

Law Enforcement Officers' Understanding of Domestic Violence Among Their Colleagues

Marie C. Salimbeni

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ABSTRACT

LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS' UNDERSTANDING OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG THEIR COLLEAGUES

by

Marie C. Salimbeni

This study examined the perceptions of officers with colleagues who perpetrate acts of domestic violence. This was a qualitative research design from a phenomenological perspective. The data was gathered by the use of face - to- face interviews using open-ended questions. The data was analyzed by the use of bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural and structural descriptions, and the invariant structure of the phenomena described by the study participants. Upon completion of the 30 interviews, the audio tapes were all transcribed, and loaded in to Atlas Ti for the purpose of coding the data for the major themes. A constant comparison method was used to analyze the data to help identify the similarities and differences between the study participants' perceptions with the phenomena. The five qualitative questions each depict a different area of experience with the phenomenon, to create a holistic picture of the perceptions of the thirty participants. The findings suggest that for some officers, the inability to separate their police role from their civilian role may be a factor in the perpetration of domestic violence by law enforcement officers. The findings also suggest that social workers may be able to play an important role in the remediation of the problem of domestic violence for those within and outside police social work settings.

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CHAPTER ONE: DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This study examined the perceptions of officers with colleagues who perpetrate acts of domestic violence. This was a qualitative research design from a phenomenological perspective (Creswell, 1998). The data was gathered by the use of face - to- face interviews using open-ended questions. The data was analyzed by the use of bracketing, horizontalization, clusters of meanings, textural and structural descriptions, and the invariant structure of the phenomena described by the study participants. This created an in-depth understanding of the perception of law enforcement officers with colleagues who perpetrate acts of domestic violence. Findings in this study were compared to the findings reported in the literature on domestic violence (Creswell, 1998; Padgett, 1998).

Purpose and Importance of the Study

Every nine seconds a woman is beaten by her spouse (Protection Against Crime, 2002). Seventy-five percent of the victims of intimate murders are female with a total of three to four million women being battered each year by their respective intimate partners (Protection Against Crime, 2002). The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of law enforcement officers with the social problem of domestic violence perpetrated by colleagues in law enforcement. The goal of the research is to arm the large metropolitan police department and social workers who work in direct practice, education, policy, and police social work settings (courts, military, etc.) with greater knowledge of the themes leading to domestic violence by law enforcement

officers. It is hoped that such knowledge will be used to inform service providers who work with law enforcement officers who perpetrate domestic violence so they can develop more effective treatment services and interventions, thereby helping to remedy the problem of domestic violence in the police department and society. Without further research in this area, domestic violence by law enforcement officers is likely to continue to be a problem for the law enforcement organization and for the victims of the relationships. Also, domestic violence by law enforcement officers is a problem for the community and for society as a whole (Wetendorf, 2000; Erwin, Gershon, Tiburzi & Lin, 2005; Johnson, Todd & Subramanian, 2005).

Domestic violence constitutes an overwhelming problem in society and an even greater problem in the families of police officers. One study found that at least 40% of all police officer families experience some form of domestic violence, in comparison to 10% of the general population (Neidig, 1992). The National Center for Women and Policing (2003) suggests that police families are more vulnerable to domestic violence because officers carry firearms, know the locations of the shelters, and can manipulate the criminal justice system to their advantage.

The enactment of laws against domestic violence indicates that society is aware of domestic violence as a social problem; nevertheless, the persistence of this problem in the law enforcement community has remained hidden. The Gun Control Act of 1968 (18 U.S.C.} 922), which prohibited the possession of firearms by a person convicted of domestic violence, made an exception for police officers convicted of misdemeanor crimes related to domestic violence (DAJA-AL, 2002). This suggests that society's view

of perpetrators of domestic violence depended on whether the perpetrator was a civilian or an officer.

In 1996, after 28 years, the Lautenberg Amendment to the Gun Control Act of 1968 eliminated the governmental exception, which led to additional consequences and possible termination for any police officer convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence.

In the large urban police department examined by this study, domestic violence involving law enforcement personnel has continued to rise within the rank and file. The department employs approximately forty thousand officers, making it the largest law enforcement agency in the world. Each year since 1996, the number of domestic violence allegations against member officers has increased by twenty percent. The inherent pressures of low pay, long work hours, a demanding public, and organizational standards for performance and procedure, combined with daily access to firearms as part of the job, place police officers at high risk for becoming involved in domestic violence. In addition to the inherent pressures of law enforcement, the passage of the Lautenberg Amendment to the Gun Control Act raised the stakes for law enforcement officers convicted of certain misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence. The commission of these crimes jeopardizes the community, the intimate partners, and the officers themselves, as they increase their risk of discharge from the department as well as more serious harm to themselves.

