

## **The Prevalence of Domestic Violence in Police Families**

**Andrew H. Ryan, Jr.**

***Abstract:** This study replicates and extends an earlier work conducted by the Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute. It addresses the serious problem of domestic violence by police officers in three areas: determining the extent of the problem, deriving solutions acceptable to police culture, and establishing a research agenda for future efforts. The study took place in seven agencies located in the Southeastern United States with full permission of each agency's chief administrator.*

**KEY WORDS:** police domestic violence, prevalence, solutions

Address correspondence concerning this article to Dr. Andrew H. Ryan, Ph.D.,  
Department of Defense, Polygraph Institute, 7540 Pickens Ave., Ft. Jackson, SC, 29206.

## **THE PREVALENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN POLICE FAMILIES**

In the past few years, people nationwide have turned their attention to domestic violence. In this time period, researchers and advocates alike have successfully enumerated the many adverse effects of domestic violence. The consequences are striking in their severity. For example, a 1992 report to the United States Senate cites domestic violence as the foremost cause of injuries in women of the ages 15 to 44, with the number of injuries resulting from domestic violence eclipsing the combined injuries of automobile accidents, muggings, and cancer deaths (Violence, 1992). In a 1993 article, Holtz and Furniss echo this thought, stating that the most common cause of emergency care for women remains abuse and it may contribute to 25 percent of female suicide attempts and 4,000 homicides every year.

Other statistics demonstrate the widespread nature of domestic violence. For example, national figures suggest that one in four women become victims of abuse by a partner (Glazer, 1993). Estimates suggest that approximately 4 million women and 2.4 million children face such abuse yearly (Family Violence Coalition, 1991). Furthermore, domestic violence appears to span across all areas of society, including many highly regarded professions. For example, the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups (1990) states that respected professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and ministers may comprise about one-third of the counseled abusers.

Would one expect the prevalence rate of domestic violence by police officers to mirror these national figures? Some in the community might expect a lower rate, given the fact that police officers have the responsibility of enforcing and following the law. On the other hand, some researchers point to the “high-risk lifestyle” and “high rates of divorce, alcoholism, and burn-out” of police officers as possibly contributing to comparable or higher rates of abuse (Neidig, Seng, and Russell, 1992). Regardless of the precise rate, such violence by police officers continues as a serious problem and zero-tolerance remains the only acceptable solution. In addition to the well-documented outcomes of such violence by nonofficers, further negative consequences exist for members of the law enforcement community. For example, researchers report that such violence may increase the likelihood of the use of excessive force while on duty (Neidig et al., 1992). Moreover, following the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act (1997), law enforcement officers convicted of a misdemeanor of domestic violence may find themselves without jobs.

These potential outcomes underscore the seriousness of this problem. Officers, like nonofficers, fall prey to stress and other social influences that result in domestic abuse. However, many questions arise concerning this problem. How many police officers commit domestic violence? Estimates of abuse by law enforcement personnel range from 22 percent to 41 percent (Neidig et al., 1992). However, authorities have not yet reached an agreement on these figures. The lack of a clear idea of a substantiated prevalence rate contributes to these additional questions: what kinds of research would help in this area, and what solutions work with this population?

Numerous attempts have been made to assess the prevalence rate of domestic violence in the police family. The scope of this problem and exploration of its possible developmental nature remain

largely unaddressed. Many researchers and senior police administrators have relied on estimates taken from similar populations such as military families. Relying on such estimates and generalizing from another culture remains problematic.

Assessing the extent of the problem in a closed culture like policing will require cooperation from both police agencies and those who serve the police agencies. Specifically, we must compare the prevalence before and after recruits enter law enforcement academies. Should we advocate preventive education or intervention programs for those in need? We need to cross-validate our data by assessing the problem from multiple dimensions.

In short, we must recognize the job demands while at the same time acknowledging the rising public expectations regarding professional conduct. Debate about estimates of abuse, ranging from 22 percent to 41 percent, is likely to continue for years to come. Whatever the extent of the problem we must approach the problem with a zero-tolerance attitude and immediately design solutions that police departments accept.

This study aims to provide answers to the questions of prevalence, research, and solutions. To do so, the study involves three parts. The study begins with a replication of research conducted by the Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute (Boyd, Carlson, Smith, and Sykes, 1995). Next, the study contains a cursory analysis of data from the testing of a population of police officer candidates. The study concludes with a survey of agencies serving domestic violence victims.

