

Keeping Our Homes Safe: Addressing Domestic Violence in New York City



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Domestic violence is generally recognized as a problem that has serious negative consequences on victims and witnesses, but many do not realize the magnitude of the problem and the extent of the harm that it causes. In the United States, over 25% of women will experience abuse at some point in their lives,¹ and one-third of all women who sought care in hospital emergency rooms for violence-related injuries were injured by an intimate partner.² Statistics such as these have led the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to declare domestic violence to be a serious public health problem as well as a criminal justice problem.^{3,4}

Every day police in New York City respond to approximately 600 incidents of domestic violence,⁵ and the Domestic Violence Hotline answers about 400 calls.⁶ While the overall number of homicides has decreased in New York City, the rate of family related homicides has remained nearly constant from 1994-2002.⁷ During this time period, there were an average of 77 family related homicides each year.⁸ In particular, young, foreign-born women in New York City have been found to be at greater risk of being killed by their partners than any other group of women.⁹ Despite the known prevalence of domestic violence, the number of reported cases of domestic violence among diverse communities remains comparatively low.¹⁰ In 2002, 65% of family related homicide cases in New York City had no known prior contact with the police. In other words, often no one knows about the violence until it is too late. It is imperative that policymakers understand the nature and impact of domestic violence on their communities in order to better assist victims. This paper will describe the effects of domestic violence on individuals and communities, and address ways to improve service delivery to victims living in diverse communities.

Consequences of Domestic Violence

Violence against women is primarily perpetrated by intimate partners, and the risk of injury is greater when the violence is perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner than by someone else.¹¹ Domestic violence has significant long and short-term consequences for society as well as the victims.¹² For the victim, short-term effects of domestic violence often include physical, emotional, and psychological harm. In the long-term, it has been shown to significantly impact physical and mental health and increase one's risk for future illnesses.¹³ Reactions to domestic abuse vary between individuals but often include a sense of disempowerment, helplessness, isolation, post-traumatic stress and depression.^{14,15} As a result of the abuse, victims can experience a decline in their ability to work; parent their children effectively; and live an independent, healthy life.

Although it is difficult to measure the social cost of domestic violence, particularly when considering the loss of lives due to violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published a report stating conservative estimates of the costs of domestic violence. Nationally, the costs of intimate partner rape, physical assault, and stalking exceed \$5.8 billion each year, of which nearly \$4.1 billion is for direct medical and mental health care services.¹⁶ Total costs of intimate partner violence include almost \$0.9 billion in lost productivity from paid work and

household chores as well as \$0.9 billion in lifetime earnings lost by victims of intimate partner homicide.¹⁷

The costs are passed on to subsequent generations since children who are victims or witnesses of domestic violence are also affected. Children who are exposed to violence in their homes learn that violence is an appropriate form of conflict resolution and stress management.¹⁸ They are also more likely to exhibit aggressive and antisocial behaviors; fearful and inhibited behaviors; have a lowered social competence; and suffer from anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms.¹⁹ Research also indicates that exposure to domestic violence can affect cognitive functioning, which can in turn affect school performance. A recently completed 20-year study of children found that witnessing family violence, power-assertive punishment, and having a conduct disorder were the greatest risk factors for becoming involved in a violent relationship, either as a victim or a perpetrator.²⁰

Immigrants and Domestic Violence

Challenges faced by immigrant victims of domestic violence is especially relevant in New York City since 36% of the population is foreign born, and over 120 different languages and dialects are spoken.²¹ In one community in the Borough of Queens, 83% of the residents speak a language other than English at home.²²

Domestic violence is a complex problem in general, but cultural influences can complicate the problem further and magnify the effects of abuse on women living in diverse communities. Immigrant women are even less likely to report abuse than non-immigrant women due to language barriers, cultural differences and a fear of deportation if they are not legally documented to live in the U.S.^{23,24} Additionally, domestic violence is “terribly exacerbated in marriages where one spouse is not a citizen and the non-citizen’s legal status depends on his or her marriage to the offender.”²⁵ Barriers faced by immigrant women fall into four main categories: language barriers, lack of knowledge, pressure and fear.