Social Work Profession

Social workers provide services to law enforcement officers who present issues of domestic violence in a variety of treatment settings. For example, when providing social

work services to individuals, families, groups, organizations, police social work settings, and communities. The intent of these services is to fulfill the profession's ethical mandate to protect the vulnerable and to promote pro-social behavior to address social problems (NASW, 1996). By adding to social work knowledge about perceptions that contribute to the perpetration of domestic violence by law enforcement officers, this study has the potential to improve the quality of social work services to them. With the knowledge gained, social workers will be better equipped to empower their clients in law enforcement to find alternative behaviors, other than to resort to violence against their significant others. The insights gained by studying this under-reported and under-studied population will begin to address the problem of law enforcement perpetrated domestic violence in society. Without further research on the male perpetrator and the development of more effective strategies for intervention in domestic violence situations, there will continue to be more unnecessary suicides and homicides related to domestic violence.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to answer the question: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers with colleagues who perpetrate acts of domestic violence in their intimate relationships? For the purpose of this study, experience was defined as "consciousness that incorporates a real content and an ideal content, in and through which we dwell in thought, perception, memory, judgement and feeling, in order to comprehend its essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 55). Direct interviewing was conducted with thirty law enforcement officers to describe their thoughts and feelings about fellow officers and allegations of domestic violence. In addition, direct

interviewing of the study participants determined what demographic, family history, organizational and personality characteristics the study participants perceived as contributing to the perpetration of domestic violence by colleagues. Lastly, differences between civilian and law enforcement populations, and solutions to the social problem, was elicited from each study participant.

The criteria for sample size in qualitative research are determined by the purpose of the study. In qualitative research, the goal is not to create a sample that can be generalized to the entire population of law enforcement officers, but to capture the depth and richness of data through the use of non-probability sampling techniques (Padgett, 1998). In this study, purposeful sampling is defined as the “selection of information-rich cases to provide the greatest depth of knowledge about the issues of central importance or purpose of the study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The researcher used ten criteria in the selection of study participants. The purposive sample size of thirty officers allowed the researcher to obtain the level of saturation of data needed in this study. The data created an invariant structure based on the perceptions and emerging themes of what contributes to a law enforcement officers’ involvement in domestic violence.

The participating officers were members of a large urban agency. Participants were recruited by the use of a flyer posted in various police precincts and posted on the department’s intranet. The intranet is accessible to all law enforcement officers and is a vehicle to obtain a heterogeneous sample of study participants. The study sample of thirty participants was comprised of heterosexual male uniformed enforcement officers of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and age groups. The sample represented officers with a range of assigned duties, years of employment and ranks. The analysis of the interviews

conducted with the law enforcement officers fulfilled the goals of the study. In addition, the researcher also met face-to-face with the one police union and various police precincts within the five Boroughs of New York City to gain support for this study.

Permission to recruit the officers was obtained from the police department in which they are employed. The Office of Management Analysis & Planning (OMAP), a sub-unit of the police commissioner's office, is responsible for reviewing proposed research and granting approval on behalf of the police commissioner when conducting research utilizing law enforcement personnel. In acknowledgment of the potential of this study to contribute to the body of practical policing knowledge, OMAP granted written approval to interview fifty male law enforcement officers.

The posted announcements of recruitment for the study included an invitation to make contact by telephone and included a telephone number. Upon completion of the initial telephone contact with the interviewer, each of the interested officers scheduled an individual interview time. Recruitment continued until a total of 40-50 participants had been interviewed. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, study interviews were conducted outside the facilities of the police department. Refreshments were served to facilitate a comfortable environment. An informational packet was given to each participant explaining in greater detail the parameters and purpose of the study. The packet also contained an informed consent form and AGENCY agreement that outlined issues of confidentiality as well as situations when issues presented, related to suicide, homicide or child abuse concerns, need to be reported for the safety of all concerned. Upon completion of the initial telephone contact, the law enforcement officers interested in volunteering for the study were scheduled an individual interview time. At

the completion of the interview the police officer received a small token of appreciation. Each study volunteer was assigned a number at the end of the individual session, to be used to identify him throughout the entire study.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to uniformed law enforcement officers who are in a heterosexual relationship. The findings of the study did not address factors that contribute to domestic violence among law enforcement officers who are female, civilian or in a same sex relationship. Furthermore, the findings may be selective and biased, representing the situations of the officers that volunteered for the study and may not be reflective of the full range of perceptions of law enforcement officers with colleagues that are involved in domestic violence. Some other limitations are related to the small number of participants, the inclusion of only one police department, and one type of police agency. Lastly, the sample of officers was not comprised of known perpetrators of domestic violence. Consequently, the data does not reflect the officers' own intimate perceptions as perpetrators of domestic violence.