## METHOD

Researchers conducted a pilot study of seven law enforcement agencies located in the Southeast and Midwest areas of the United States. Each agency received a maximum of 50 surveys (see appendix A) that the sheriff/police chief randomly gave to officers. The anonymously completed surveys consisted of 13 questions that officers answered “Yes” or “No”. For 11 of these items, officers had the option of choosing “Don’t Know”, though the instructions on the survey encouraged them to avoid using this answer. These questions dealt with the involvement of officers in domestic violence, the reporting of instances of domestic violence, the discipline of perpetrators of domestic violence, and the training curriculum for officers about domestic violence.

In addition, the survey asked officers to rank on a Likert scale of 10 (Very much a problem) to 1 (Not a problem at all) the degree to which domestic violence exists as a problem in their department. The survey ended with a question asking officers about their preference for mandatory or voluntary domestic violence intervention programs. This item also allowed for the officer to explain his or her answer. Along with the survey, officers received a prepaid envelope in which they could return their survey. This seemed to reassure them of the confidentiality of the process.

The second part of the study involved the analyzing of prehire self-report data obtained from tests taken by candidates for various law enforcement positions. Tests used in this study included the Personal History Questionnaire (PHQ) and the Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI). For each test,

## 4 Prevalence of Violence

researchers looked at the percentages of respondents who had answered test items in a manner that might indicate a greater propensity for domestic violence. In the case of the PHQ, the primary item examined was as follows: “Have you ever slapped, punched, or otherwise injured a spouse or romantic partner?” In addition, the researchers examined respondents’ answers to various questions regarding demographic data and alcohol use to determine if any of these areas were correlated with the above admission.

In this phase of the study, researchers conducted telephone surveys with 26 agencies serving victims of domestic violence. Types of agencies contacted included help lines and shelters. The primary question asked of these agencies was “What is your estimate of prevalence of domestic violence within the law enforcement community?” Researchers asked the contacts at these agencies to provide both an estimate of the reported and the actual prevalence of this problem within this population.

### RESULTS

**Survey.** Of the 288 surveys given to officers, researchers received 210 completed surveys in the mail, showing a participation rate of 73 percent. The rather high response rate probably reflects the nonthreatening and anonymous nature of the questionnaire. Additionally, the high response rate may indicate the officers’ level of interest in this topic.

Respondents answered questions regarding issues of the actual involvement of fellow officers in domestic violence in the following manner: 54 percent indicated that they knew of an officer in their department involved in domestic violence, 64 percent stated that they had heard rumors about such involvement, and 44 percent stated that domestic violence occurred among members of their department. The average overall rating for the degree to which domestic violence was a problem in the departments surveyed was three, on a scale with ten being “Very Much a Problem” and one being “Not a Problem at All.” A rating of three was also the modal response given. A complementary finding was that only four percent of those surveyed indicated that the involvement of police officers in domestic violence was greater than the involvement of nonpolice officers.

Regarding the reporting of domestic violence incidents among fellow officers, respondents answered as follows: 45 percent acknowledged reports made to their departments concerning domestic violence by officers, 53 percent indicated awareness of officers reported for domestic violence. However, only 16 percent knew of officers involved in domestic violence that went unreported.

In the area of discipline/intervention, 31 percent reported that a member of their department had been disciplined for involvement in domestic violence, 28 percent of respondents stated that they believed severe punishment caused underreporting of domestic violence. Thirty percent of the respondents found discipline for domestic violence offenses too severe. Interestingly, 63 percent of respondents stated that they thought they or other officers would seek help if the information remained strictly confidential.

Regarding the training curriculum, 47 percent of officers reported that they believed in the

effectiveness of treatment programs. Likewise, 55 percent reported that they believed in the potential success of prevention programs. Forty-three percent supported mandatory interventions. Reasons given for mandatory programs included: the severity of the offense, police officers' perceived duty to uphold the law in their personal conduct, and an expressed concern that some officers would not attend voluntary training interests. On the other hand, 54 percent supported voluntary interventions. Respondents listed the following rationales for voluntary treatment: a general resentment of mandatory training of any kind, a general belief that intervention helps only if the person wants help, and the thinking that many simply do not need this sort of training.

