

Policing domestic violence: Does officer gender matter?

Ivan Y. Sun*

Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, United States

Abstract

This research assessed whether female officers respond to domestic violence differently from male officers. Though many studies had analyzed police responses to domestic violence since the 1980s, very few had empirically examined different types of actions, especially noncoercive actions, employed by women and men in handling domestic violence. Using data collected by a large-scale observational project, this research analyzed police supportive and control actions toward citizens involved in domestic violence. Findings showed that female officers were more likely than male officers to provide support to citizens involved in domestic violence. Female and male officers, however, did not differ significantly in exercising control actions toward citizens. Regression results from separate models for female and male officers revealed that some of the variables are predictive of police actions for one gender but not the other. Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

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Introduction

Police responses to domestic violence had become the focal concern of a large number of studies since the 1980s. Research on police responses had been directed along two main avenues. Some studies had focused on the effectiveness of different types of police interventions (e.g., arrest, separation, and mediation) in reducing future violence (e.g., Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1990; Hirschel, Hutchison, Dean, Kelley, & Pesackis, 1991; Pate & Hamilton, 1992; Sherman & Berk, 1984). Though these studies did not produce consistent results regarding the deterrent effect of arrest, their findings, especially those from the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment (Sherman & Berk, 1984), had led directly to the adoption of mandatory or presumptive arrest policies by police departments throughout the country.

A second and dominant line of inquiry in examining police responses to domestic violence concerned a wide array of factors that contributed to variation in police responses during conflict resolution (e.g., Bachman & Coker, 1995; Belknap, 1996; Bell, 1985; R. Berk, Fenstermaker, & Newton, 1988; S. Berk & Loseke, 1981; Buzawa, 1988; Buzawa & Austin, 1993; Buzawa, Austin, & Buzawa, 1995; Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Dugan, 2003; Feder, 1997; Finn, Blackwell, Stalans, Studdard, & Dugan, 2004; Finn & Stalans, 1995, 2002; Homant & Kennedy, 1985; Kane, 1999; Robinson & Chandek, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Stalans & Finn, 1995, 2000; Stith, 1990). As in previous research on police behavior, a number of predictors had been investigated, including officer characteristics (e.g., gender, race, education, police experience, martial stress), citizen and situational variables (e.g., gender, race, demeanor, victim preference, injury, cooperativeness, victim/offender relationship, presence of a witness, prior record, type of weapon/force used, evidence strength), and organizational and community factors (e.g., pro-arrest policies, degree of urbanization).

* Tel.: +1 302 831 8727; fax: +1 302 831 0688.

E-mail address: Isun@udel.edu.

This current research was designed to answer the question: Does officer gender make a difference in police responses to domestic violence? Although police responses to domestic violence had received substantial research attention, three concerns deserve further consideration. First, only a small number of studies had compared behavioral differences between female officers and male officers in dealing with domestic violence and the results were far from conclusive. For example, some reported a weak or nil relationship between officer gender and arrest decisions (Feder, 1997; Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Chandek, 2000a; Stalans & Finn, 2000), while others found that female officers were less likely than their male counterparts to make arrests (Robinson & Chandek, 2000b). More research clearly is needed to clarify the relationship between officer gender and their actions during conflict resolution.

A second and related concern is that previous research had concentrated predominately on police control or coercive actions, especially arrests, during conflict settlement. Very little is known about the nature and prevalence of noncoercive or supportive police responses. The absence of research on supportive actions is attributed mainly to the difficulty in differentiating coercive actions from noncoercive ones, both of which are likely to occur in a given police-citizen encounter (Riksheim & Chermak, 1993). While it is often claimed that recruiting more women into the force improves police responses to domestic violence (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2001; Ferraro & Pope, 1993; Hanmer, Radford, & Stanko, 1989), there is not sufficient evidence to justify this argument. More importantly, it is unclear whether the same types of predictors of officers' coercive behavior account for noncoercive actions. Prior research thus is inadequate since control actions are rare events and police routinely utilize noncoercive tactics to dispose of conflicts. More research efforts should be devoted to the investigation of police supportive actions in handling domestic violence.

A final concern is that the majority of past research had assessed police responses to domestic violence using data from police reports and records, officer surveys or self-reported actions to hypothetical scenarios, or interviews/surveys of victims of domestic violence. Very few had analyzed police actions in handling domestic violence using data collected from systematic social observation (SSO) (see Mastrofski et al., 1998). Although SSO is not flawless (for example, see Mastrofski & Parks, 1990; Spano, 2003, for a discussion of officer reactivity), it does have the advantage over other approaches of capturing more

detailed information on police/citizen interactions over the entire incident. For instance, SSO enables researchers to distinguish police-initiated actions from police responses to citizen requests, which are difficult to document through other methods.

This research was designed to address these concerns by assessing both female and male officers' supportive and control actions toward citizens in handling domestic conflicts and disputes. Specifically, this study attempted to (1) analyze the extent and prevalence of supportive and control actions employed by female officers and male officers in settling domestic conflicts, (2) examine the effects of officer gender and other predictors on police supportive and control actions in disposing of domestic violence, and (3) assess whether different variables account for the variance in female and male officers' supportive and control actions. A study of this kind enhanced the understanding of police supportive and control actions and gender differences in handling domestic violence.

Police response to domestic violence

Domestic violence represents the largest single category of calls to local police departments (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2001). Traditionally, police had considerable discretion in handling domestic violence. Officers did not actively intervene in most domestic violence cases, and when they chose to, there was a strong bias against arresting suspects or abusers (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003). Mediation, separation, and inaction, rather than arrest, were frequent actions taken by police in disposing of conflicts. The adoption of mandatory or pro-arrest policies by almost all major police departments since the 1980s, along with the spread of victim assistance programs and fear of civil liability, had pushed police to act more aggressive toward suspects and more responsive toward victims of domestic violence.

Under mandatory or pro-arrest policies, police still utilized high levels of discretion in handling domestic violence (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Miller, 2000). The wide array of actions employed by police in dealing with conflicts and disputes can be classified into two general groups: supportive approaches and control approaches (Sun & Payne, 2004). Supportive approaches, such as counseling, offering physical assistance and information, and showing courtesy and concern, emphasize the provision of emotional and psychological support in order to enhance citizen compliance and satisfaction. Control approaches, such as verbal threatening, search and seizure, separation, and arrest, stress the exercise of

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