Language

Focus groups held with victims in diverse communities regarding their experiences with the mandatory arrest policies revealed that language barriers were the main obstacle to service delivery for immigrant victims. Those who had translators provided by the precinct or who had at least one responding patrol officer who spoke their language reported high rates of satisfaction with how the police responded to their 911 call. Those who were not provided with interpreters had higher rates of complaints. These complaints included: the victim’s side of the story was not heard; a child was used as an interpreter, and the offender’s friend or relative was used as an interpreter. There were no complaints about the Domestic Violence Prevention Officers (“DVPOs”). All victims who participated in the focus groups felt safer when they were visited by police officers, and even felt safer if they saw a patrol car drive by their home – knowing the DVPOs did this as part of their responsibilities.

Lack of Knowledge

Language barriers also make it challenging for community members to learn about domestic violence laws and services. Victims may not know that domestic violence is against the law in the United States. They may also hold incorrect interpretations of religious tenets –

believing their religion permits men to hit their wives or to treat women as inferior to men.²⁶ Many immigrant women do not realize that they have rights in the U.S. and that the police and the courts will help them regardless of their immigration status.²⁷ They are also less familiar with, and more intimidated by, the legal process than non-immigrants. Women living in diverse communities may not be aware that there are services available to them in their own language, or they do not know how to access those services.

Pressure

Cultural beliefs can foster an environment that discourages the disclosure of abuse. The victim may believe that abuse is an acceptable part of her culture or marital life. Some cultures believe that maintaining the community's or family's reputation is more important than the rights of the individual.²⁸ They believe that police should not be involved in what are considered "family matters" or that it is tremendously shameful to discuss marital problems with others.²⁹ Some cultures believe perseverance through adversity is more honorable than escaping the adversity, and may not understand that this cultural norm may lead to serious injury or death.³⁰ Also, in many cultures, women are often socialized to keep the family together at all costs and to be dependent on men – unlike in the U.S. where there is a greater expectation for women to be independent.³¹ Other cultural factors may serve as barriers to asking for or receiving help – such as an extended family structure in which a family elder encourages the victim to tolerate the abuse.

Fear

Fear is a tactic often used by offenders to control their partners. Immigrants often have additional fears that non-immigrants do not. Many immigrant women are afraid of the police and do not know that police in the U.S. are there to help them. This can be the result of a lack of knowledge of the U.S. criminal justice system, or it can be based upon negative experiences with the police in their country of origin. For example, in some countries, people are socialized to fear the police and are taught that involving the police will only make matters worse. Additionally, an immigrant woman often fears the social consequences of what is perceived as bringing shame to her family and to her country of origin if she discloses the abuse.³² She may also fear losing support or being ostracized from her cultural community.³³ An immigrant victim may fear losing custody of her children if she separates from her husband, based upon customs in her country of origin, and she may fear deportation, even though, as a domestic violence victim, she may be protected from deportation.³⁴ Some women immigrate to the U.S. to escape dire situations such as persecution and forced prostitution.³⁵ A victim may think that enduring sustained abuse from an intimate partner in the U.S. is her only alternative to being forced to return to potentially worse conditions in her country of origin.

Co-occurrence of Sex Offenses and Domestic Violence

Research indicates that many women are raped within the context of their marriage, and there is a significant correlation between other crimes of domestic violence and forced sexual activity.^{36,37} Forced sex is also an independent risk factor for female homicide.³⁸ In general, women who are assaulted by a known perpetrator are less likely to seek assistance than those assaulted by a stranger.³⁹ Approximately 47% of domestic violence victims who are raped never

seek medical attention related to the rape.⁴⁰ Most rapes are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, and intimate partner rape accounts for 25% of all rapes.^{41,42}

Many victims do not disclose sexual assault either because of shame or because they perceive it to be part of a generally abusive situation and not a separate crime. Some women believe performing sexual acts against their will is a requirement or duty in a marriage. Most sexual assaults against women are not reported to police. Seventy-four percent of completed and attempted rapes against females were not reported to the police in 1992-2000.⁴³ Victims of sexual assault by an intimate partner are even less likely to report the crime.⁴⁴

Risk Factors for Domestic Violence

Recognizing the risk factors associated with domestic violence can help those who work directly with victims identify domestic violence incidents that have an increased likelihood of injury. Although domestic violence crosses all socioeconomic groups, it occurs more frequently among women living in poverty.⁴⁵ An 11-city study, which included New York City, found eight factors that significantly increase the risk of female homicide by an intimate partner. These risk factors include:

