



## Domestic violence and criminal justice training needs of social services workers

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### ABSTRACT

Domestic violence is a multifaceted problem that requires various agencies to work together to serve victims. Among other agencies that are involved in this collaborative effort, criminal justice officials must work with social services workers to ensure that cases are handled effectively. At the root of this collaborative effort, it is natural to question whether various parties have the knowledge needed to effectively respond to specific cases of domestic violence. In this study, attention was given to whether social workers possessed enough knowledge about various aspects of domestic violence, including information required to process domestic violence cases in the criminal justice system. In all, 186 social services worker supervisors in the Commonwealth of Virginia were asked to rate the level of knowledge they believed social services workers had regarding specific domestic violence topics with the level of knowledge workers they believed social workers needed regarding each domestic violence topic. Findings suggested that social services workers might have more problems dealing with the interpersonal nature of domestic violence cases than they do with the legal issues. At the same time, the supervisors suggested the workers knew less about specific legal options than they needed to know. Based on this, the authors suggest changes in training for all human services workers, including criminal justice officials and social workers.

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### Introduction

Domestic violence is a multifaceted problem requiring collaborative efforts by human services workers serving domestic violence victims (B. E. Blakely & Dolon, 1991; Dolon & Hendricks, 1989). On the one hand, domestic violence is a social problem. As such, domestic violence victims will need assistance from social services workers in regards to meeting various social needs. Among other things, these needs include help with basic health care needs, assistance staying safe in abusive relationships, help leaving abusive relationships, assistance getting public benefits, guidance in navigating the service network, and direction in developing parenting skills (Fugate, Landis, & Riordan, 2005; Saltzman, Mahendra, & Ikeda, 2005). On the other hand, domestic violence is a crime problem and the criminalization of domestic violence has resulted in different relationships between human services agencies (Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Morgan, Johnson, & Sigler, 2006). As a crime problem, domestic violence victims may have a different set of needs. They may need help navigating the court system, seeking protection orders, understanding their legal rights, and working with criminal justice officials (Payne & Gainey, 2006).

Domestic violence is a social problem and a crime problem, and it is imperative that those helping domestic violence victims are broadly prepared to respond to domestic violence cases (Johnson & Sigler, 1995). Criminal justice officials should be prepared to help address victims' legal needs while understanding how victims' social needs may inhibit

service delivery. Alternatively, social services workers should be prepared to help victims gain needed services, while understanding how the social service network must at times interface with the criminal justice system. Also note that domestic violence victims are likely to seek out social services from workers who are in prime positions to make referrals to the police or criminal justice system.

Domestic violence victims might come into contact with social services workers before they come into contact with law enforcement for at least three different reasons. First, the co-occurring nature of child abuse and domestic violence, with anywhere from 33 to 77 percent of domestic violence cases involving co-occurring child abuse, creates a scenario in which social services workers who work with children might encounter a domestic violence victim (Kellogg & Menard, 2003; Payne & Gainey, 2006). Generally, those who define one form of abuse as inappropriate tend to define other types of abuse as inappropriate (Johnson & Sigler, 1995). It is easy to imagine a case in which suspected child abuse is referred to social services before law enforcement is contacted. In fact, the laws of most states mandate that reporters contact social services, rather than criminal justice officials, in suspected cases of child maltreatment.

Second, the high rate of domestic violence among those seeking health and financial benefits from social services creates the possibility that social services workers will encounter a domestic violence victim whose case should be referred to the criminal justice system. The role of service providers with whom lower class women may come in contact with is thus important in helping to identify victims and provide necessary assistance. Research estimates that anywhere from 50 percent to over 80 percent of women receiving public assistance

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have been physically abused by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime compared to only 22 percent of the general population (Lawrence, 2002; Lyon, 2000; Tolman & Raphael, 2000).

Third, increasing concern about elder mistreatment has resulted in more reports of elder abuse to adult protective services. As with child abuse, mandated reporters will typically notify social services rather than law enforcement about suspected cases of elder abuse (Payne, 2005). Consequently, for cases involving elder spousal abuse, social services may be the first agency responding to the victimization.

The literature is rife with suggestions that the police and other criminal justice professionals need to receive more training about the needs of victims and ways to better navigate the diverse family justice system, which includes other human services agencies (Payne & Gainey, 2006). Turning this question around, it seems natural to ask whether social services workers are able to effectively respond to the criminal justice needs of victims. Whether or not workers are adequately prepared to address these multiple needs is not clear. In this article, the issue of whether social services workers are adequately trained to meet various social needs and criminal justice needs of domestic violence victims is addressed.

## Review of literature

Criminologists' interest in domestic violence began around the same time that researchers from other fields began to study domestic violence. Much of the early criminological research on domestic violence focused on legal issues related to the phenomenon (Barry, 1980; Eisenberg & Seymour, 1979; Kalmuss, 1979; Walker, 1984). In the early 1980s and since then, criminologists began to focus more on how criminal justice officials responded to domestic violence cases. Beginning with Sherman and Berk's (1984) classic arrest experiment, the number of studies assessing how criminal justice officials responded to domestic violence cases has increased dramatically (Payne & Gainey, 2006). As Payne and Gainey (2006) note, the number of "domestic violence" articles cited in criminal justice abstracts has increased significantly over the past two decades.

