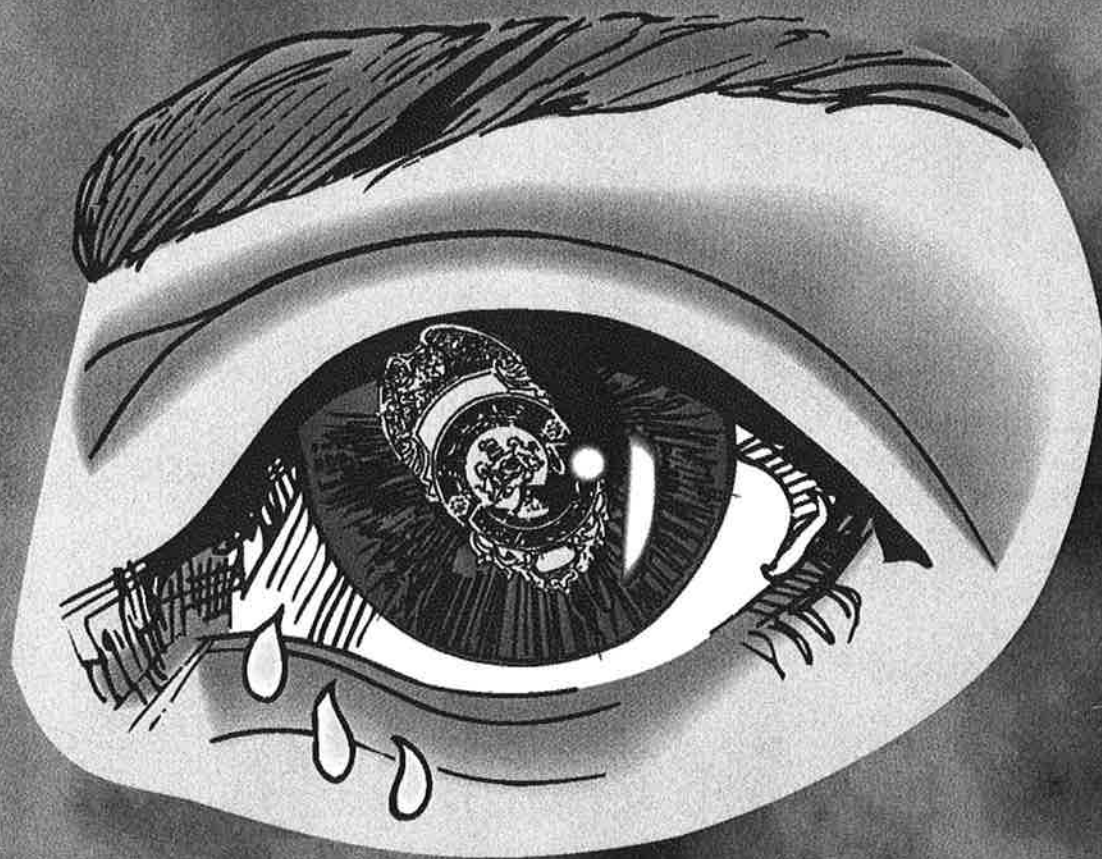




U.S. Department of Justice  
Federal Bureau of Investigation

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



## BY POLICE OFFICERS

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE UNIT  
FBI ACADEMY  
QUANTICO, VA



# *Domestic Violence by Police Officers*

**A compilation of papers submitted  
to the Domestic Violence by Police  
Officers Conference at the FBI Academy  
Quantico, VA**

**DONALD C. SHEEHAN**  
**Supervisory Special Agent**  
**Federal Bureau of Investigation**

**Editor**

**Washington, D.C.**  
**2000**

## PREVENTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Nancy K. Bohl

*Abstract: The author wants to prevent domestic violence on the part of police officers. Although the exact prevalence of domestic violence by police officers remains unknown, certain risk factors increase the potential for it to happen: personality, organizational perspective, training and job characteristics. Positive changes can occur by attending to selection, organizational structure and policy, training, and counseling. Certain unresolved issues needing attention exist: family safety, the buddy issue, and confidentiality.*

KEY WORDS: police domestic violence, prevention, solutions

Address correspondence concerning this article to Nancy K. Bohl, Ph.D., The Counseling Team,  
1881 Business Center Drive, Suite 11, San Bernardino, CA 92408.

## PREVENTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A large amount of research literature on domestic violence exists. Mention in the literature almost always refers to police in their role as representatives of the law and concerns how they can best help the victims. Accordingly, researchers have dealt with such matters as the factors that influence the decision to make an arrest (Bachman and Coker, 1995; Finn and Stalans, 1997; Gondolf and McFerron, 1989; Home, 1991/1992; Saunders, 1995), whether mandatory arrest laws decrease recidivism (Miller and Krull, 1997; Paternoster, Bachman, Brame, and Sherman, 1997; Schmidt and Sherman, 1993; Tolman and Weisz, 1995), and what training police officers should have to make them sensitive to the needs of victims (Mignon and Holmes, 1995; Rigakos, 1995; Shipley, 1995). We know now that in a percentage of domestic violence cases, police officers are involved not as protectors but rather as perpetrators (Boyd, Carlson, Smith, and Sykes, 1995; Turner, 1998). This article focuses on the occurrence of domestic violence on the part of male police officers. Statistics show that, in the great majority of cases of domestic violence, the perpetrator is male and the victim is female (Bell, 1987; Steinmetz, 1980).

## FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE

The lack of reliable data makes any meaningful statements about the frequency of domestic violence in law enforcement officers difficult. In one recent survey of law enforcement personnel in a southwestern state, 24 percent of the 891 male officers who responded reported that they were physically aggressive with their spouses (Neidig, Russell, and Seng, 1992). A national survey of police agencies carried out in 1995 dealt with a different issue, which was whether an increase had occurred during the prior two years (Boyd et al., 1995). Although 28 percent of the responding departments reported such an increase, the findings remain suspect, because respondents were told what findings the investigators expected. Whether the data reflected an increase in reporting or an increase in actual incidents remains a question.

In the absence of sufficient data on police officers, Turner (1998) suggests we use the estimated incidence for the general population, but that figure remains unclear. According to a national survey published in 1985, an incidence of 16 percent occurred among married or cohabiting couples (Straus and Gelles, 1986), but more recent studies involving more restricted samples have yielded estimates of 37 percent (Newmark, Harrel, and Salem, 1995) and 33 percent (American Medical Association, 1994). The highest estimates (57 percent and 54 percent respectively) come from studies of the military (Bohannon, Dosser, and Lindley, 1995) and women treated for any reason at hospitals in a single, large, metropolitan area (Abbott, Johnson, Koziol-McLain, and Lowenstein, 1995).

What particular categories of men within law enforcement appear likely to become involved in domestic violence? The only presently available data come from an unpublished report provided by the Los Angeles Police Department for the years 1990 to 1998 to the Los Angeles City Council (Parks, 1998). Of 438 domestic violence complaints involving police officers, the largest number involved men in the age range 30 to 39 at the rank of Police Officer II.

## POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON THE PART OF POLICE OFFICERS

**Personality.** Personnel selected for law enforcement duties demonstrate above average intelligence, self-confidence, and responsibility, but they tend to display guarded, moralistic, rigid, and authoritarian behaviors. These characteristics make the individual less flexible in interpersonal situations. Police officers detach themselves emotionally from the environment in which they work. Dropping that detachment at home becomes difficult as they progress in their careers. This often results in withdrawal, decreased communication, and lack of emotional intimacy. The individual who has no outlet for emotional expression may feel stressed, and there will be an increased tendency to act out. The police officer's acceptance of traditional male-female sex-role stereotypes, in which the man is expected to remain strong and silent and the woman is expected to remain obedient (Kirschman, 1997), increases the tendency toward maladaptive behavior.

**Organizational perspective.** In the average police officer's world, giving and obeying orders occurs daily. It becomes natural to give orders at home and have them obeyed. At work, the expression of anger toward superiors appears insubordinate. As a result, law enforcement personnel often take that anger and frustration home and displace it onto their wives and children.

**Training.** Law enforcement academies stress the importance of gaining compliance. They actually equate compliance with officer safety. The average police officer uses force on the as one of several possible appropriate solutions to a problem situation. That same attitude often goes home. Failure to gain complete compliance from a spouse may trigger the fear that control has been lost, and it may result in an almost automatic justification in the officer's mind for the use of physical force.

