On the subject of violence against women, there is no shortage of depressing news. Take a Bureau of Justice Statistics report entitled “Female Victims of Violent Crime” which reported that in 1974 women’s likelihood of violent victimization was less than half that of men; by 1994, it stood at two thirds that of men. Basically, in two decades, the nation saw the decreasing violent victimization rates for men while the victimization rates for women remained “relatively stable or increasing.” With reference to lethal violence, “husbands or boyfriends killed 26% of female murder victims, whereas wives or girlfriends killed 3% of male victims.” Finally, between 1977 and 1995, the murder rate for male intimates (husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends) dropped by two thirds (from 1.5 per 100K to 0.5 per 100K), while the female murders by intimates barely budged (dropping them from 1.6 per 100K to 1.3 per 100K) (Craven, 1996: 2). Pretty dismal stuff, overall, for those concerned about women victims.

How has the academy responded to this national crisis of lethal violence against women? With few exceptions, the academic literature on domestic violence (particularly that which appears in prestigious journals) has focused almost exclusively on the issue of mandatory arrest and its effectiveness in reducing subsequent wife battering. Arrest has always been a weak reed upon which to build a national policy on domestic violence. Most recently, in fact, arrest emerged as even more of a problem where women victims are concerned. A California study found that the female share of these arrests increased from 6 percent in 1988 to 16.5 percent in 1998 (Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis, 1999), and other jurisdictions report even higher proportions of women arrested for “domestic violence.” Many now suspect, in fact, that statistics showing increasing arrests of women and girls for assaults can be largely explained by mandatory arrest policies.

There is another intervention – temporary restraining orders – that have failed to receive as much academic attention, and this is unfortunate since, unlike the arrest situation, women seeking TROs are clearly seeking help and are willing to act against their batterers. Often, TROs are dismissed as being “just a piece of paper,” but James Ptacek’s *Battered Women in the Courtroom* indicates that they are far more than that. The book cleverly uses TRO applications, and various proceedings around TROs, as a way to explore “judicial responses” to wife battering in Massachusetts. In the process, the book actually serves up some good news about progress that we have made.
in the area of wife battering as well as some clear ideas about where we need to go in the future.

The book is actually a summary of findings from a series of different modest investigations on the part of the author. He reports first on the contents of a random sample of 100 women’s applications for temporary restraining orders filed in 1992 in to courts in MA: Dorchester District Court (which serves a “working-class and poor, predominantly African-American and Latino and Latina population”) and Quincy District Court (“which serves a middle- and working-class, largely Anglo-American population”) (p. 72). The author also conducted courtroom observations of eighteen different judges over a nine-month period of time between 1992 and 1993, and he interviewed 8 judges between 1992 and 1994. Finally, he conducted phone interviews with 40 women victims (twenty from each jurisdiction) who had applied for TROs in 1992. These different data sets provide the empirical foundation for the book.

Cutting to the chase, Ptacek’s best news is contained in the last chapters of the book, where he reports on the interviews with the victim’s themselves. Here, despite rather discouraging news about how women are treated in courtrooms when seeking TROs, we discover that 80% of the women in Dorchester and 95% of the women in Quincy said they had “made the right decision” in going to court to get a temporary restraining order (p. 171). Nonetheless, 62% of the respondents said that their batterers had violated at least some aspect of the order. How to reconcile these two facts? Ptacek notes that it appears that for many of these women the process was its own reward. Not only did the TRO often work to stop the abuse for many of his respondents: “He’s afraid to get arrested, and I know a lot of men don’t listen to it, but he does, and I’m lucky for that” (p. 164), but also because the process of seeking a TRO forced the women to take action, which in turn, shifted the balance of power in their lives: “I would do it again if I had to because I proved something to him and I proved something to myself. I could put my feelings aside after 14 years of being with him. Even if I love him, I know it’s not right how he acts” (p. 165).

The women were also asked about their experiences with the court and the police personnel, and here the news was better than expected (and largely dovetailed with Ptacek’s own observations). About two thirds of the Judges were assessed by the women as supportive, while another quarter were “bureaucratic,” and about ten percent were “condescending, harsh, or otherwise demeaning” (p. 150). Police got more mixed reviews, though about half the women said they learned about TROs from the police. The most common complaint among the women was that the police were unwilling to arrest, even using the absence of a TRO as an excuse, despite Massachusetts law