Exploring police attitudes towards domestic violence in Queensland, Australia

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Overview of my talk

- Importance of the relationship between the police and DV victims
- Police officers’ attitudes towards DV
- Factors which influence police decision making
- Crime and Misconduct Commission (2005) study
- Replication of CMC study to explore continuity and change in officers’ attitudes
Background and context

- A high proportion of DV incidents are not reported but those which are create a large volume of calls to the police
- The relationship between the police and DV victims is crucial for the prevention of DV
Police attitudes to DV

Understanding police attitudes about DV is key to developing a better response to the problem. From the police perspective issues include:

- Anticipated cooperation from the victim (Cretney & Davis, 1995)
- Fear of being assaulted (Parsons & Jesilow, 2001)
- The difficulty of establishing who has committed what crime (Johnson, 2004)
Police attitudes to DV

- Fear of complaints against officers (Ferraro, 2005)
- The perception that police intervention is futile (Miller, 2005; Rowe, 2007)
- The presence of children (Findlay, Sheehan, Davey, Brodie, & Rynne, 2000)
- The perception that DV cases are a private matter rather than valid police work (Kantor & Straus, 1995; Kemp, Norris, & Fielding, 1992; Waddington, 1993)
Police attitudes to DV

- The relationship between police officers and DV victims is important because:
  - If victims do not trust the police they will be less likely to report DV incidents to them
  - Police officer’s attitudes towards DV are a significant factor in how they treat DV victims
  - In turn, officer behaviour towards victims influences the trust victims have in them
Factors which influence police decisions in DV cases

- The presence of an offender (Feder, 1999; Robinson & Chandek, 2000)
- The presence of witnesses (Holmes, 1993)
- The presence of serious injuries (Buzawa, Austin, & Buzawa, 1996)
- Whether the offender is affected by alcohol (Berk, Fenstermaker, & Newton, 1988)
Factors which influence police decisions in DV cases

- Whether the incident was reported near the end of a police shift (Linn, 2009)
- The victim’s wish that the offender be arrested (Feder, 1998; Ho, 2000)

Policing Domestic violence in Queensland
Meeting the challenges

The main research questions were:

1. What is the current police response to domestic violence in Queensland?
2. How can this response be improved?
Methodology

- Police officers from across Queensland participated in focus groups, interviews, and surveys
- Domestic violence agencies and legal services were consulted
- Victims were surveyed
- Administrative data from QPS databases was also analysed
A survey was developed to explore a number of aspects of police officers’ involvement in domestic violence calls.

This survey was distributed to a random sample across the state of 900 operational police officers.

450 responses were obtained, a response rate of 50%.

The ranks of respondents were constables (61%), senior constables (25%) and sergeants (13%).

25% of survey participants were female, slightly higher than the 23% of female officers in the QPS at that time.
Findings of victim survey

- Only about half of the 53 victims were satisfied with the police response, with many feeling that officers did not take the matter seriously, and took too long to arrive.
- Although 42% of victims wanted the offender to be arrested, an arrest was made in only 11% of cases.
- About 38% of victims stated they did not feel any safer after the police arrived.
Findings of police survey

- Officers indicated that the time-consuming administrative aspects of a domestic violence job made them less willing to take action.
- Officers believed that the complex social and health issues involved in domestic violence mean that police can only be effective in conjunction with assistance from other community agencies.
Factors related to officers’ decisions to apply for protection order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of DV occurring again</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s perceived willingness to cooperate</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception that the victim is as much at fault as the offender</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of auditing processes</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s wishes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of indexes/procedures to complete</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors which affect officers’ decisions to lay criminal charges

Percentage of officers who rated these factors as important

- Violence against police
- Use of a weapon
- Serious injury to victim
- Emotional state of victim
- Breach of DVO
- Victim wants arrest to be made
Factors which affect officers’ decisions to not lay criminal charges

Percentage of officers who rated these factors as important

- Belief that victims often drop charges
- Victim has previously dropped charges
- Frequent calls from this house from the police
- Victim is affected by alcohol/drugs
- Victim is aggressive
- Victim does not want offender to be charged
Current project: Replicating CMC study

Aims

- To determine whether and how the attitudes of QPS officers towards DV have changed over the past seven years
- To establish how any such changes have been influenced by the training programs recently employed by the QPS
- To explore ways in which the current police response to DV may be improved
Current project

- Methodology
  - A slightly modified version of the original survey will be distributed to approximately 450 officers via the internal QPS email system
  - Structured interviews of as many as possible of the 29 Domestic Violence Coordinators will also be conducted
  - Wave II data will be compared to that of Wave I
Possible findings?

Officers' attitudes to DV

Training

2005 2011
Potential contributions to knowledge

- Changes to police attitudes towards DV, or the lack of them, should help us to understand whether it is worthwhile for police services to make large investments in police training in this area.

- We can also compare any changes in police attitudes against changes in the rates at which DV is reported to them, and the rates at which convictions for these crimes are obtained.

- This should allow us to clarify the relationship between police attitudes to DV and the overall effectiveness of the criminal justice system in controlling it.
Current status of project

- Negotiations with the QPS for ethical approval
- Revision of the police survey instrument
- Literature review of police attitudes to DV
- Organising release by the CMC of data from the 2005 study
References


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