characteristics such as education, employment status, and breadwinner role. Standard errors are clustered at the local area level.

Table 3 shows that non-mandatory reporting laws increased the likelihood of ending abusive relationships by 2.28 percentage points. This effect is particularly pronounced for highly educated women and mothers, who may face greater stigma or institutional barriers to public reporting. These findings suggest that non-mandatory reporting policies provide victims with safer avenues to leave abusive relationships, particularly benefiting those who might otherwise hesitate to involve law enforcement.

To summarize, results from Tables 2 and 1 indicate that NML policies led to an increase in victims seeking healthcare services and reaching out for help. The observed reduction in intimate partner homicides suggests that these policies played a crucial role in preventing escalation, providing victims with opportunities to leave abusive relationships before violence intensified.

---

<sup>23</sup>Reasons include threats, physical violence, isolation from family/friends, or constant criticism by the partner.



### 6.3 Reducing Violence Within Relationships

The decline in IPH may be driven by a reduction in domestic violence within intact households. According to [Farmer and Tiefenthaler \(1996\)](#), access to public services can strengthen a victim’s position within a relationship, reducing violence even if the services are not directly used. To further test this possibility, I rely on survey data from the Violence Against Women survey and estimate the following equation:

$$y_{i,a,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 NML_{a,t} + X'_{i,a,t}\beta_2 + Z'_{i,a,t}\beta_3 + \gamma_a + \theta_t + \epsilon_{a,t}, \quad (5)$$

where  $y_{i,a,t}$  measures domestic violence using two indicators: *Self-reported abuse*: A binary variable indicating whether a woman perceives herself as a victim of abuse, and *Technical abuse*: A binary variable constructed from 13 questions about mistreatment ([Alberdi and Matas, 2002](#)), taking the value 1 if any indicator occurs “frequently” or “sometimes.”

Table 4 presents the results. In the preferred specification (Panel A, Column 3), non-mandatory reporting laws reduced self-reported abuse by 1.42 percentage points. Panel B shows a 1.74 percentage point reduction in technical abuse, equivalent to a 17.4% reduction relative to the sample mean. These findings suggest that lowering barriers to leaving abusive relationships serves as a strong deterrent to spousal violence.

Taken together, these results indicate that non-mandatory police reporting laws reduce victims’ reliance on the criminal justice system, making them less likely to contact the police but more likely to seek alternative support services such as healthcare providers.

## 7 Conclusions

In recent years, many countries have implemented policies to reduce violence against women, primarily focusing on criminal justice responses to intimate partner violence. Such measures typically require victims to file a police report to receive protection and assistance. However, research shows that most victims do not report abuse to the police, instead seeking help from social services. This paper investigates the impact of allowing victims to access protection and support without the mandatory filing of a police report.

Using temporal and geographic variations in the enactment of non-mandatory police reporting policies, I find that victims with access to support without involving law enforcement are less likely to engage with the criminal justice system. Follow-



ing the introduction of these policies, domestic violence cases reported to the police decline, while female hospitalizations due to assault increase. These findings suggest that when alternative support services are available, victims prefer them over engaging with law enforcement. Importantly, these findings are not driven by a rise in domestic violence or a decline in reporting

Overall, the results suggest that non-mandatory reporting laws reduce domestic violence through two primary mechanisms: the dissolution of abusive relationships and a decrease in violence within intact couples. I show that highly educated women and women with children are more likely to end abusive relationships following the policy's implementation. For highly educated women, the ability to leave without public disclosure may lower stigma and social costs, facilitating their exit from abusive relationships. These findings suggest that enabling victims to leave abusive relationships without undergoing lengthy legal and administrative processes, and without prosecuting their abusers, can mitigate domestic abuse before it escalates to lethal outcomes.

Despite the progress enabled by alternative support systems, the criminal justice system often fails to fully address victims' needs. Policies that emphasize offender accountability may impose significant economic, emotional, and psychological burdens on survivors, potentially discouraging them from seeking help ([Epstein and Goodman, 2019](#)). My findings demonstrate that criminal justice interventions are not the only effective approach to combating domestic violence. Expanding alternative support systems, such as non-mandatory police reporting policies, can empower victims, reduce barriers to seeking assistance, and prevent the escalation of violence.

These findings highlight the need to rethink traditional responses to domestic violence. Expanding access to support services while reducing dependence on the criminal justice system could provide more effective, victim-centered solutions.