**Job characteristics.** Men who batter minimize the degree and impact of their violence (Vaselle-Augenstein and Ehrlich, 1992). Police officers witness and use force—physical, verbal, and emotional—in the routine performance of their duties, and they become habituated to it. That habituation makes it likely that they will not see their use of physical force in the home as acts of violence; and they are even less likely to see their use of verbal or emotional force as abusive.

Because people sometimes lie to them, police officers often become cynical and suspicious. If carried over to the home, these attitudes can result in chronic jealousy and paranoia. Frequently officers place extreme restrictions on their families, in terms of what they can do and where they can go. Although the restrictions may arise out of a desire to protect the family, the result is isolation of the family from friends, relatives, and the community. That isolation provides a background condition for the occurrence of domestic violence (Vaselle-Augenstein and Ehrlich, 1992) because the spouse becomes effectively cut off from information and support that could be provided by others.

### HOW TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE

**Selection.** The selection procedure functions to screen out individuals who demonstrate clearly pathological behavior and have a prior history of violence, but it should go further, giving

#### 4 Preventing Domestic Violence

preference to applicants who display flexibility, good impulse, control, and interpersonal skills. Not only do such individuals make good police officers but they also engage less frequently in domestic violence. Additionally, give careful consideration to eliminating applicants who use alcohol excessively. Use of alcohol does not cause battering but, since it acts to remove inhibitions, it can function as a trigger (Vaselle-Augenstein and Ehrlich, 1992).

**Organizational structure and policy.** Treatment classes for male batterers emphasize relating to others, especially women, on a more equal basis (Adams, 1988). Police organizations need to change away from authoritarian role-playing as well. As new applicants are selected for the police force who have better interpersonal skills than past applicants, the need for the kind of regimented, paramilitary structure that has always characterized the police will decrease. Flexibility must become a part of the organizational structure, and it must occur from the top down. It applies to both formal and informal procedures. In particular, make more allowances for input from individuals who are at the lower echelons.

Police organizations need more than a change to more equitable personal relationships. Rather than handling each complaint on a case-by-case basis (Boyd et al., 1995), agencies need to have a definite policy in place which states clearly that all offenders, including police officers, receive prosecution. Until recently, domestic violence often was trivialized by law enforcement agencies to something noncriminal, noninjurious, and inconsequential. The false perception of a private family matter promotes further abuse. Departments can no longer tolerate such behavior. In recent years, law enforcement agencies have begun to take a more aggressive stand with respect to prosecution of batterers. However, the tendency to look the other way still exists. Turner (1998) suggests a model policy for dealing with domestic violence in police officers. The policy features: 1) zero tolerance for domestic violence in law enforcement and 2) disciplinary action against department members who fail to report suspected domestic violence. Supervisors who fail to act when they discover domestic abuse by their subordinates should receive disciplinary action as well.

**Training.** Preventive training should begin in the police academy, emphasizing physical force as only one of several possible solutions to a problem situation. Teach verbal skills at the academy, both through explicit instruction and through modeling of appropriate behavior on the part of instructors. Reinforce the use of interpersonal negotiating skills on the part of students, not merely by instructors. Change the way officers learn to obtain compliance. Instead of teaching compliance as a matter of course, recruits at the academy should learn to obtain compliance only when necessary to eliminate a threat to safety.

Students at police academies should take a course on domestic violence. San Bernardino, California, mandates such training. The course originally aimed to make officers aware of the need for outside intervention to protect the victim and to acquaint officers with their legal responsibilities in the event they respond to a scene where domestic violence occurred. A recently enhanced version of the course shows officers the relevance of the material in their own lives. It describes domestic violence as a felony like any other. All perpetrators, including police officers, receive punishment. They learn it is not a good idea to protect buddies who engage in domestic violence. Part of the course

involves a discussion of the relationship between stereotypical male sex-role behavior and violence. Students learn women have been socially trained to respond to anger and stress by turning inward and becoming depressed, whereas men have been trained from childhood to respond to anger and stress by striking out at someone. Better ways to deal with anger and stress receive full treatment both in this course and others at the police academy. Officers receive specific training in anger management techniques and appropriate methods for the reduction of stress.

The opportunity for training is not limited to the police academy. Further opportunities arise with in-service training for officers. Courses for supervisors and Internal Affairs group investigators emphasize the necessity to treat domestic violence incidents seriously. Specific information about available counseling resources and how to make appropriate referrals for suspected domestic abusers contribute to the course content. Education does not have to be confined to the classroom. Roll call is an entirely appropriate place to conduct domestic violence training.

