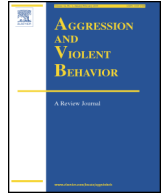




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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Estimating the rate of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers: A review of methods and estimates

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ABSTRACT

Rates of officer-perpetrated domestic violence have not been estimated across studies, limiting our knowledge of the extent of this social problem. The purpose of this article is to report on the range of officer-involved domestic violence and the inconsistencies in research methodology across studies. For this article, domestic violence was operationalized as the self-reported use of physical/domestic violence by a law enforcement officer toward an intimate partner. A systematic review of all relevant literature published before April 2015 was conducted to identify primary research studies that provide percentage of law enforcement officers who self-report perpetrating domestic violence. A total of 667 potentially relevant articles were identified by searching Proquest Criminal Justice, PsycINFO through Proquest, ISI Web of Knowledge, reference harvesting, dissertation databases, and institutional reports. Seven articles met the inclusion criteria, offering a range of 4.8–40% of officers who self-report perpetrating domestic violence. Discrepancies in prevalence rates may be attributable to measurement and sampling decisions. This article makes recommendation for future research by identifying the strengths and limitations of previous research. Accurately tracking the rate of OI DV is important to evaluate the effectiveness of laws, policies, and interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of officer-perpetrated domestic violence.

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1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a major social issue that has devastating physical and emotional consequences for millions of people every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014) and has been deemed a national epidemic (see Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010 for a review). Perpetration of domestic violence is not limited to any racial, socioeconomic, or occupational group (Matud, 2007). Even law enforcement officers – those who are tasked with policing this crime – perpetrate violence against their intimate partners (Johnson, 1991). While horrific and gruesome acts of officer-perpetrated domestic violence are documented by the mainstream news media (KOMO News, 2006), there is little empirical consensus about the rate of officer-perpetrated domestic violence. Early reports estimate the occurrence of officer-perpetrated domestic violence to be much higher rate than the general public (Johnson, 1991), which has led to the development of resources, and prevention and intervention services. However, there is a wide range in the percentage of officers who self-report-perpetrating domestic violence, which may be attributable to disparities in how this information is solicited. The goal of this systematic review is to identify and evaluate studies that report on the rate of officer-perpetrated domestic violence to make recommendations for future research, policy, and intervention/prevention program development.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Rates of officer-perpetrated domestic violence

In a report to the United States of House of Representatives, Johnson (1991) presented the first estimates of law enforcement involved domestic violence, placing the rate of engagement at approximately 40%. This issue has since gained national attention through media coverage (e.g., Agorist, 2014) and adoption as an advocacy cause (e.g., The Advocates for Human Rights, 2009). According to these sources, officer-involved domestic violence is occurring at a much higher rate compared to the general population, yet officers are not held to the same standard of accountability as non-law enforcement offenders (National Center for Women and Policing, n.d.). Common methods of estimating the prevalence/incidence of domestic violence in the general population include prosecution/arrest records, utilization of domestic violence related services, victim self-report, and perpetrator self-report (Hamby, 2014). All of these methods are inherently biased; however, the effect of the bias may be more pronounced when examining the rates of among law enforcement families. For example, Stinson and Liederbach (2013) found that there were a total of 324 cases in which police were arrested for domestic violence (281 separate officers) covered by the media from 2005 to 2007, and an investigation by the New York Times found a surge in arrests of officers for domestic violence, over a quarter of whom maintained their job a year after the complaint (Cohen, Ruiz, & Childress, 2013). These numbers represent both the difficulty in locating systematic data on rates of officer-involved domestic violence (OIDV), and also the low rate of arrest and firing, especially in respect to the high rates of self-reported perpetration estimated by Johnson.

Anonymous self-report of perpetration and/or victimization may be the only, although imperfect, method of assessing the extent of the problem. While officers and their family members have incentive to suppress admission of these crimes (whether due to code of honor, lack of trust in confidentiality assurances, fear of losing job, etc.), previous research lends evidence that self-report can be a valid source of data. Specifically, Hamby (2014) suggests that there “is no topic of study that people refuse to discuss. Not criminal perpetration, not illegal drug use, not socially taboo sexual behaviors, not any topic that has yet been studied (p. 149).” Research from the past 30 years indicates that some law enforcement officers are willing to report perpetrating OIDV, and the rates established by self-report surveys are much higher than the limited information that is known about arrest rates for

OIDV, suggesting it may be closer to the actual rate than relying on formal reporting measures.

1.1.2. Dynamics of officer-perpetrated domestic violence

Domestic violence within law enforcement families is unique from domestic violence perpetrated in the general public because of specific risk factors that are a part of the job, as well as complex barriers victims must navigate for safety. For instance, law enforcement officers are taught specific skills that help them command authority and control situations on the job (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005; Klein & Klein, 2000) that when exercised within their intimate partner relationships can cause psychologically terrorizing and physically violent situations. As a routine part of their job, law enforcement officers are disproportionately exposed to a number of stress-related risk factors linked to IPV perpetration, including shift rotation and weekend work, exposure to traumatic situations, and frequent marital discord (Erwin, Gershon, Tiburzi, & Lin, 2005). Coupled with the fact that all sworn law enforcement officers have access to firearms as part of their job, situations of domestic dispute can escalate and become particularly dangerous for the partners of officers (Gershon, 2000). In summary, law enforcement officers are trained to control situations, have increased stress associated with violence perpetration, and have guaranteed access to lethal weapons – a dangerous combination for their partners.

Victims of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers face unique barriers that may lead to increased safety risks and decreased access to resources for seeking assistance (Wetendorf & Davis, 2003). Because the perpetrator works in law enforcement, if a victim chooses to turn to law enforcement for help s/he is most likely contacting someone who knows her/his abuser, making it difficult to pursue legal action against the perpetrator-officer (Ammons, 2005). Further, victims of officer-perpetrated domestic violence have difficulty accessing non-legal supports such as emergency domestic violence shelters. While the location of these shelters are proprietary information, officers are privy to their locations, endangering the victims of officer-perpetrated violence and shelter staff who provide assistance to them (Ammons, 2005). Further, victims of officer-perpetrated domestic violence report using informal support networks (e.g., staying in other officers' houses) and going to great lengths to conceal their victimization to not jeopardize their partners' job (Johnson, 1991). In the case of intimate partner violence in a law enforcement family, the incentive to not report might be especially heightened provided the additive barriers described above.

1.1.3. Laws and policies affecting OIDV

The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) initially proposed mandatory arrest policies in the cases of domestic violence. In states that adopt mandatory arrest policies, law enforcement is required to make an arrest if there is probable cause of an assault on a family member or intimate partner. At least 21 states have mandatory arrest policies (SAVE, 2010). Other states have adopted pro-arrest policies, which strongly encourage arrests for domestic violence calls but do not require an arrest (SAVE, 2010). While the goal of these policies is to standardize responses and treat this crime seriously, there is evidence that implementation of mandatory and pro-arrest policies may actually discourage victims from reporting domestic violence offenses to the police. For instance, Iyengar (2008) found a 4.5% decline in reporting rates in states with mandatory arrest policies and a 2.8% decline in states with pro-arrest policies.

Mandatory/pro-arrest policies may disproportionately influence the reporting of OIDV because of a fear that responding officers and/or the court system will not believe the victim, and/or fear of retaliation by the perpetrating officer toward the victim. Further, there are serious implications for the careers and families of officers convicted of domestic violence. Under the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 1996 (commonly called the Lautenberg Amendment or Domestic Violence Gun Ban), any person, including law enforcement officers, who is charged with a

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