

Appropriate police response to domestic violence: Comparing perceptions of Chinese and American college students

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Abstract

While domestic violence has emerged as a global concern since the 1970s, empirical research on public preferences for police response to domestic violence is lacking. Even rarer is investigating the issue from an international, comparative perspective. Using survey data collected from more than one thousand college students in two Chinese and two U.S. cities, this study compared Chinese and American citizens' attitudes toward traditional and proactive police response to domestic violence and tested the effects of demographic characteristics, attitudes toward violence and gender roles, personal experiences with domestic violence, and locality on such attitudes. Chinese students were found to be more likely than American students to favor traditional response and less likely to support proactive response. Chinese and American students' attitudes toward police response to domestic violence were influenced by both different and common factors. Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, domestic violence has increasingly emerged as a global concern. A worldwide trend of establishing and enhancing women's rights, including protecting women against various forms of violence, has been observed. In the United States, the move toward consistent legal intervention against domestic violence was influenced primarily by findings from the pioneering study conducted in Minneapolis (Sherman and Berk, 1984), litigations brought up against police departments by victims of domestic violence, and legislations and policies regulating governmental response and protecting victims' rights (Sun, 2007). In China, the 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 was hailed as "a watershed moment in Chinese women's perceptions and activism about the issue of domestic violence" (Zhang, 2009, p. 70). Since then, research on the prevalence, forms, and risk factors of domestic violence in mainland China has dramatically increased.

This study examined Chinese and American citizens' attitudes toward appropriate police actions in handling domestic violence incidents. While domestic violence has been the subject of a substantial number of studies, two concerns remain largely unaddressed. First, empirical investigation of public preferences for police response to incidents of domestic violence is lacking. Second, very few studies have assessed domestic violence issues from an international, comparative perspective, particularly citizens' preferences for police response. For example, we do not know the similarities and differences between Chinese and American citizens' preferences for police actions in domestic violence cases or factors that shape their attitudes and preferences. A cross-national comparative study of this kind can contribute to our understanding of potential cultural, social, and legal influences on citizens' attitudes toward police response.

Using survey data collected from more than one thousand students in two Chinese cities, Beijing and Hong Kong, and two U.S. cities, Newark, Delaware, and Detroit, Michigan, this study compared and contrasted Chinese and American citizens' attitudes toward traditional and proactive police response to domestic violence. Two research questions guided this research: (a) what are the general patterns of Chinese and American citizens' perceptions of domestic violence; and (b) are Chinese and American citizens' attitudes toward police response influenced by similar or different factors? This study used college student samples for two reasons. First, college students are not immune from the problem of intimate partner violence. In fact, several studies showed that college students in the U.S. have experienced especially high levels of intimate partner violence over the course of their student careers, with prevalence rates ranging between 20% and 50% (Bryant and Spencer, 2003; Shook et al., 2000; Straus, 2004). Second, college students represent the future of policy development and reforms in both nations. To promote public support for effective official intervention geared toward preventing intimate partner violence and violence against women in general, college campus is an important platform for public communication and advocacy.

2. Policing domestic violence

2.1. *Traditional vs. proactive police Response in the U.S.*

Traditionally, the U.S. police exercised considerable discretion in dealing with domestic violence incidents. In most cases, they did not actively intervene. When they chose to intervene, non-arrest actions such as mediation, separation, and inaction, were more frequently employed

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