

COMMENTARY

Officer-involved domestic violence: A call for action among I-O psychologists

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Dhanani et al. (2022) review a compelling and sobering body of evidence regarding police-initiated violence, with a focus on racism and disparate impact on the Black community. We agree with the authors that racialized police-initiated violence is a major systemic issue that can, and should, be addressed at least in part through I-O psychology practices. We assert, however, that police violence not only occurs on duty but also at home and directed at officers' own family members.

Domestic violence is a global public health issue that affects an estimated 10 million people every year (Russell & Pappas, 2018). Domestic violence is abusive behavior used to gain power within the family and can include stalking, emotional, economic, sexual, physical, or psychological aggression (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2003). We review the incidence and empirical data on officer-involved domestic violence. We raise the issue of domestic violence as a major work-family, stress, and health issue in the policing profession. We close this commentary discussing the role of I-O psychology in addressing this problem.

Prevalence of officer-involved domestic violence

Public interest in officer-involved domestic violence began with Johnson's (1991) congressional testimony suggesting a link between police stress and family violence. Despite public interest, policy changes, and devastating incidences of officer-involved domestic violence, data on the topic has been woefully slim over the last 30 years (Russell & Pappas, 2018). Studies suggest anywhere between 4.8–40% of officer families experience domestic violence, with some sources estimating officers are four times more likely to engage in domestic violence than the general population (Gershon, 2000; Neidig et al., 1992; Russell & Pappas, 2018). Estimating prevalence of officer-involved domestic violence has been notoriously difficult, because there are no federal mandatory reporting requirements, no agencies or governing bodies that track statistics, variation in definitions and methodologies, and strong secrecy norms that suppress reporting and repercussions (Gershon et al., 2009; Mennicke & Ropes, 2016; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). Although existing studies and public discourse focus largely on intimate partner violence, there is evidence that officer violence is also directed toward their children (Friedersdorf, 2014; Gershon et al., 2009; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013).

Several factors put family members of police officers at risk for domestic violence. Police officers have access and training to use guns (Gershon, 2000; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). Further, police are trained to handle conflict through domination and control (Johnson et al., 2005; Mennicke & Ropes, 2016). Police officers can navigate and are embedded within the criminal justice system and know about domestic violence victim shelter locations, making it difficult for victims to seek help or refuge (Russell & Pappas, 2018). Victims may also be reluctant to contact

someone they know (a friend and/or colleague of the abuser) to report abuse (Mennicke & Ropes, 2016). Moreover, a strong code of commitment to one another among officers is thought to silence domestic abuse reports, and victims may fear further abuse escalation (Johnson et al., 2005). Even if victims come forward, many perpetrators receive minimal legal and career repercussions (Friedersdorf, 2014; Lonsway, 2006; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). Officer testimony may also be suspect due to a record of institutionalized perjury (e.g., Slobogin, 1996) and clear personal benefits for unreliable testimony (Johnson, 2016). Thus, officers have tools, training, and opportunities that increase the likelihood of abuse and vulnerability for family members.

Why does officer-involved domestic violence occur?

The predominant perspective is that police officers engage in domestic violence as a behavioral stress reaction to acute and extreme stressors experienced on the job. Police officers can be exposed to violence and traumatic events, such as being injured, being involved in a hostage situation, or attending a colleague's funeral (Gershon, 2000; Gershon et al., 2009). Officers may also experience poor job design features, including low pay, lack of respect, social isolation, long hours, shift work, incivility, and poor training (Gibson et al., 2001). These stressors trigger negative psychological states and coping mechanisms (e.g., problem drinking) which spillover into and are enacted at home (Johnson et al., 2005). This process is similar to strain-based work–family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In support, studies find exposure to police stress and working in high crime districts are associated with higher reported intimate partner violence (Erwin et al., 2005; Neidig et al., 1992). Multiple studies suggest exposure to violence and job stressors are associated with increased likelihood of domestic violence via alcohol use (Johnson et al., 2005; Oehme et al., 2012), and negative psychological states like PTSD, burnout, depression, and anger (Anderson & Lo, 2011; Gibson et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Oehme et al., 2012). There is also some evidence that gender and racial minority officers might be especially susceptible to spillover (Anderson & Lo, 2011; Erwin et al., 2005).

Another perspective is that officers are socialized to engage in violent behavior, which is then inappropriately enacted at home (i.e., behavior-based work-to-family conflict, Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Police officers are trained to enact dominance and control on the job, including the use of violence and coercive behavior. Further, as Dhanani et al. highlight, officers may be resistant to de-escalation techniques and training. Officers may have difficulty switching off this behavior, inappropriately using violence at home to dominate and control family members. In support, Anderson and Lo (2011) found officer exposure to stressors was associated with increased domestic violence through the use of authoritarian behavior at home (Anderson & Lo, 2011). The authors suggest violent behavior may also be a maladaptive coping mechanism to redirect stress (e.g., Griffin & Bernard, 2003). A similar argument has been made for alcohol use, in that a strong police culture around problem drinking as a coping mechanism increases individual consumption and subsequently domestic violence (Oehme et al., 2012). One study found domestic violence rates increased for those who were on the force for more than 7 years compared to those with less tenure (Erwin et al., 2005), suggesting those with greater exposure to stressors and toxic cultures are more likely to be domestic violence perpetrators. Another study found a curvilinear pattern, such that rates of domestic violence were highest for young (21–29 years) officers and officers over the age of 49 (Neidig et al., 1992).