**Self Report.** Responses to the PHQ indicated that 10 percent of respondents (148 candidates) admitted to having ever slapped, punched, or otherwise injured a spouse or romantic partner, with 7.2 percent (110 candidates) stating that this had happened once, and 2.1 percent (33 candidates) indicating that this had happened two or three times. Repeated abuse (four or more occurrences) was reported by only five respondents (0.3 percent).

Admissions of abuse appeared more frequently among black applicants than among white applicants. Of the 525 black applicants, 73 applicants (14 percent) acknowledged having somehow injured their romantic partner. This percentage was twice as large as that among the white applicant population. In this group, 66 of the 953 white applicants (7 percent) reported injurious abuse.

More striking was the breakdown of abuse by gender. Going against popular belief, female applicants reported having ever slapped, punched, or otherwise injured a spouse or romantic partner at a rate greater than three times that of male applicants (24 percent versus 7 percent). This data paralleled data from a Michigan survey of law enforcement applicants. As in the present study, females were much more likely to report having somehow injured their spouse or romantic partner. Specifically, 20 percent of female applicants (117 people) reported having hit their romantic partner while only 8 percent of male applicants (250 people) reported such behavior.

Further analysis of the applicant data within the subset of applicants who admitted to physical contact with a spouse or mate reveals that 67.6 percent of the 148 admitters were male and 32.4 percent were female. Additionally, it is noted that 73.8 percent (107) of the total subset admitted to only one incident, while 26.2 percent admitted to two or more incidents. A report of 74.4 percent of males and 72.3 percent of females having one incident maintains a consistency of distribution between males and females. Frequency of drinking for this group was compared with the population. In the total population, 13.8 percent reported drinking three or more alcoholic beverages weekly compared to 49.3 percent of the sample of admitters.

Researchers conducted a follow-up investigation of those applicants who had admitted in the prescreening process to having somehow injured their romantic partner. Of the 148 candidates who admitted to this activity, only one applicant became a police officer.

**Victim Agencies.** Fifteen of the 26 agencies contacted discussed this issue. The remainder could not discuss the matter at the time or stated that they had no information on this topic. Regarding

the prevalence of reported domestic violence within the law enforcement community, 14 of the 15 respondents stated that the rate was lower than that of the general population. The one exception stated that this rate was equal to that of the population at large. This picture drastically differs when contacts discussed the issue of the actual prevalence of domestic violence cases. To this question, no respondent answered that the problem existed to a lesser extent in law enforcement families. Instead, nine of those surveyed stated that the rate equaled that of the general population, three saw it as equal or greater, and three found it greater. Though respondents acknowledged that their answers only estimated the behavior, they justified these estimates in numerous ways. Many cited the victims' hesitancy to report the incident. They suggested that the abuser's position as police officers potentially magnified such hesitancy. Reasons for this possible increased reluctance included the following: police officers' knowledge of the location of safe houses, the possibility that the police department was not accurately looking into the behavior of one of its own officers, the perceived prestige of the officer within the community, and the fear of retribution by the officer.

Agencies reported specific examples of cases in which respondents stated that police officers either improperly managed reported cases of domestic violence by fellow officers, failed to report cases of domestic violence of which they had personal knowledge, or misconstrued facts about the violence if the case ever reached the court system. The high prevalence of alcohol abuse, the ready availability of a gun, and working in a "high stress, violence-focused arena" appeared as causes for the increased rate as well.

### DISCUSSION

What have we discovered about domestic violence in police families? Past research has shown that accurate assessment of the prevalence rate of domestic violence within any population remains difficult to gauge. Many disciplines differ in their approach to the problem. Disagreement about the true nature of the problem also exists. Speculation about this issue runs rampant. We compare police families to similar professions and make assumptions. Others suggest that the police profession can manage the problem using its own processes. Some even suggest that the problem looms so large that some people attempt to conceal the truth. We can only agree to disagree and that we have yet to determine the best research methodology for dealing effectively with this problem.

This study began by modifying past research methods of soliciting data to help determine the proper intervention programs. Moreover, we sought to empower the target population to assist in determining the possible sources of the problem and in arriving at acceptable solutions. In short, our study focused on solutions rather than another redefinition of the problem. We sought not to uncover the deep statistical meaning of speculative data by pinpointing a specific number, but sought the recognition and acceptance of the solutions.