**Counseling.** The ultimate goal of any program to reduce or eliminate domestic violence in police officers should be prevention. Accordingly, officers who are at risk should be identified and directed to counseling services. Consider an individual at risk if he exhibits the following behaviors:

Talks about his wife or partner a lot but in a way that suggests pathological jealousy and extreme control (e.g., reports that his wife has to report her whereabouts at all times and that she cannot see friends and relatives without him).

Says that his wife is no good but, at the same time, says that they will stay together forever.

Says that he is following or having his wife followed.

Talks about "slapping her around a little for her own good" and insists that the damage was not serious.

Reports fantasies of beating his wife, raping her, or killing her.

Shows, both in conversation and in actions, that he believes myths about battering (e.g., that the woman deserves it, that he has the right to do it, and that he should not suffer serious consequences for it).

Has low self-esteem combined with highly traditional attitudes about sex roles.

A variety of treatment programs exists for police officers identified as "at risk." Here, the peer support program can play an important role. Men reluctant to ask for help from a professional often are willing to talk to other police officers. Therefore, expand the usual training for peer support program personnel so that they know the warning signs and can provide appropriate help. Other possibilities for counseling include talking with a chaplain, treatment with other batterers in a group that is led by a mental health professional, or individual counseling with a mental health professional.

## 6 Preventing Domestic Violence

Regardless of who conducts the sessions, include topics such as a discussion of the impact of a law enforcement career on relationships, ways to improve communication with the spouse, and ways to make the relationship more equal. In an ideal domestic violence prevention program, an officer having trouble controlling violence could request counseling privately, without having to go to a supervisor for permission.

### UNRESOLVED ISSUES

**Ensuring the woman's safety.** Evidence suggests the underreporting of domestic violence in the general population (Bachman and Coker, 1995; Berliner, 1987), probably because battered women fear asking for outside help. Police officers who batter exacerbate the problem because they know the location of women's shelters, know how to track people who have disappeared, are knowledgeable about the legal system (especially the fact that protective orders rarely are treated seriously by the police, Rigakos, 1995), and have special training to include responding quickly and disarming others. Ways will have to be found to make these women feel safe. It is not clear whether they will require protection beyond what is ordinarily offered to victims of domestic violence.

**The buddy issue.** Officers are supposed to report suspected domestic violence by their colleagues, but it may prove difficult to circumvent the tendency of police officers to draw together and close ranks. Certainly, an officer would not want to report a colleague on whom he might, at some later date, rely upon for his very life. As for supervisors, many do not discipline men they feel are otherwise "good officers." We must explore ways to alter the high level of tolerance for domestic violence presently displayed by many people in law enforcement.

The severity of the recent amendment to the Federal Gun Control Act which prohibits individuals who have been convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence from carrying guns may have unintended consequences. Since police officers need their guns, they could lose their jobs. The federal government clearly considers domestic violence a serious offense; however, the very severity of the newly enacted penalty could increase the tendency of police officers to protect one another by failing to report incidents of suspected domestic violence.

**Confidentiality.** Sometimes the battered spouse receives counseling rather than her husband. The guidelines with respect to what is ethical behavior on the part of a counselor who is retained by a police department are not entirely clear. The problem will arise, as well, when chaplains and individuals from the peer support program are involved in counseling police officers who have battered their spouses. Specification of behaviors constituting an indication of a "danger to others," and hence, require notification of the appropriate authorities needs to be made explicit.

### CONCLUSION

The need to deal with the problem of domestic violence on the part of law enforcement officers has always existed, but the recent changes in the Federal Gun Control Act have provided an added sense of urgency. Although some issues still need to be addressed, it does not imply a hopeless



