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A Brief Look at VPSOs and Violence Against Women Cases

The Alaska Senate Judiciary Committee issued recommendations in 2009 to reduce sexual assault in Alaska. That same year, Alaska Governor Sean Parnell proposed a 10-year initiative to end the epidemic of domestic violence and sexual assault in this state. Both recommended increasing the number of Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) in rural Alaska to assist in dealing with domestic violence and sexual assault crimes, as well as other public safety concerns. Earlier this year, U.S. Senator Mark Begich (D) introduced the Alaska Safe Families and Villages Act of 2011 which would provide additional funding for local law enforcement personnel in rural Alaska.

This article looks at a study of sexual assault and sexual assault of a minor cases reported to Alaska State Troopers in 2003 and 2004 when the first responder was a local paraprofessional police officer—a Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO), Village Police Officer (VPO), or Tribal Police Officer (TPO).

VPSOs, VPOs And TPOs

The Village Public Safety Officer Program began formally in 1981 and provides state funding for public safety services at the local level in rural Alaskan communities. The program was established to “reduce the loss of life due to fires, drowning, lost person, and the lack of immediate emergency medical assistance in rural communities” (Alaska Department of Public Safety, <http://www.dps.state.ak.us/ast/vpso/default.aspx>). Since then, Village Public Safety Officers have become essential first responders in rural Alaska, along with Village Police Officers and Tribal Police Officers. These three types of local paraprofessional police differ in the level of training they receive and their funding sources. In general, Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) receive more state training than the other two categories of local paraprofessional police.

The Alaska Department of Public Safety hired 27 Village Public Safety Officers in

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http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/forum/28/2-3summerfall2011/e_vpso.html

For other articles and publications related to intimate partner violence and violence against women, see:

<http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/vaw/>

For other articles and publications related to Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) and paraprofessional police, see:

<http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/directory/v/vpso.html>

Abstract: *This study examined sexual assault and sexual abuse of a minor cases that were reported to Alaska State Troopers in 2003 and 2004, and assault cases involving domestic violence that were reported to Alaska State Troopers in 2004. All analyses were restricted to cases that included only one victim and only one adult suspect. From Alaska Department of Law records, we examined whether cases were referred for prosecution, whether cases were accepted for prosecution, and whether cases resulted in a conviction. We also examined if these legal resolutions were different when the first responder was a local paraprofessional police officer (i.e., a Village Public Safety Officer, a Village Police Officer, or a Tribal Police Officer).*

- Overall, local paraprofessional police significantly increased the probability of referral for sexual assault cases, had no effect on the probability of referral for sexual abuse of a minor cases, and decreased the probability of referral for assault cases involving domestic violence. (Cases are referred for prosecution by the Alaska State Troopers to the Alaska Department of Law.)
- For all three offenses (sexual assault, sexual abuse of a minor, and assault involving domestic violence), local paraprofessional police significantly increased the probability that cases would be accepted for prosecution.
- Local paraprofessional police did not impact the probability of conviction in sexual assault cases, but significantly increased the probability of conviction in sexual abuse of minor cases and in assault cases involving domestic violence. Cases that resulted in a conviction may have been plea bargained to reduced charges.

2010 and 17 more from January through September 2011. As of August 31, 2011, there were 101 funded VPSO positions and 86 filled VPSO positions in 74 rural communities. As of that same date, there were a total of 109 Village Police Officers (VPOs) and Tribal Police Officers (TPOs) in 52 communities.

There is no law enforcement officer in the 91 communities that currently have populations of less than 50 residents. Forty-three rural communities have at least one Alaska Wildlife Trooper or Alaska State Trooper in residence while statewide 40 communities have a municipal police department. Sixty-nine communities are patrolled by Alaska State Troopers or a municipal police department, but do not have a resident law enforcement officer. In some instances, a community may have

both a municipal police department and an Alaska Wildlife Trooper or Alaska State Trooper post; these communities include Bethel, Cordova, Craig, Dillingham, Fairbanks, Galena, Haines, Juneau, Ketchikan, King Salmon, Klawock, Kodiak, Kotzebue, Nome, Palmer, Petersburg, Seward, Sitka, Soldotna, Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, Valdez, Wasilla. (These figures reflect rural law enforcement staffing as of August 31, 2011; changes in staffing may have occurred since that time.)

