

An Inside View of Police Officers' Experience with Domestic Violence

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This presentation is dedicated in memory of the life and work of

Dr. Susan H. Horwitz

Introduction

- **Since the recognition of domestic violence (DV) in the late 1970s, police officers have continued to be frontline providers.**
- **Despite their changing role, little is known about their experiences and responses to DV.**
- **This paper fills a gap in the literature by asking police officers for their thoughts, feelings and recommendations on how to reduce and ameliorate this public health problem.**

Literature Review

- Though their role seems clear and straightforward, police efforts to both “eliminate” and interrupt DV can be complex.
- The major themes within the body of literature on police involvement in DV incidents include:
 1. Current arrest policies.
 2. Victims’ access and attitudes toward police.
 3. Police attitudes toward victims and perpetrators.
 4. Gender differences between male and female police officers.
- There is scant literature that directly asks police officers what they think and feel about their role in intervening with DV.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

- This study occurred in upstate New York, with an urban police force.
- Twenty-two police officers, 10 women and 12 men, participated in a 1.5 hour focus group:
 1. All-male
 2. All-female
 3. Mixed gender group.

Participant Demographics

- Ages ranged from 20 to over 50 years old ($\bar{X}=47.2$).
- Mean level of experience was 18 years in the department.
- Fourteen (63.6%) of the 22 officers had a bachelor’s degree or higher.
- Twelve officers (54.5%) identified themselves as Caucasian, five (22.7%) as African American, three (13.6%) as Latino and one (4.5%) as Asian American. One officer did not report a race or ethnicity.

Participant Demographics

- Fourteen (63.6%) of the officers were married and four (18.2%) officers reported being divorced. The others (18.1%) were either living in a committed relationship, or never married.
- Twenty officers (90.9%) had children.
- Their ranks ranged from leadership to frontline responders.

Procedure

- Each focus group followed the same format and script.
- A 20-minute power point presentation of the results from the *Community-wide Professionals' Response to Partner Violence* were presented to each group.
- Participants were invited to respond to the following questions:

Focus Group Questions

1. What do these results say to you about your professional response to domestic violence?
2. How prepared do you feel for dealing with partner violence?
3. What do you think your role should be in working with partner violence?
4. What next steps do these results suggest?
5. Why do you think people who are in partner violent relationships ask for help at such low rates?
6. Are there any other observations that you would like to make regarding partner violence?

Analysis

- Team members met and read the transcripts aloud, which were imbedded into ATLAS.ti, a software program that electronically organizes and stores information coded thematically (Muhr 1993-2010).
- The team coded and recoded the data at three distinct levels.
 1. Open coding phase (42 codes).
 2. These were collapsed into 6 code families.
 3. Three major themes emerged.

Results (Handout #1)

- Police Practice Patterns
- Chronicity and Complexity of DV
- Future Connections to Larger Systems

Police Practice Patterns

Figure 1. Police Activities (Middle Boxes)

"I would say that we're prepared because we're told what we have to do. We know how you're gonna handle every domestic situation because there's mandatory arrests, there's things; there's procedures we have to follow. So, most of them are the same. You go in there, you do a specific report, you arrest the person that you think is the one who started it, or, so they're the same".

Chronicity and Complexity of DV

Figure 1 Current Barriers (Top Left Boxes)

“And so we look at the woman getting thrashed around and you’ve been to the house four times, and you say, you know lady, you own some of this. And I don’t know that we’re empathic enough with people who really are helpless and victimized and not able to extract themselves because we have a hard time picturing ourselves doing that, or being that way”.

“You always go back to those same houses, and we’ll arrest on an order of protection and they’re back out, and it’s like, it starts over and over again”.

Desired Changes and Outcomes

Figure 1 Desired Changes and Outcomes (Upper Right Boxes)

“And if we had that same kind of debriefing and analysis around issues of domestic violence [as they have with community violence incidents], we might do some things different”.

“I think at least, you know, the attitude of the officers would be more optimistic in the fact that their actions are going to have some positive effect on a solution to the problem”.

Discussion

- Participants were emphatic and clear about how they viewed themselves as one thread in a complex and interwoven system.
- The police know what to do. They know where to refer victims. The problem is not in the protocol, but rather in the redundancy of ineffective, albeit often heartfelt efforts.
- After meeting with the officers and hearing their stories, their disappointments and their frustrations, the authors began to understand the emotional responses that the participants described. The picture became clearer of the victim who calls for police intervention and finds herself invalidated and discredited.

Limitations

- This study was conducted in an upstate New York urban community which may not be reflective of rural and suburban officer's experiences.
- The state laws also, while enacting mandatory arrest policies, did not provide adequate fiscal resources with which to provide staffing needed to enforce the statute.
- Although this study was deemed exempt, the militaristic nature of the police profession raises issues about officers' freedoms to speak openly.
- Lastly, this qualitative study lays the foundation for a larger study that seeks to integrate the findings and have officers themselves elucidate their experiences.

Conclusions

- The police can do their part and enforce the laws that protect the public's safety.
- However, for them to have job satisfaction and continue to be engaged, we must begin to pay attention to their specific needs: debriefing, feedback and continuing DV education.
- As the scientific community advances the field through evidence-based interventions, we must inform the police academy so appropriate referrals can be made and ensure that DV curriculums are updated.

For More Information

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