Anticipated Contributions

The contributions of the study outweigh any of the limitations of the research. The social problem of domestic violence is a silent killer in society and within the rank and file of a large metropolitan police department. The increase in domestic violence among the uniformed members of the police force is a growing problem. Qualitative research on the topic does not exist in the literature. An officer's eligibility to carry a firearm and be the enforcer of social control makes the untreated law enforcement perpetrator of

domestic violence a danger to both his intimate partner and to the community he serves. This research study adds to an understanding of domestic violence in general, and in particular, domestic violence perpetrated by the law enforcement officer. The voices of the study participants, who have no known reported history of perpetrating domestic violence, gave an objective or unbiased view of law enforcement perpetrated domestic violence.

The identification of some of the themes contributing to domestic violence among police officers provides social work practitioners with greater insight and knowledge. This additional knowledge informs the modification of current treatment strategies and interventions in the treatment of the heterosexual male perpetrator of domestic violence. The treatment of the perpetrator of domestic violence has not been proven to be effective in the resolution of the problem of domestic violence. The social work knowledge base about the etiology of this problem and the treatment of this special population is underdeveloped. By addressing a gap in the field, the research may lead to the improvement of services for the law enforcement perpetrator of domestic violence. This, in turn, will improve community policing, increase the safety of intimate partners, and reduce the number of domestic violence incidents that are committed by law enforcement officers.

In summary, domestic violence by police officers affects their own safety and that of their partners. In addition, the incidence of domestic violence by police officers is rising, with profound effects on community policing. These and other dimensions of the social problem of the perpetration of domestic violence by law enforcement officers will be discussed in the next section.

CHAPTER TWO: THE STUDY PROBLEM

This study is concerned with the social problem of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers and the study participants' perceptions with its occurrence. A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the study question: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers with colleagues who perpetrate domestic violence in their intimate relationships?

The problem of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers had received little attention until 1996, with the passing of the Lautenberg Amendment to the Gun Control Act of 1968. The passing of the Lautenberg Amendment moved the longstanding problem of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement into the public realm. This section examines the social problem of domestic violence from a historical and current perspective to include the characteristics of the problem, legislative and judicial response at the federal level, the role and values of social work, and the relationship between domestic violence and battering by the civilian populations and law enforcement personnel.

Characteristics of the Problem

Domestic violence is defined in a variety of ways. For purposes of this study, domestic violence is defined as actual or threatened physical, sexual, psychological or

emotional abuse directed towards a current or former spouse, girlfriend, and boyfriend or dating partner in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 1999). Domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement personnel presents some challenging obstacles to the communities they serve.

Law enforcement perpetrated domestic violence has a serious impact upon society. The officer batterer has an in depth knowledge of the legal system and has access to a multitude of confidential addresses of the shelter system which are not available to the general public. The community is faced with the conflict of a law enforcement officer who is himself a batterer while acting to serve and protect the community and be the gatekeeper in the arrest, court testimony and conviction of the victim's batterer (Wetendorf, 2000). The impact on the community can be seen both in the response of a police perpetrator to a victim's call for help as well as the skepticism which is bred in the community if a police perpetrator is not held accountable for his or her abusive behaviors (Wetendorf, 2000). The social problem of domestic violence and legislation that is put in place to protect the victim is at risk of being undermined by the officer batterer.

According to Wetendorf (2000), law enforcement perpetrated domestic violence is different from civilian cases in that police abusers tend to be tougher and more dangerous than other batterers. The officer's training and eligibility to carry a firearm does place his victim at greater risk. The officer batterer uses the institutional power, the badge, gun and support of the police department as a weapon against the victim along with constant control of the victim by threat of intimidation, isolation and terror (Wetendorf, 2000). The officer batterer is equipped with the apparatus and power to protect society which, when misused, places society and the victim at greater risk.

Law enforcement officers learn a variety of interviewing and interrogation techniques to take control of a situation that often requires a degree of deception and manipulative behavior (Wetendorf, 2000). In this way, the officer learns how to articulate in court the use of deadly physical force in a variety of situations (Wetendorf, 2000). This knowledge can also be used against a victim to intimidate and create fear.

Additionally, Wetendorf (2000) states the law enforcement batterer can be more dangerous than the civilian batterer due to the knowledge received in tactics of how to use physical force that will inflict pain upon the perpetrator. The use of tactics and force is used to apprehend or subdue a perpetrator, causing the least amount of physical injury, while sustaining their role to serve and protect the community. These tactics can be used on the victim to inflict extreme pain and control the victim from taking any legal course of action against the batterer.

Scope of the Problem

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (1999) reports the problem of domestic violence is an international one affecting one out of every three women every three seconds in the form of sexual coercion, beatings or other type of abuse (Roberts & Brownell, 1999). In the United States, an incident of domestic violence battering occurs every fifteen seconds, with ninety eight percent of all incidents of domestic violence perpetrated by men (Facts, 2004). Seventy five percent of all victims of intimate relationship homicides are female with a total of three to four million women battered each year by their intimate partner (Protection Against Crime, 2002). The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that seventy-one percent of all