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Police Responses to Domestic Violence and Public Perception

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence (IPV), has become an epidemic in the United States. This research is intended to explain the types of IPV, describe the effects of severe IPV, look at the change in public perception of IPV, and explore the police responses to IPV situations. Subjects of research at UNLV participated in the “Police Responses to Calls for Service” survey, that was created to determine the public’s level of awareness of IPV situations and whether that awareness increases support for police positions in responding to intimate partner violence calls.

BACKGROUND

Domestic violence is now being referenced as intimate partner violence (IPV) because abuse can continue even after the partners are no longer living together. About 26 women and men are murdered by an intimate partner each week, according to 12 million victims every year (CDC, 2011). In 2007, intimate partner homicide (IPH) accounted for 1% of all homicides in the nation. Of those deaths, 78% of the victims were female (CDC, 2012). Nevada has consistently been in the nation in negative IPV statistics. In 2010, the national average for women killed by men was 1.22 per 100,000, but Nevada's average was over double the national average with 3.62 per 100,000 (Violence Policy Center, 2012).

IPV can consist of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as, threatening or stalking behaviors. These behaviors do not appear in isolation but typically occur on a continuum and can either involve or span types of abuse (CDC, 2012).

Physical abuse is the most commonly recognized type of abuse in IPV situations and some would consider it the most severe abuse (Kreiders, Mark, & Ryan, 2000). Almost 15% of women and just under 5% of men have experienced rape, physical harm, or stalking in an intimate relationship (Black et al., 2011).

Police responses to IPV have also changed due to rising awareness. Many departments have created special divisions for IPV situations. Over the years, various danger and lethality assessments have been created to help address the dangerousness and lethality found in IPV cases. These assessments were intended to determine the probability of re-victimization, future lethality, or both. The Danger Assessment (DA) was originally created by Jacquelyn Campbell in 1986. The purpose of the DA was to predict and prevent future physical violence in intimate partner relationships (Campbell, 1986). The Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) is derived from three of Campbell's research studies on IPV danger assessments (MNADV, 2005). This tool was tested to assess lethality in IPV situations. The LAP is a unique design because it was specifically created for first responders (i.e. law enforcement) to IPV calls.

Currently there are 14 states that have implemented LAP for IPV first responders: Maryland, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont (MNADV, 2012). The uniqueness of this program is that victims are immediately offered help on scene from police or first responders. Because of this feature, almost 33% of the IPV victims that were screened as high risk for future violence or lethality received help services immediately (MNADV, 2012). According to Campbell, by taking advantage of IPV shelters and services, victims can reduce their risk of future violence and lethality by 40% (2005). This research is intended to explore public knowledge about IPV and examine the public’s support for new police positions directing officer responses to IPV calls for service. Furthermore, this research will want to connect the relationship between public awareness and support of police policies.

METHODS

The “Police Responses to Calls for Service” survey was created by Dr. M. Alexis Kennedy for the Law and Social Issues Research Lab. The lab is located in the Criminal Justice Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. We were granted in the Spring of 2012 (protocol number 1110-1942) and collection of data started immediately. The survey was designed to measure support for current police policies related to IPV responses and measure student awareness of IPV issues.

The Maryland Model Lethality Assessment consists of 11 questions addressing issues of danger and lethality, plus one open ended question. The first three questions on the assessment, an automatic procedure. The last question asks the victim “Is there anything else that worries you about your safety” (MNADV, 2005, “Domestic Violence Lethality Screening Tool”). If the answer is “yes” to the first three questions, the officer continues with items 4-11, affirmative answers for four or more of the subsequent questions trigger the response procedures. For every question the victim “Yes” to the question, an automatic positive trigger results in the advanced threat assessment process. The last question asks the victim “Is there anything else that worries you about your safety” (MNADV, 2005, “Domestic Violence Lethality Screening Tool”). If the officer determines that the protocol is not depending on the victim's response to the final question.

In order to determine levels of agreement with the LAP questions were taken directly from the assessment with responses measured at the ordinal level (5-point). Additionally, to determine the public’s level of awareness and knowledge of domestic violence situations, scenarios were given to the participants with responses measured at the ordinal level (5-point scale).

The methods by which the survey used for this paper were frequencies and simple correlations.

RESULTS

Support for the Lethality Assessment Protocols

The “Police Responses” survey asked participants whether they agreed with the police protocols of asking the three questions in Figure 1. The majority of participants agreed that police should be required to ask such questions when responding to IPV calls for service.

Figure 1

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Public awareness of IPV was measured in part by asking participants about resources available to victims. The table below shows that the public feels that there are adequate resources available for victims and that it is easier for victims not to be able to contact help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Available</th>
<th>Gender (Pearson r)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Men's Mean Agreement</th>
<th>Women's Mean Agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police responses</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources available</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Strongly agree is 5 on a 5 point response scale. Higher means represent higher levels of agreement.

Awareness of Domestic Violence Myths

The “Police Responses” survey used domestic violence myths to further explore the level of awareness the public has about domestic violence situations. Figure 2 represents the level of agreement towards each statement by gender.

Figure 2

DISCUSSION

Preliminary analyses found support for current police policies based on the lethality assessment protocols adopted throughout the US. Both women and men supported requiring officers to ask personal questions about IPV history in order to assess current and future risk. Where gender differences appeared were in awareness of resources available to victims. Women were more likely to diagnose that there are adequate resources available to victims of IPV. Also showing differences were some but not all of the items looking at awareness of abuse. Women were more likely to recognize isolation in a warning sign for abuse.