Violence against women high in La.

A national report reveals that Louisiana trails just three other states in the number of women killed by men.

Cindy Urrea
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Tom Stagg says he knows how some men in Louisiana feel about their women. He hears their stories every day.

"Men here, and throughout the South, think they can do whatever they want to their women," said Stagg, director of Lafayette's Domestic Abuse Intervention Program. "Their women, their wives, are their property. Women are chattel to them. That is a very strong sentiment in the South."

"Because they are men, they believe that gives them privilege over their women," he said. "It's a belief system that does not value women and OKs any form of abuse. You can show them any statistic you want and they don't care: They want to hold on to that old belief system of 'she's mine, she's my property and I can do what I want.'"

According to Stagg, "that old belief system" partially explains a survey released Wednesday that shows Louisiana has the fourth highest rate of women murdered by men in the United States.

Based on 1996 statistics, 66 women were murdered by men in Louisiana for a homicide rate of 2.93 in every 100,000 population. Louisiana trailed only Nevada (3.44), Delaware (3.23) and South Carolina (3.08).

Most of the Louisiana women (56 percent) were shot and killed by guns and the vast majority (93 percent) were murdered by someone they knew, usually a boyfriend or husband. More than half of the murders (53 percent) happened during an argument between the victim and the killer.

The Louisiana statistics hold true for the nation: 93 percent of the 2,129 women killed by men in the United States knew their attacker, 56 percent were killed with guns and 63 percent died during an argument with their killer.

The survey was done by the anti-gun Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C., and timed to coincide with the start of Domestic Violence Awareness month in October.

For Stagg, the Louisiana figures and national ranking came as no surprise.

"We have one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the country," Stagg said. "Not only is it in our culture, but it is also tied to substance abuse — another problem we struggle to deal with here."

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Program is a court-ordered program specifically structured to deal with the chronic abuser. Since opening in 1994, the program has treated more than 1,600 men. According to Stagg, more than half graduated the program, which boasts a recidivism rate of less than 20 percent.

"We're trying to reverse the trend here by helping these batterers understand where that belief system came from and why they feel that way," Stagg said. "We've been lucky in Lafayette that there haven't been a lot more murders from domestic violence situations."

Many of the women who check into the Faith House domestic violence shelter report being threatened by their husbands or boyfriends, most often with a gun. It's one of the reasons Faith House has a 72-hour protection policy: Once a client checks in, she may not leave for three days.

And though physical abuse may drive a client to seek refuge at Faith House or call the police, the implied threat of a gun can be just as threatening, according to Major Ralph Peters of the Lafayette Sheriff's Office.

"Domestic violence is not about a gun, it's about power and control," Peters said. "But just knowing that there is a gun on the rack in the truck or in the closet or in the drawer is enough of an intimidation for most women. It's a danger sign and should be taken seriously."