- offender's access to a gun
- offender's previous threat with a weapon
- recent physical separation from the offender
- having a child in the home who is not biologically related to the offender
- stalking by the offender
- forced sex by the offender
- abuse by the offender during pregnancy
- unemployed offender

Risk of injury also substantially increased if the offender threatened to harm the victim or someone close to the victim; and if the offender was under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the domestic violence incident.⁴⁶ It is important to note that the use of alcohol and drugs does not cause the violent behavior, even though the offender may use it as an excuse for his actions. Men who sexually assault and batter their partners are more likely to cause severe injuries or kill their victims.⁴⁷ Battering can begin at any point in a relationship; however, it often starts during pregnancy.⁴⁸

How New York City Responds to Domestic Violence

New York City is actively involved in addressing many aspects of domestic violence. Current efforts include:

- identifying and targeting higher risk populations;
- implementing programs and coordinating agency response in order to reduce barriers to services;
- educating police, prosecutors, judges, clergy and health care professionals on issues surrounding domestic violence;
- encouraging health care professionals to screen patients for domestic violence;

- reaching out to diverse communities, particularly through local newspapers and media;
- measuring the efficacy of awareness campaigns;
- enhancing the NYPD's Domestic Violence Tracking System;
- linking the databases among the different law enforcement agencies;
- learning about methods utilized in other cities; and
- teaching young people about domestic violence.

The New York City Police Department has developed a proactive, pro-arrest approach to domestic violence. Every precinct has officers and investigators who deal specifically with domestic violence incidents and prevention of domestic violence.⁴⁹ The Police Academy, with input from responding officers and victims that was collected through funding from an OVW grant, also updated their training curriculum in 2003 to better inform new officers about the dynamics of domestic violence. Since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, the police department has received over \$3.5 million in grant awards to fund programs to address domestic violence. As a result of their efforts, between 1994-2002, there was a 59% increase in family-related arrests and a 74% increase in arrests for violations of Orders of Protection.⁵⁰

Recommendations

Domestic violence is a preventable crime; however, it is a complex problem that requires multifaceted efforts. Living with domestic abuse is terrifying, and a victim's immigrant status may further isolate her and thus, place her at greater risk. Women in diverse communities face numerous obstacles to reporting domestic violence. While culture plays a significant role in shaping personal behavior, it should not be viewed as an automatic predictor of how a person will respond to domestic abuse. Each case is unique and should be assessed with aspects of culture utilized as relevant factors. Other crimes such as homicide, sex offenses and drug use have significant levels of co-occurrence with domestic abuse. Therefore, efforts to reduce domestic violence simultaneously lower the rates of these other crimes.

The efforts of the City to reduce domestic violence has had a positive impact on people's lives. However, despite these efforts, there are still many ways New York City can expand and improve domestic violence services. The main obstacle for victims lies in reducing barriers to services. The best way to reduce these barriers is by: 1) educating the community, 2) educating those whom victims seek out for help on domestic violence issues, and 3) strengthening the City's attempts to coordinate its response to domestic violence.

One of the main barriers that prevents victims from reaching out for help lies in their lack of knowledge that help is available to them – particularly in regard to how police can help victims. For immigrants, this is often due to difficulties with English fluency and in learning about and adjusting their behavior to the laws in the United States. Expanding awareness campaigns and partnering with community based organizations to distribute material in different languages is one way to help keep community members informed.

Victim's experiences when they seek help also affects the likelihood that they will continue to seek assistance. Thus, it is important that the professionals who assist victims are

equipped with knowledge regarding domestic violence issues to assure that their response is appropriate and will encourage others to seek help as well. Often, police, religious leaders, and health care professionals are the first to learn about abuse. Therefore, training for law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, health care professionals, and clergy should be continued.

The third significant barrier to obtaining services is due to the complexity of the public benefits system. Even advocates and agency representatives themselves do not fully understand the nuances of certain rules and regulations. Creating centers with multiple services would be an important step for the City in order to further coordinate the response to domestic violence. Such a center would serve as a central intake point for victims in order to more efficiently and effectively help them obtain the services they need. Although the City has begun efforts to address these barriers to service, there is much work to be done in this area. These barriers are best eliminated by working with those involved with domestic violence on both fronts – with both victims and those who serve them.

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