

## Arrest and intimate partner violence: Toward a more complete application of deterrence theory<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Two decades of research have failed to produce consistent and compelling results that arrest deters intimate partner violence. This tradition of research is reviewed, concluding that little can be learned about the deterrent efficacy of arrest (or other sanctions) for this type of violence until a more complete framework of deterrence theory is specified to guide further research. The framework should delineate mediating influences besides deterrence, linking arrest to the prevention, reduction, or cessation of intimate partner violence, and factors that moderate those influences. Such factors bear on the differential sensitivity to sanctions on the part of actual or potential perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Recommendations for future research are offered, including suggestions for data needed to draw defensible causal inferences about these mediating and moderating influences.

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*Keywords:* Deterrence; Intimate partner violence; Violence prevention

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Whether arrest policies promote the prevention, cessation, or reduction of intimate partner violence remains an open question, despite decades of research on the deterrent efficacy of arrest (Berk, Campbell, Klap, & Western, 1992; Carmody & Williams, 1988; Dugan, 2003; Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1990a, 1990b; Dutton, Hart, Kennedy, & Williams, 1992; Garner, Fagan, & Maxwell, 1995; Hirschel & Hutchison, 1992; Lackey & Williams, 1995; Maxwell, Garner, & Fagan, 2001, 2002; Pate & Hamilton, 1992; Sherman & Berk, 1984; Sherman, Smith, Schmidt, & Rogan, 1992; Williams, 1992; Williams & Hawkins, 1989a, 1989b, 1992). This paper reviews research on arrest and intimate partner violence, documenting mixed findings and contending that it suffers from an insufficiently developed theoretical foundation. This line of research has been conducted in the absence of systematic theorizing about deterrence processes and other mediating linkages between sanctions and intimate partner violence. Conceptually clarifying and empirically distinguishing those linkages is important for delimiting the scope of deterrence theory and yielding a more complete understanding of the preventive potential of sanctions.

Moreover, previous arrest research on intimate partner violence has shown that the influence of sanctions varies across perpetrators of violence, suggesting that some perpetrators may be more sensitive to sanction threats and experiences than others (see Garner et al., 1995; Garner & Maxwell, 2000; Schmidt & Sherman, 1993; Sherman, 1992a for reviews). Accounting for differential sensitivity to sanctions is important for elaborating deterrence theory, targeting arrest policies and practices to the most appropriate perpetrators of violence, and avoiding potential iatrogenic effects of arrest. Such effects have been reported in research on arrest and intimate partner violence (Dunford et al., 1990b; Hirschel & Hutchison, 1992; Sherman et al., 1992), as well as other forms of crime (Pogarsky & Piquero, 2003). Several studies have recently sought to account for variation in the effects of sanction experiences, estimating the influence of factors such as the presence of criminal opportunities, moral impropriety, emotionality, self-control, and impulsivity (Grasmick, Tittle, Burski, &

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