## References

- Agüero, J. M. and Frisancho, V. (2022), ‘Measuring violence against women with experimental methods’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change* **70**. (Cited on p. 6)
- Aizer, A. (2010), ‘The gender wage gap and domestic violence’, *American Economic Review* **100**, 1847–1859. (Cited on p. 4, 6, 8)
- Aizer, A. and Bó, P. D. (2009), ‘Love, hate and murder: Commitment devices in violent relationships’, *Journal of Public Economics* **93**, 412–428.  
**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2008.09.011> (Cited on p. 3)
- Alberdi, I. and Matas, N. (2002), *La violencia doméstica: Informe sobre los malos tratos a mujeres en España*, Vol. 39, colección edn. (Cited on p. 8, 13)
- Amaral, S., Bhalotra, S. R. and Prakash, N. (2014), ‘Welfare reform and immigrant fertility’. (Cited on p. 2, 3)
- Anderberg, D., Rainer, H., Wadsworth, J. and Wilson, T. (2016), ‘Unemployment and domestic violence: Theory and evidence’, *The Economic Journal* **126**, 1947–1979.  
**URL:** <https://academic.oup.com/ej/article/126/597/1947-1979/5077969> (Cited on p. 4)
- Becker, G. (1968), ‘Crime and punishment: An economic approach’, *Journal of Political Economy* **76**. (Cited on p. 5)
- Brassiolo, P. (2016), ‘Domestic violence and divorce law: When divorce threats become credible’, *Journal of Labor Economics* **34**, 443–477. (Cited on p. 4)
- Epstein, D. and Goodman, L. A. (2019), ‘Discounting women: Doubting domestic violence survivors’ credibility and dismissing their experiences’, *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review* **167**, 191–203. (Cited on p. 2, 14)
- Farmer, B. A. M. Y. and Tiefenthaler, J. (1996), ‘American economic association domestic violence : The value of services as signals author ( s ): Amy farmer and jill tiefenthaler source : The american economic review , vol . 86 , no . 2 , papers and proceedings of the hundredth and eighth annual meeting’, *American Economic Association* **86**.  
**URL:** <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2118136> (Cited on p. 6, 13)
- Gillis, J. R., Diamond, S. L., Jebely, P., Orekhovsky, V., Ostovich, E. M., MacIsaac, K., Segrati, S. and Mandell, D. (2006), ‘Systemic obstacles to battered women’s participation in the judicial system: When will the status quo change?’, *Violence Against Women* **12**, 1150–1168. (Cited on p. 2)

Gutiérrez, J. L. (2015), 'Informe sobre violencia contra la mujer española', *Gabinete de Coordinación y Estudios. Secretaría de Estado de Seguridad*.

**URL:** [https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/archivos-y-documentacion/documentacion-y-publicaciones/publicaciones-descargables/publicaciones-periodicas/Base-de-datos-policia-de-identificadores-obtenidos-a-partir-de-ADN-Memoria/Informe\\_sobre\\_violencia\\_contra\\_la\\_mujer\\_2015\\_-\\_2019\\_126210076.pdf](https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/archivos-y-documentacion/documentacion-y-publicaciones/publicaciones-descargables/publicaciones-periodicas/Base-de-datos-policia-de-identificadores-obtenidos-a-partir-de-ADN-Memoria/Informe_sobre_violencia_contra_la_mujer_2015_-_2019_126210076.pdf) (Cited on p. 2, 5)

Iyengar, R. (2009), 'Does the certainty of arrest reduce domestic violence ? evidence from mandatory and recommended arrest laws', *Journal of Public Economics* **93**, 85–98.

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2008.09.006> (Cited on p. 3)

Kaukinen, C. (2004), 'The help-seeking strategies of female violent-crime victims', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* **19**, 967–990. (Cited on p. 3)

Koppensteiner, M. F., Matheson, J. and Plugor, R. (2024), 'Public services access and domestic violence: Lessons from a randomized controlled trial', *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, **16**(1). (Cited on p. 3, 9)

Kwak, H., Dierenfeldt, R. and McNeeley, S. (2019), 'The code of the street and cooperation with the police: Do codes of violence, procedural injustice, and police ineffectiveness discourage reporting violent victimization to the police?', *Journal of Criminal Justice* **60**, 25–34. (Cited on p. 2)

Miller, A. R. and Segal, C. (2019), 'Do female officers improve law enforcement quality? effects on crime reporting and domestic violence', *The Review of Economic Studies* **86**, 2220–2247. (Cited on p. 3, 5)

Petrosky, E., Blair, J. M., Betz, C. J., Fowler, K. A., Jack, S. P. and Lyons, B. H. (2017), 'Racial and ethnic differences in homicides of adult women and the role of intimate partner violence — united states, 2003–2014', *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* **66**, 741–746. (Cited on p. 2)

Rennison, C. M. (2001), 'Criminal victimization 2000: Changes 1999–2000 with trends 1993–2000.'. (Cited on p. 2)

Stevenson, B. and Wolfers, J. (2006), 'Bargaining in the shadow of the law: Divorce laws and family distress', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* **121**, 267–288. (Cited on p. 4)

Sun, L. and Abraham, S. (2021), 'Estimating dynamic treatment effects in event studies with heterogeneous treatment effects', *Journal of Econometrics* **225**(2), 175–199. Themed Issue: Treatment Effect 1.