As first responders, Village Public Safety Officers assist Alaska State Troopers—and they make a difference. Previous Justice Center studies have found that sexual assault cases with adult victims that were originally reported to local paraprofessional police were 3.5 times more likely to be prosecuted than sexual assault cases originally reported

directly to State Troopers (Wood, Rosay, Postle, and TePas, 2007). Another study by Wood and Gruenewald (2006) found that villages with a local paraprofessional police presence had rates of serious injury caused by assault that were 40 percent less than those villages without a local paraprofessional police presence.

Study Results

Following are key results from a study funded in 2005 by the National Institute of Justice and conducted in partnership with the Alaska State Troopers and the Alaska Department of Law. The results below apply only to offenses reported to Alaska State Troopers (and exclude all offenses reported to other local or municipal law enforcement agencies).

We examined 300 sexual assault and 338 sexual abuse of minor cases that included one victim and one adult suspect, and 1,095 assault cases involving domestic violence that included one victim and one suspect (for this analysis, cases with multiple suspects or multiple victims were excluded). The sexual assault and sexual abuse of minor cases were reported to Alaska State Troopers in 2003 and 2004. The assault cases involving domestic violence were reported to Alaska State Troopers in 2004. From the Alaska State Trooper reports, we examined whether the first responder was a local paraprofessional police officer (i.e., a Village

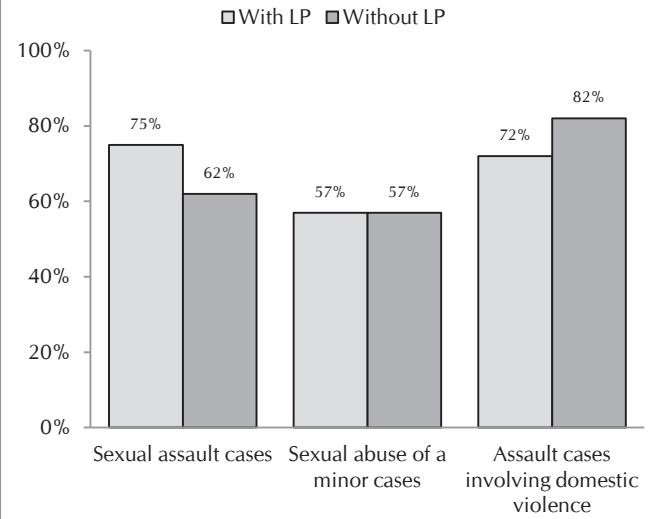
Public Safety Officer, Village Police Officer, or Tribal Police Officer). In the vast majority of cases, a Village Public Safety Officer was the first responder. From the Alaska Department of Law records, we examined whether cases were referred for prosecution, whether cases were accepted for prosecution, and whether cases resulted in a conviction.

Figure 1 shows the probability of referral for cases reported to Alaska State Troopers. Overall, local paraprofessional police significantly increased the probability of referral for sexual assault cases, had no impact on the probability of referral for prosecution of sexual abuse of a minor cases, and decreased the probability of referral for prosecution for assault cases involving domestic violence. (Cases are referred by the Alaska State Troopers to the Alaska Department of Law.)

Figure 2 shows the probability of acceptance for cases that were referred for

Figure 1. Probability of Referral

Probability that cases reported to the Alaska State Troopers were referred to the Alaska Department of Law, with and without a local paraprofessional (LP) as first responder.