Overall, our findings produced many interesting and encouraging results that contribute much to finding better methods of assessing the prevalence rates, suggestions for future research, and ideas for intervention programs. The extremely high participation rate of 73 percent stands out as a significant number. A rate of this magnitude suggests that law enforcement officers more thoroughly want

to understand the issue of domestic violence, particularly as it relates to their profession. Furthermore, comments made by officers on their surveys tend to show a strong condemnation of domestic violence, by themselves or by others. If harnessed properly, this commitment could reduce the prevalence of domestic violence in both the law enforcement community and the general population.

Next, though this study did not offer an exact estimate of a prevalence rate among police families, it did get consensus on the prehire estimate (<10 percent, 007 percent hired), which suggests that screening works. This supports a view of domestic violence as a developmental problem that occurs as a result of the profession. For example, greater than half of the respondents to the survey indicated that they were aware of another officer in their department involved in domestic violence. Even more stated that they had heard rumors about such involvement. The finding that only four percent of officers surveyed stated that they felt that police officers engaged in abuse more often than the general population suggests that the rate of domestic violence among police officer families equals or falls short of the national average. Still, given the limitations on the number of agencies surveyed and the nature of the specific questions asked, the survey suggests no definite prevalence rate. A future survey involving a larger number of participants and delving more deeply into this issue of prevalence might prove quite worthwhile. Collection of data must involve culturally competent researchers viewed as friendly to law enforcement. In the opinion of this researcher this data remains available if assessed in a confidential manner.

In addition to general prevalence rate, the current study raises other, more specific questions about prevalence rates of domestic violence. For example, the type of domestic violence assessment used. Intervention programs must meet specific needs. Although the Michigan data largely mirrors the southeastern data, in the prehire applicant sample, we need to determine the actual cases of officers hired exhibiting similar problem behavior.

Do other agencies show this same pattern of having higher rates of domestic violence by female applicants than by male applicants? If so, what causes this response pattern? Are females more likely to report abuse, or are they more likely to abuse?

In a related vein, do other states show the higher prevalence of domestic violence by black applicants? Again, does this demonstrate a greater tendency to admit to domestic violence or does it accurately reflect a generally higher rate of domestic abuse? Further, what cultural factors could contribute to the rate of domestic violence in this and in other populations? Not only would looking at these areas help solve the question of prevalence, but it could also provide suggestions for useful programs.

The screening out of those applicants admitting to domestic violence appears as another question raised in the current study that addresses both prevalence and programming. The phenomenon raises two important issues. First, the screening out of previous domestic abusers supports the use of prescreening instruments as a means to decrease the number of known abusers in the police force. Secondly, the presence of only one person admitting to having injured his or her romantic partner in the hire list raises questions about the underlying cause of domestic violence by law enforcement officers. Assuming that the prevalence of domestic violence among law enforcement officers stays equal

to that of the general community (as suggested by most of the agencies serving victims), what causes the spread of domestic violence from one candidate to other officers? Did candidates incorrectly identify themselves as never having hit their partners when, in reality, they abuse their families? Alternatively, does police work itself contribute to the development of domestic violence? Do the stresses and other factors cited in the poll of victim agencies form the root of this problem? These questions, which carry such extraordinary implications for both the intervention and prevention of domestic violence, warrant a closer look in future research.

The victim agencies provided the weakest data in the present study. This source of data becomes vital in the cross-validation of any other data source and fundamentally affects our providing solutions that work within the given victim population. A related suggestion for future research involves looking at those intervention and prevention programs currently in existence. Though many survey respondents viewed the potential effects of prevention and intervention programs within the training curriculum uncertainly, some believed in the usefulness of such programs.

A closer look at the effects of various model programs employing different prevention and intervention methods could help one reach a solid, empirical conclusion about the efficacy of these programs. Specifically, such a study could focus on a comparison of the willingness of police officers to seek help, the tendency of offenders to repeat their actions, and the tendency of officers and nonofficers to report domestic violence across the various programs. Thus, policy makers could better serve their officers, the officers' families, and the community. Specifically, we should listen when officers tell us they will go for treatment if and only if they receive it on a confidential basis. If, as this study suggests, the organization contributes to the development of the problem, then law enforcement agencies must provide the same protection afforded other professions.

