

Wife Assault as a Crime

The Perspectives of Victims and Police Officers on a Charging Policy in London, Ontario from 1980 to 1990

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The present study addressed the effectiveness of police officers laying charges in cases of wife assault when the police have reasonable grounds to believe that an assault has taken place. The effectiveness of this policy was addressed by interviewing 90 women in London, Ontario who had been physically abused by their partner and received one of three interventions (1. police intervention/charges laid, 2. police intervention/no charges laid, 3. no police intervention/no charges laid). Research findings indicate that victims had a high level of satisfaction with police officer's interventions and reported a significant reduction in violence when criminal charges were laid by the police. The small sample size did not allow for an analysis of a meaningful interaction between police and other community interventions (e.g. specialized social services).

The effectiveness of the policy was also assessed by examining police data on the number of charges laid and a survey of police officer's attitudes with regard to the importance and impact of the directive to lay charges in cases of wife assault. The policy was shown to be implemented in a dramatic fashion. Between 1979 (pre-policy) and 1990 the rate of charges had increased from 2.7% to 89.9% of wife assault occurrences. Over a four year period between 1987 and 1990 officers were significantly less inclined to leave the responsibility for laying charges with victims. The change in laying charges was paralleled by more positive police attitudes on the importance of the policy and their perceived support from victims and the courts.

The court response to the charges indicated a continuing trend of fewer cases being dismissed or withdrawn in com-

parison to previous years. The police charges led to a significant increase in more serious court sentences (probation, incarceration) than in previous years, especially in contrast to victim-laid charges (Jaffe and Burris, 1981). Although the charges led to a significant reduction in the violence that victims reported, the fear of violence continued. During the court process half the victims continued to fear for their safety and one-quarter were threatened by the batterer. Many victims indicated a need for greater awareness of their plight in the community through public awareness (42%). Over one-quarter of the victims (28%) suggested that the police offer more information with regard to the court process and available community services.

The limitations in generalizing the study's findings were discussed in terms of the progressive nature of the London Police Force and the coordinated community response to violence against women in London. Limitations were also discussed with regard to the small sample size and the small number of participants representing visible minorities.

Recommendations

1. Feedback should be offered to the London Police Force on the successful implementation of the charging policy.
2. The research findings should be shared with other police forces across Canada.
3. The research findings should be shared with police colleges and provincial justice institutes across Canada.
4. Future research should be funded by appropriate federal and provincial government ministries to examine the following:

- the response of police forces in other communities in Canada,
- a comparison of various police interventions with other community support services,
- the special needs of visible minorities, and
- the impact of the court on recidivism of wife assault.

5. The present study reinforces the importance of public education and a high level of awareness on the part of front-line professionals (e.g. family doctors, clergy) on the issue of abused women.
6. The importance of specialized services that are geared to the needs of battered women is underlined by the high degree to which these services are considered "very helpful" by victims of violence.
7. Canadian police forces should clearly communicate their charging policy on behalf of all victims of violence. Ultimately, the same community response to other social issues (e.g. drinking and driving) needs to be developed for violence against women.
8. Communities need to examine the level of support and protection available to victims before, during, and after the laying of charges. The community response to victims should be a well-coordinated intervention (Prairie Research Associates, 1990).

*This article is a summary of the full project report, which is available from:
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