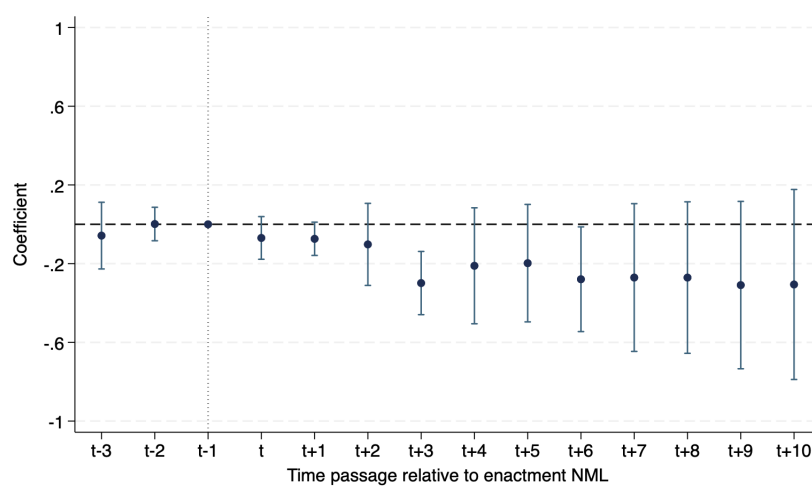
**URL:** <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S030440762030378X> (Cited on p. 10, 28)

UNOC (2018), 'Global study on homicide'.

**URL:** <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22057928> (Cited on p. 2)

Xie, M. and Baumer, E. P. (2019), 'Crime victims' decisions to call the police: Past research and new directions', *Annual Review of Criminology* **2**, 217–240. (Cited on p. 5)

**Figure 1:** Event Study coefficient plot



Note: Event-study coefficient plot using [2](#). Period t represents the year Non-mandatory laws were enacted. Dependent variable: DV incidents reported to the police per 100,000 women

**Table 1:** Mechanisms: Impact of NML on Intimate Partner Homicides

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	IPH	IPH	IPH	IPH	IPH	All Homicides	Men Homicides
Non Mandatory Law	-0.1104** (0.048)	-0.1072** (0.046)	-0.1187** (0.047)	-0.1135** (0.049)	-0.1214** (0.051)	-0.0074 (0.144)	-0.0024 (0.288)
Observations	980	980	980	980	980	980	980
R-squared	0.146	0.147	0.149	0.154	0.199	0.285	0.283
Local Area characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Area FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Criminal Justice Decentralization				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Women Court				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Crime Rate					Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean D.V.	0.25					0.78	1.60

*Notes* Table 1 reports the estimates from Eq 1. Specification 1 includes year and area fixed effects. Specification 2 includes demographic area characteristic. Specification 3 adds economic characteristics and Specification 4 further adds justice system's characteristics. Specification 5 controls for other types of crimes. Column 6 uses as dependent variable all homicides excluding female homicides committed by the husband. Column 7 regress homicides with men victims. All homicides are measured per 100,000 people. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Standards errors are clustered at the local area level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Table 2:** Mechanisms: Impact of NML on Hospitalization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Female	Female	Male	Male
Non Mandatory Law	0.2057** (0.077)	0.1926** (0.095)	0.6111 (1.092)	-0.1749 (0.645)
Observations	826	826	826	826
R-squared	0.247	0.277	0.467	0.495
Local Area Characteristics	No	Yes	No	Yes
Local Area FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes Table 2 reports the estimates from Eq 1. Hospital Data is only available until 2015. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Standards errors are clustered at the local area level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Table 3:** Mechanisms: Domestic Abuse as Reason for Relationship Dissolution

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Non Mandatory Law	0.0219** (0.010)	0.0228** (0.010)	0.0228** (0.010)	0.0085 (0.007)
Low Educated*NML			-0.0241** (0.009)	
Having Children*NML				0.0523* (0.025)
Low Educated			-0.0116 (0.013)	
Having Children				0.0831*** (0.010)
Observations	9,811	9,811	9,811	9,811
R-squared	0.007	0.049	0.049	0.049
Individual Characteristics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Area FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Notes* Table 3 reports the estimates from Eq 4. Sample: All adult women (older than 18) living in Spain who ended a relationship. All regressions include a constant term. Specification 1 includes year and area fixed effects. Specification 2 includes individual characteristics. Source data: Survey of Violence Against Women 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Standards errors are clustered at the local area level. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