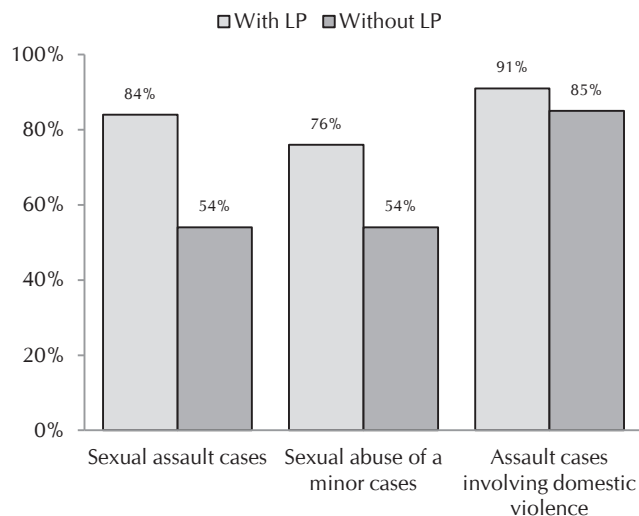


Note: N = 300 sexual assault cases, 338 sexual abuse of minor cases, and 1,095 assault cases involving domestic violence reported to Alaska State Troopers.

prosecution. For all three offenses (sexual assault, sexual abuse of minor, and assault involving domestic violence), local paraprofessional police significantly increased the probability that cases would be accepted for prosecution. When the first responder was a local paraprofessional police officer, the

Figure 2. Probability of Acceptance

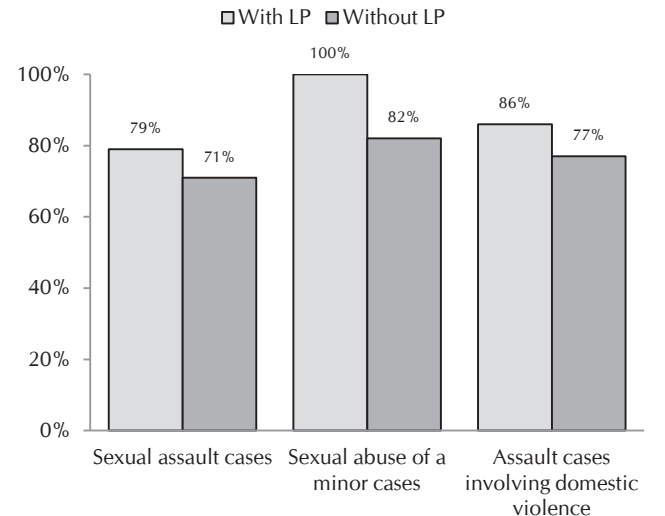
Probability that cases referred by the Alaska State Troopers to the Alaska Department of Law were accepted for prosecution, with and without a local paraprofessional (LP) as first responder.



Note: N = 194 sexual assault cases, 192 sexual abuse of minor cases, and 873 assault cases involving domestic violence referred to Alaska Department of Law by Alaska State Troopers.

Figure 3. Probability of Conviction

Probability that cases accepted for prosecution by the Alaska Department of Law resulted in conviction, with and without a local paraprofessional (LP) as first responder.



Note: N = 119 sexual assault cases, 109 sexual abuse of minor cases, and 748 assault cases involving domestic violence accepted by Alaska Department of Law. Convictions include guilty pleas on reduced charges.

probability that a case would be accepted for prosecution increased significantly in sexual assault cases and in sexual abuse of minor cases. The probability increased less in assault cases involving domestic violence. (Cases are accepted for prosecution by the Alaska Department of Law.)

Figure 3 shows the *probability of conviction* for cases that had been accepted for prosecution. Local paraprofessional police

did not impact the probability of conviction in sexual assault cases, but significantly increased the probability of conviction in sexual abuse of minor cases and in assault cases involving domestic violence. Cases that resulted in a conviction may have been plea bargained to reduce charges.

Research for this article was compiled by André Rosay, Justice Center Director; Marny Rivera, Justice Center Associate

Professor; and Barbara Armstrong, Alaska Justice Forum editor.

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More Reading on VPSOs

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