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Stinson, Philip M. and Liederbach, John, "Research Brief One-Sheet No.4: Officer-Involved Domestic Violence" (2012). *Criminal Justice Faculty Publications*. 34.

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Research Brief *One-Sheet* – No. 4

Officer-Involved Domestic Violence

Philip M. Stinson, Sr. & John Liederbach

Background

Officer-Involved Domestic Violence (OIDV) refers to instances of domestic and/or family violence that occur within police families. OIDV has been recognized as an important issue for both police scholars and practitioners. The movement to recognize OIDV gained momentum through the last two decades, beginning with exploratory research that linked police stress and family violence (Johnson, 1991). The movement also involved enactment of the Violence Against Women Act (1994) and the Lautenberg Amendment to the federal Gun Control Act that prohibits individuals—including police officers—from owning or using a firearm if they are convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence. The International Association of Police Chiefs (IACP) promulgated a model policy on OIDV in 1999 and issued a revised policy on OIDV in 2003.

The purpose of the research is to provide empirical data on violence within police families. Our research identifies and describes incidents in which police were arrested for criminal offenses associated with an incident of family and/or domestic violence. Our primary goal is to provide information on actual OIDV cases to inform policies and further initiatives designed to mitigate the problem.

Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study on police crime. The study identifies OIDV cases through content analyses of published newspaper articles. Data are derived using the Google News™ search engine and Google Alerts™ email update service. The research team located and printed news article identified through these applications, examined them for relevancy, and archived them for subsequent coding and analyses.

The American Academy of Family Physicians definition of family violence was used to identify OIDV arrests within the larger dataset on police crime (*see* AAFP, 2000).

Supplemental coding involved a cross-check of the names of each of the arrested officers against the federal courts' Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system. The cross-check was used to explore whether arrested officers had ever been named in their official capacity as a party defendant in one or more civil actions arising under federal civil rights laws at any time during their law enforcement career.

Findings

The study identified 324 cases in which police were arrested for a criminal offense associated with an incident of OIDV. One-third of the victims were the current spouse of the arrested officer. Close to one-fourth of the victims were children, including a child or step-child of the officer or children who were unrelated to the arrested officer. Current and former boyfriend/girlfriends comprised one-fourth of the victims. There were 16 victims who were also police officers. Simple assault was the most serious

offense charged in 132 of the cases, followed by aggravated assault, forcible rape, intimidation, murder/non-negligent manslaughter, and forcible fondling.

Data on final organizational outcomes were available for 233 of the cases. About one-third of those cases involved officers who were separated from their job either through resignation or termination. The majority of cases in which the final employment outcome was known resulted in a suspension *without* job separation. Of those cases where there was a conviction on at least one offense charged, officers are known to have lost their job through either termination or resignation in less than half of those cases.

More than one fifth of the OIDV cases involved an officer who had also been named individually as a party defendant in at least one federal court civil action for deprivation of civil rights under color of law pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §1983 at some point during their law enforcement career.

Implications

Findings in regard to OIDV victims—especially children and persons other than current spouses—demonstrate the need for expansive definitions that include non-marital and parental relationships in research on OIDV. Also, some of the behavior described in the news articles did not result in either an official charge that corresponded to the nature of the underlying criminal act or any type of criminal conviction. These cases demonstrate how some officers escape appropriate penalties due to loopholes and the impact of discretionary decisions of actors in the system. Finally, findings from the PACER searches suggest that misconduct associated with the perpetration of OIDV may not be isolated; but instead, indicative of officers with performance problems in other areas of their work.

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Read the full article

Stinson, P. M. & Liederbach, J. (2012). Fox in the henhouse: A study of police officers arrested for crimes associated with domestic and/or family violence. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*. Prepublished August 28, 2012, doi: 10.1177/0887403412453837

This project was supported by Award No. 2011-IJ-CX-0024, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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