situation. We need to maintain a proactive rather than a reactive stance and deal with problems *before* they arise. That means making a better selection of recruits, making the organizational structure more democratic, instituting formal zero-tolerance policies for domestic violence in law enforcement, providing training for officers at all levels in which alternatives to the use of force, both at home and elsewhere, are emphasized, and identifying those individuals who seem to be at risk and referring them to appropriate resources. Doing these things will ensure real progress in eliminating or, at the very least, reducing domestic violence on the part of law enforcement officers.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, J., Johnson, R., Koziol-McLain, J., and Lowenstein, S. R. (1995). Domestic violence against women: Incidence and prevalence in an emergency department population. Journal of the American Medical Association, 273, 1763-1767.
- Adams, D. (1988). Treatment models of men who batter: A profeminist analysis. In K. Yllo and M. Bograd (Eds.), Feminist perspectives on wife abuse (pp. 176-199). Beverly Hills, Ca: Sage Publications.
- American Medical Association. (1994, June 4). When violence hits home. Time Magazine.
- Bachman, R., and Coker, A. L. (1995). Police involvement in domestic violence: The interactive effects of victim injury, offender's history of violence, and race. Violence and Victims, 10, 91-106.
- Bell, D. J. (1987). The victim-offender relationship: A determinant factor in police domestic dispute dispositions. Marriage and Family Review, 12, 87-102.
- Berliner, L. (1987). The frequency of interpersonal violence: What do the studies tell us? Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 2, 223-224.
- Bohannon, J. R., Dosser, D. A. and Lindley, S. E. (1995). Using couple data to determine domestic violence rates: An attempt to replicate previous work. Violence and Victims, 10, 133-141.
- Boyd, L., Carlson, D., Smith, R., and Sykes, G. W. (1995). Domestic assault among police: A survey of internal affairs policies. Arlington, TX: Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute of the Southwestern Legal Foundation.
- Finn, M. A., and Stalans, L. J. (1997). The influence of gender and mental state on police decisions in domestic assault cases. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 24, 157-176.
- Gondolf, E. W., and McFerron, J. R. (1989). Handling battering men: Police action in wife abuse cases. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 16, 429-439.
- Home, A. (1991/1992). Responding to domestic violence: A comparison of social workers' and police officers' interventions. Social Work and Social Sciences Review, 3, 150-162.
- Kirschman, E. (1997). I love a cop: What police families need to know. NY: Guilford Press.
- Mignon, S. I., and Holmes, W. M. (1995). Police response to mandatory arrest laws. Crime and Delinquency, 41, 430-442.
- Miller, J. A. L., and Krull, A. C. (1997). Controlling domestic violence: Victim resources and

police intervention. In G. K. Kantor and J. L. Jasinski (Eds.), Out of darkness: Contemporary perspectives on family violence (pp. 235-254). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Neidig, P., Russell, H., and Seng, A. (1992). Interspousal aggression in law enforcement families: A preliminary investigation. Police Studies, *15*, 30-38.

Newmark, L., Harrel, A. and Salem, P. (1995). Domestic violence and empowerment in custody and visitation in custody and visitation cases. Family and Conciliation Courts Review, *33*, 30- 62.

Parks, B. (1998, March). Memorandum to the Los Angeles City Council.

Paternoster, R., Bachman, R., Brame, R., and Sherman, L. W. (1997). Do fair procedures matter? The effect of procedural justice on spouse assault. Law and Society Review, *31*, 163-204.

Rigakos, G. S. (1995). Constructing the symbolic complainant: Police subculture and the nonenforcement of protection orders for battered women. Violence and Victims, *10*, 227-246.

Saunders, D. G. (1995). The tendency to arrest victims of domestic violence: A preliminary analysis of officer characteristics. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, *10*, 147-158.

Schmidt, J. D., and Sherman, L. W. (1993). Does arrest deter domestic violence? American Behavioral Scientist, *36*, 601-609.

Shipley, M. M. (1995). Domestic violence: Nashville's increased response. Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, *6*, 135-137.

Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). Women and violence: Victims and perpetrators. American Journal of Psychotherapy, *34*, 334-350.

Straus, M., and Gelles, R. J. (1986). Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. Journal of Marriage and Family, *48*, 465-479.

Tolman, R. M., and Weisz, A. (1995). Coordinated community intervention for domestic violence: The effects of arrest and prosecution on recidivism of woman abuse perpetrators. Crime and Delinquency, *41*, 481-495.

Turner, N. (1998, June). IACP releases model policy on police officer-involved domestic violence. Police Chief, p. 61.

Vaselle-Augenstein, R., and Ehrlich, A. (1992). Male batterers: Evidence for psychopathology. In E. C. Viano (Ed.), Intimate violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives (pp. 139-154). Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis Publishers.