



Police Officer-Perpetrated Domestic Violence

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Crystal Judson. Jessica Boynton. Abigail Bieber. These names have been in the news a lot over the years. Together, they represent the very real victims who suffer and often die as a result of harmful public policy on police domestic violence.

For more than thirty years, research on police officer-perpetrated domestic violence has focused on officers, law enforcement departments, and media reports of violence. Meanwhile, survivors and their families—the people living with the violence and navigating the system meant to protect them have largely been absent from the evidence base that guides policy. As a result, policymakers have a deeply **incomplete picture** of the problem, and their responses miss many spots where harm occurs.

The solution is straightforward. Research and policy must shift toward survivor-centered evidence and prevention infrastructure. When survivor experience becomes the starting point for analysis, barriers to reporting, institutional protection of abusers, and failures in the response system become visible. Those insights are what will guide policies to reduce violence earlier and support survivors more effectively.

Policing Domestic Violence

Most Americans know someone who has experienced domestic violence, whether they realize it or not. In the United States, it is estimated that more than **50 million people** experience intimate partner violence during their lifetime, **often developing** through escalating patterns of control, intimidation, and physical harm that isolate and entrap victims. When that violence reaches a breaking point, most people are told to engage with the criminal-legal system for help.

Law enforcement has become a **central part** of the domestic violence response system, often serving as the first point of contact when domestic violence escalates. When the abuser is an officer, however, the **situation changes**: survivors must now seek help from the same institution that employs the person harming them, placing them in the difficult position of relying on the abuser's professional network for protection and accountability.

That dynamic changes everything. Preliminary **searches** and survivor **statements** show that they and their loved ones may hesitate to report abuse because the complaint moves through the abuser's workplace. Support services likely coordinate with the same departments that employ the abuser, making them potentially off-limits to survivors. In short, the system designed to respond to violence can become a major barrier to safety.

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Despite the dangerous reality survivors and their support networks face, the academic research base guiding policy has rarely centered survivor experience. The only explicitly survivor-focused studies in the United States were published in 1991 and 1992. Both found that at least 40 percent of officers reported losing control violently with a partner in the previous year. Those findings were alarming, yet they were never followed by sustained survivor-focused research. Later scholarship largely examined officer behavior, departmental culture, or disciplinary responses.

What we do know is that violence is often addressed late, institutional accountability remains limited, and survivors face the system alone, if they choose to at all. If the solutions to address officer-perpetrated violence are officer discipline, which is rare and unreliable, then this leaves major parts of the problem untouched.

My recent research published in Violence Against Women shows how officer-centered approaches to understanding and treating police domestic violence have narrowed policy conversations and harmed survivors. When research and policy elevate the perspectives of abusers and institutions, police culture ends up shaping how the violence itself is defined and addressed.

Prioritizing the Prevention of Violence

Prevention infrastructure needs to be treated as a core public safety policy. Early intervention programs, survivor services, and community-based support systems reduce escalation before violence becomes lethal. When prevention is underfunded, governments rely on punishment after harm occurs rather than stopping violence earlier. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, the state-wide domestic violence service providers, and numerous exceptional academic centers do exceptional work on this issue, but have been chronically underfunded and under-resourced for decades, doing unquantifiable harm to survivors and the public knowledge base.

Policymakers who are committed to addressing domestic violence should continuously invest in prevention infrastructure. Gender-based violence prevention programs, survivor advocacy organizations, and restorative justice approaches remain chronically underfunded, despite growing evidence that early support reduces escalation and long-term harm. Treating prevention as core public safety policy, rather than as an afterthought to punishment, would strengthen the systems that identify risk and intervene before violence becomes a crisis.

Noncriminal-Legal Support for Victims

Domestic violence response systems must not rely exclusively on the criminal-legal process as a means for justice, service-connection, and support. Linkages between federal dollars and domestic violence response work create challenging situations for those seeking to build a less-carceral-focused support network. Alternative response pathways, including survivor advocacy networks and community-based reporting channels, can expand access to safety while preserving accountability mechanisms. Similarly, zero-tolerance policies and others that favor criminalization through a deterrence and punishment-based approach must be analyzed critically for efficacy and equity, as they have largely become broad-brush policy responses that harm survivors and abusers.

These changes do not replace law enforcement accountability; rather, they provide survivors with more than one avenue for seeking support.

Local, state, and federal research funding should prioritize survivor-centered studies that examine how victims navigate institutions and how departments respond to abuse, rather than focusing almost entirely on officer behavior. The experiences of survivors determine whether reporting is possible and how institutional responses reduce or deepen harm. At the same time, policymakers should also expand the range of response options available to survivors. Domestic violence support systems that operate alongside, but independent from, law enforcement institutions can give survivors access to support without forcing them immediately into an adversarial criminal process tied to the abuser's workplace.

Finally, legislatures must evaluate institutional responses, not just individual misconduct. When police departments handle domestic violence allegations involving their own officers, the quality of the institutional response determines whether violence is contained or protected. This is of immense importance to the legitimacy of police departments and to whether victims will seek support from them. As such, Peace Officer Standards and Training Commissions and Civilian Compliant Review Boards must be given resources and power to be able to challenge **deeply entrenched** police union power and judicial bias. Similarly, legislatures should consider fostering completely independent domestic violence review boards that can specifically tackle cases of abuse in relationships involving power, privilege, and prestige. In short, effective policy must support options that examine how institutions act when confronted with abuse, and hold them accountable when those responses fail survivors.

Domestic violence by police officers is not rare, and the way we address it has made the problem harder to solve. A survivor-centered approach can shift that trajectory, letting policy be built on the experiences of those living with violence, and prevention becomes possible.