We in law enforcement must seek understanding for the current offenders and begin to develop interdisciplinary programs that will consider the high-risk individuals, a strategy considerably more efficient than mandating global training programs that do not target the families in crisis.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Our investigation generated several questions requiring future research. First, we need to develop a multimethod approach to examine the prevalence of violence among law enforcement families. Until we accurately determine the actual prevalence of domestic violence among law enforcement officers, any findings or conclusions will face criticism. Second, we must develop screening mechanisms to identify applicants and officers prone to domestic violence. We advocate making the standardized tests identifying potential violators mandatory. In the future, we may need to include specific questions or indicators to identify traits associated with domestic violence. As our data suggest, the conventional wisdom of males as domestic abusers may not reflect reality. Third, agencies must develop strategies of intervention coupled with appropriate disciplinary actions. Here, mandatory interventions should mirror those strategies for officers involved in "critical incidents" such as the use of deadly force. For example, a mandatory session with an officer who used deadly force and a psychologist may provide needed assistance without the stigma of someone seeking help. Similarly,



an officer who attacks a member of his/her family would undergo screening by a psychologist without actively seeking help. An officer diagnosed with a treatable problem could benefit from an available intervention program.

Finally, we need a proper screening mechanism in place to identify those applicants involved in domestic violence. For those who have “learned” violence as a way of coping with personal stress during their tenure as a police officer, agencies must commit resources to identify these officers early and provide interventions that can successfully stop this type of violence. Agencies must also take seriously early indicators and charges of violence against their officers. Only by thoroughly investigating all accusations can agencies maintain and increase the trust and confidence of the public in guarding against police abuse of authority. State laws must permit the prosecution and decertification of officers who are convicted of crimes, including domestic violence.

### **CONCLUSION**

Although research findings have only begun to report the existence of a problem, these investigations must continue to look at the prevalence of domestic violence, methods of identifying applicants and officers with problems, swift and sure methods of not allowing troubled individuals into the profession, and ways to retrain or remove those who have fallen into the downward spiral of domestic violence.

### **POLICE OFFICER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE STUDY**

We are interested in determining the TRUE prevalence rate of police officers' involvement in domestic violence. We are not interested in names or the identification of the officer or his/her agency or family member/s affected. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of what you know about police officer involvement in domestic violence.

Please attempt to answer "Yes" or "No" (and avoid answering "Don't Know") as much as possible. Thank you for your help.

Are you aware of any officer in your department who has been involved in domestic violence?  
Have you ever heard rumors about an officer from your department involved in domestic violence?

To your knowledge, have there been any reports made to the department concerning officers involved in domestic violence?

Based on your experiences, is the involvement of police officers in domestic violence any greater than the involvement of nonpolice officers?

Are you aware of any officers involved in domestic violence that was not reported?

Are you aware of any officers involved in domestic violence that was reported?

Has any member of your department been disciplined for involvement in domestic violence?

In your opinion, does domestic violence occur among members of your department?

Do you think there would be more reports of domestic violence if the potential discipline were not so severe?

Do you think the potential discipline for involvement in domestic violence is too severe?

Do you think you (or any other officer) would seek help if the information could be kept strictly confidential? Y N Don't Know

Would treatment programs be successful if incorporated into the training curriculum?

Would prevention programs be successful if incorporated into the training curriculum?

In your opinion, is domestic violence a problem among officers in your department?

Should intervention programs be mandatory or voluntary? Why?

Thank you for your valuable input and dedication to improving the law enforcement profession.

## REFERENCES

Boyd, L., Carlson, D., Smith, R., and Sykes, G. (1995). Domestic assault among police: A survey of internal affairs policies, In Advanced Management College Paper Series. Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute: Richardson, Texas.

Family Violence Coalition. (1991). Broken bodies and broken spirits: Family violence in Maryland and recommendations for change. Boston, MA: Author.

Glazer, S. (1993). Violence against women. CO Researcher, 8, 171.

Holtz, H and Furniss, K. (1993, Spring). The health care provider's role in domestic violence. Trends in Health Care, Laws and Ethics, 8, 47.

Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups. (1990). For shelter and beyond. Author.

Neidig, P., Seng, A., and Russell, H. (1992, Fall/Winter). FOP marital aggression survey. National FOP Journal.

Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act. Public Law 104-208, 18 U.S.C. @ 922 (1997).

Violence against women. Majority Staff Report, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 102<sup>nd</sup> Congress. (1992).