Finally, police officers may have traits that increase likelihood to perpetrate domestic violence. For example, officers who experienced physical abuse in childhood learn and role model violence, becoming abusers themselves (Gibson et al., 2001; Zavala et al., 2015). Similarly, officers with non-violent values are less likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence (Zavala et al., 2015). Zavala and Melander (2019) suggested officers low in self-control are less likely to resist criminal and violent behavior, and individuals with high desire for control are driven to actively and assertively

influence others, including the use of violent coercive behaviors. Results showed desire-to-be-in-control was associated with perpetrating intimate partner violence, whereas low self-control was not. Surprisingly, Erwin et al. (2005) found no differences in personality and psychopathy scores using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) for officers accused versus not accused of intimate partner violence.

Although individual differences within policing may predispose individuals to violence, there is little explicit evidence regarding whether the prototypical police officer personality overlaps with that of domestic abusers. Police officers tend to be especially high in dutifulness, deliberation, and ambition (conscientiousness facets) as well as gregariousness, assertiveness, and excitement seeking (extraversion facets), and are physiologically reactive to stress (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013; Salters-Pedneault et al., 2010). Police recruits also tend to be higher in some aspects of psychopathy (fearless, dominance, and coldheartedness) than community samples (Falkenbach, Balash, et al., 2018), and these traits exist in subsamples of the police population (Falkenbach, Glackin, et al., 2018). These traits (e.g., dominance, psychopathy) tend to also be associated with domestic abuse (Carton & Egan, 2017; Iyican & Babcock, 2018). A single study explicitly compares police officers and male domestic abuser using MMPI scores and found little overlap across the two groups (Aamodt et al., 1998).

The role of I-O psychology in officer-involved domestic violence

This grave issue poses a significant point of ethical collaboration with police departments. If we, as a profession, are to continue collaborating with law enforcement institutions, we have an obligation under the APA code of conduct to not neglect this significant threat to the welfare of the partners and children of police. According to the APA principle of beneficence and nonmaleficence “psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons” (American Psychological Association, 2017).

For I-O psychologists seeking to work with police departments, our skills can be used to identify and address risk factors and barriers from both a situational and an individual difference perspective. First, our extensive training in work–family issues, recovery, and occupational health are particularly well-suited for understanding spillover processes and testing work design and training solutions that might better help officers to recover and maintain separation between stress on the job and interactions at home. For example, solutions at the individual level might include teaching or encouraging recovery strategies, boundary management strategies that segment work and home lives, or training for stress management (Oehme et al., 2016). Work design solutions might include supervisor support training, reducing the length of shifts, or cycling officer assignments to reduce potential for prolonged violence exposure. Interventions may also include direct resource groups or resources explicitly for the partners (not just spouses) and children of police (e.g., Aronson et al., 2018 interventions for military families).

I-O psychologists collaborating with police departments must also enthusiastically advocate for systemic measures to minimize officer-involved domestic violence. Our knowledge of organizational culture, organizational change, selection, and training are pertinent for addressing toxic cultures of substance use, violence, and authoritarianism. Solutions include work design changes such as advocating for the implementation of existing guidelines (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2003); screening out job candidates with a history of, or individual differences associated with, domestic abuse; mandatory reporting of domestic abuse to external agencies; and mandated regular use mental health services (Hofer & Savell, 2021). Law enforcement leadership can lead by example by encouraging follow-up on domestic violence claims reported to officers, offering a confidential point of support for family members, and ensuring perpetrators are subject to appropriate legal and career ramifications (e.g., removal of firearm possession; Oehme et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2016). I-O psychologists can play a role in implementing and evaluating such organization changes.

We also argue that I-O researchers take a systems-level approach that moves beyond the boundaries of the organization to include local, state, and national policies and resources as key variables that may enable or inhibit officer-involved domestic violence. Given the dearth of data on this issue, rigorous research on sources and consequences of officer-involved domestic violence would be a helpful step forward for designing, testing, and advocating for solutions such as those offered here. As experts in measurement and evaluation, we can play a role in developing methods that capture and track incidence and predictors surreptitiously or unobtrusively. Last, we argue that I-O researchers be wary of any research or organizational initiatives focused on policing institutions that do not take this significant outcome into account, as any potential change brought about by our research may have harmful consequences for the spouses and children of police, thereby violating our code of ethics.

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