Almost consistently, research examining the criminal justice response to domestic violence had considered how actors behaved in domestic violence situations. This research focused on various criminal justice officials including police officers (Eitle, 2005; Felson, Ackerman, & Gallagher, 2005; Van Hasselt & Malcolm, 2005), judges (Crocker, 2005), prosecutors (Hartman & Belknap, 2003), and probation officers (Hofford, 1991). Three themes arose in these studies. First, the majority of studies suggested that criminal justice officials, as in all criminal cases, possess a great deal of discretion in domestic violence cases, and this discretion influences their decision making. To be sure, stricter mandatory arrest and mandatory prosecution laws have limited criminal justice officials' discretion to a degree. Still, even after the creation of these "mandatory" laws dictating criminal justice officials' responses, research found that workers such as police officers (Erez & Belknap, 1998; Feder, 1996, 1997, 1998; Miller, 1989, 2001) and judges (Erez & Belknap, 1998; Hartman & Belknap, 2003) still responded to domestic violence cases with a great deal of discretion.

A second theme found in this research was that the criminal justice response to domestic violence victims has been improving. While some advocates expected that mandatory arrest laws would have an immediate impact on domestic violence case processing, studies found that it took several years for the policy to be effective (Jones & Belknap, 1999; Mignon & Holmes, 1995). As well, research on the successes of certain batterer treatment programs suggested that the criminal justice system was beginning to better serve domestic violence victims (Gondolf & Jones, 2001; Heckert & Gondolf, 2005).

A third theme arising from these studies had to do with training needs. Indeed, it was common that researchers recommended increased, improved, or different types of training for criminal justice professionals in domestic violence cases. Reviewing the policy implica-

tions sections of papers would likely indicate that "improved training" was the most popular implication of this body of research. Despite the popularity of this recommendation, only a handful of studies considered the nature or types of domestic violence training provided to criminal justice officials.

Of those criminological domestic violence training studies conducted, most focused on the impact of training on police activity. Research on the impact of domestic violence training for police officers was mixed (Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005; Smithey, Green, & Giacomazzi, 2000). On the one hand, it was believed that training would help to overcome the victim blaming attitudes which are often attributed to law enforcement officers. On the other hand, a study of 291 domestic violence cases found that trained police officers and untrained officers (in terms of domestic violence training) spent similar amounts of time at the crime scene. In addition, this same study found that the conviction rate was similar for cases involving trained and untrained officers (Smithey et al., 2000). Whether training influences case processing remains debatable. Still, most agreed that domestic violence training can help police officers learn how to work in the multi-agency response system that serves domestic violence victims (Kent, Huntley, & Wyrick, 1999). It is within this context that it is important to consider the domestic violence and criminal justice training provided to other human services workers involved in this multi-agency network.

With regard to training provided to other human services professionals, recent research considered the amount of domestic violence training provided to social services workers as well as the most effective types of training strategies. With regard to the extent of training provided to social services workers, research by Danis and Lockhart (2003) found that less than 1 percent of social workers received training on domestic violence as part of their college course work. Focusing on types of training preferred, research by Payne, Carmody, Respass, and Hoofnagle (2006) found that social workers preferred traditional training strategies as opposed to online strategies.

On the surface, it may seem that apples and oranges are being compared when discussing criminal justice and social services workers' domestic violence training needs. One of the consistent criticisms of domestic violence research, however, was that as a multifaceted problem, researchers have narrowly studied the phenomenon (Ohlin & Tonry, 1988). Criminologists studied the crime issues related to domestic violence and social workers considered how domestic violence was handled as a social problem. In an effort to address this fragmented research dilemma, the current study considered how well social services workers are prepared to deal with both social needs and criminal justice needs of domestic violence victims. Addressing the criminal justice and domestic violence training needs of social services will help determine if workers are able to help victims meet their social and criminal justice needs.

## Methods

Surveys were mailed to all 339 social work program supervisors at all 122 social work agencies in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In doing so, all social services agencies were included in the sampling frame. Prior to receiving the survey, the supervisors received letters from the Department of Social Services (DSS) commissioner and from the director of the Office of Family Violence encouraging participation. Approximately one month after the surveys were distributed, those who did not respond by mail were contacted by telephone and offered a chance to complete the survey by phone, fax, or e-mail. Overall, 186 social workers from 114 agencies responded. Thus, the agency response rate was 92 percent, and the supervisor response rate was 55 percent. This was certainly an acceptable response rate for a survey of this type.

A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix. The survey included a section in which respondents were asked to indicate how much their workers needed to know about specific aspects related to domestic violence, as well as how much their workers actually knew

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