**Table 4:** Impact of Non-Mandatory Laws on Non-Fatal Outcomes

	Panel A		Panel B		Panel C	Panel D
	Self-Reported D.V.		Technical D.V.		Psychological	Physical
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Non-Mandatory Law	-0.0149** (0.007)	-0.0148** (0.007)	-0.0118** (0.005)	-0.0119** (0.005)	-0.0163** (0.006)	-0.0042 (0.004)
Observations	57,324	57,258	57,324	57,258	57,258	57,258
R-squared	0.015	0.016	0.020	0.022	0.018	0.009
Women Characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partner Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Area FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean D.V.	0.032		0.12		0.10	0.02

*Notes:* Table 4 reports the estimates from Eq 5. Sample: All adult women (older than 18) living in Spain who had a partner when answering the survey. Specification 1 controls for women's characteristics. Specification 2 adds partner characteristics. All regressions include a constant term. Self-reported domestic abuse is my dependent variable in Panel A. It is a dummy that takes values 1 if the woman reports suffering from domestic violence, 0 otherwise. Technical abuse is the dependent variable in Panel B. It is a dummy variable that equals 1 if a woman replies to any of the 13 indicators that occur "frequently" or "sometimes". Source data: Survey of Violence Against Women 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Standards errors are clustered at the local area level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

## **8 Supplemental Figures and Tables**

**Table A1:** Main Variable Definitions and Sources

Variable Name	Definition	Source
Domestic Violence Cases	DV cases reported to the Police per 100,000 women by province and year	Ministry for Home Affairs' Statistical Yearbooks
Intimated Partner Homicides	Female Intimated Partner Homicides per 100,000 women by province and year	Ministry for Home Affairs' Statistical Yearbooks
Share of Natives	Share of Natives by province and year	Census Population National Statistics Institute
Share of Low Educated Women	Share of Women without high school education	Spanish Labor Force Survey
Ratio Female to Male Employment	Ratio of female to male employment	Spanish Labor Force Survey
Unemployment Rate	Unemployment Rate by province and year	Spanish Labor Force Survey
Administration of Justice	Dummy variable equal 1 if the state has the power over the administration of justice	Official State Gazette
IP Hospitalization	Female Hospitalization due to assault per 100,000 women by province and year	Specialized Care Activity Register (RAE-CMBD), managed by the Ministry of Health

**Table A2: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Dependent Variable:</b>			
Domestic Violence Cases per 100,000 inhabitants	980	367.45	242.81
IP Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants	980	0.25	0.40
IP Hospitalization 100,000 women	826	0.36	0.67
<b>Independent Variables:</b>			
Share of Natives	980	0.51	0.42
Share of Low Educated Women	980	0.47	0.06
Ratio Female to Male Employment	980	4.43	6.03
Unemployment Rate	980	0.16	0.07
Women Court	980	0.37	0.48
Divorce Law	980	0.64	0.47

**Table A3:** Questions from the Survey on Violence Against Women

**Measure whether a woman ended her last relationship due to domestic abuse**

---

***Why did the relationship end?***

---

He threatened you

He hit you

He prevented you from seeing your family or relating to friends and neighbors

He said everything you did was wrong

**Measure of Technical Abuse in the Survey**

---

***At the moment, how often your intimate partner done any of the following***

---

He decides what you can and cannot do

He takes the money you earn or does not give you what you need

He prevents you from seeing your family or relating to friends and neighbours

He tells you that you are not capable of anything

He insults you or make you feel bad with yourself

He insists on having sex even when he knows you don't want to

He frightens you

He pushes or hits you

He threatens you

Doesn't appreciate your work

He decides the things you can or cannot do

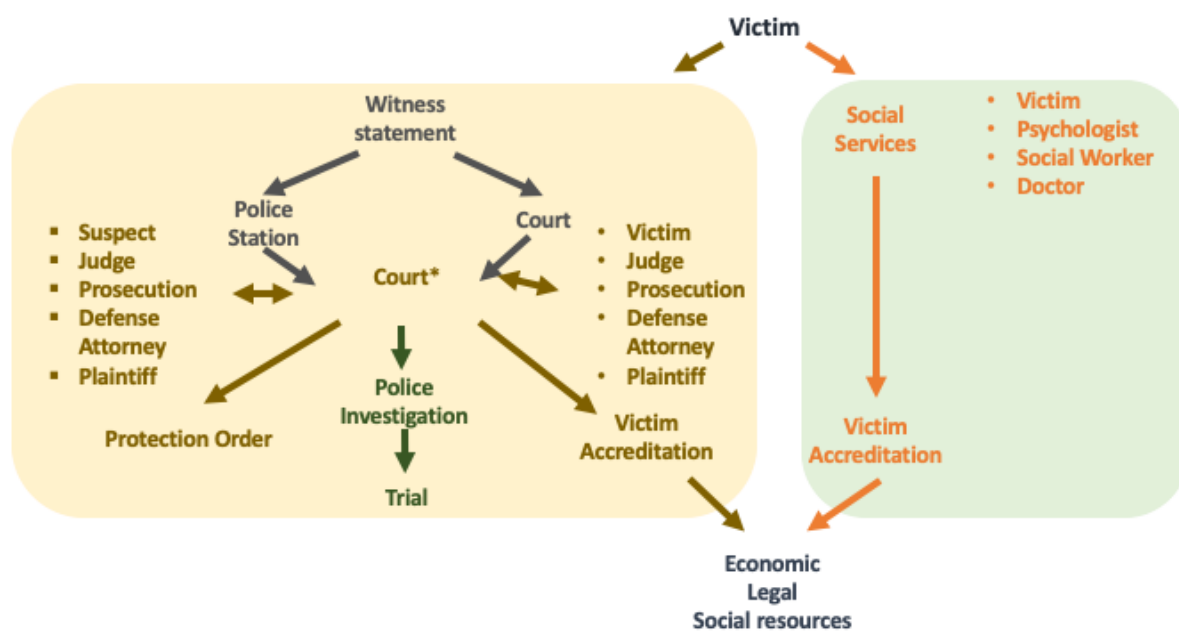
He does not appreciate your work

He does not value your beliefs

---

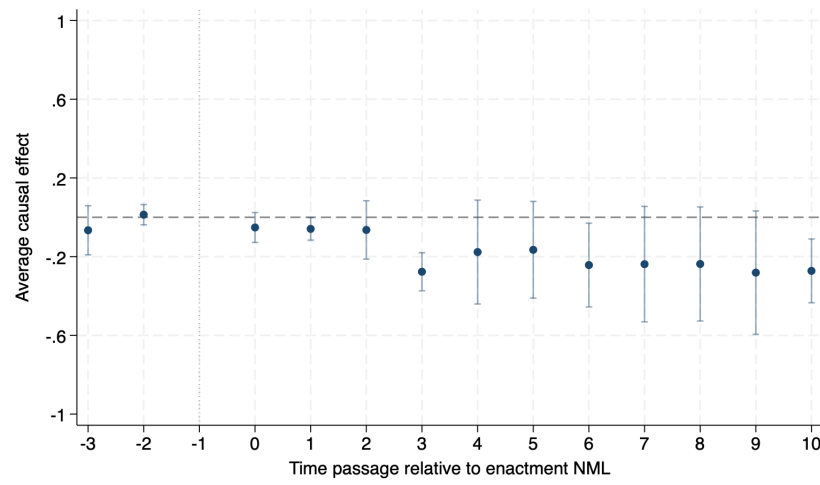
**Source:** Questionnaire Spanish Survey on Violence Against Women, 1999, 2002,2005,2011.

**Figure A1:** Process to access services



**Source:** Author' analysis of the Official State Gazette.

**Figure A2: Event Study coefficient plot**



Note: Event-study coefficient plot using [Sun and Abraham \(2021\)](#). Period t represents the year Non-mandatory laws were enacted.  
Dependent variable: DV incidents reported to the police per 100,000 women

**Table A4:** Endogenous Adoption of Non Mandatory Reporting Laws

	(1)	(2)
	First Year Non Mandatory Law>0	First Year Non Mandatory Law>0
Domestic Violence	-0.0396 (0.072)	-0.0095 (0.101)
Share of Natives		-1.7569 (1.709)
Share of Low Educated Women		3.8934 (2.634)
Ratio Female to Male Employment		0.0047 (0.049)
Unemployment Rate		-1.0102 (1.132)
Constant	0.0990 (0.065)	-1.8948 (1.302)
Observations	45	45
R-squared	0.001	0.160
Local Area Characteristics	No	Yes

*Notes:* Table A4 reports the estimates from Eq 2. All regressions include a constant term, as well as the other regressors included in Eq 2 in the text. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Standards errors are clustered at the local level level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$