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# Police Attitudes Toward Domestic Violence Offenders

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Police attitudes are important in facilitating a sense of safety and comfort in women seeking justice-system support for protection from partner violence. This study examined police attitudes toward sanctions and treatment for domestic violence offenders compared with other violent and nonviolent offenders. In addition, police attitudes toward domestic violence offenders who do and do not use substances were examined. Officers from one city police department ( $n = 315$ ) participated in a survey. Results indicate there is a trend toward attitudes that treatment, rather than sanctions, was more appropriate for domestic violence offenders. In addition, officers rated the use of sanctions higher for domestic violence offenders who abuse alcohol or drugs compared with domestic violence offenders who did not abuse alcohol or drugs. Understanding police attitudes toward domestic violence offenders may have implications for police training and victim services in facilitating the use of the justice system in protecting women from partner violence.

**Keywords:** *domestic violence offenders; police attitudes; justice system; victim safety*

Research suggests that police attitudes are critical in the justice system response to domestic violence. Police officers can diffuse domestic violence situations by protecting the victim, keeping the peace, and enforcing the law (Belknap, 1995). However, negative police attitudes may influence the outcome of the police call and women's attempts to seek help through the justice system in the future (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Leukefeld, 2006). Police attitudes may not predict specific action taken by police officers as these may be mandated by law, but they are highly likely to influence the officer's assessment and response to the situation (Belknap, 1995; Robinson & Chandek, 2000) as well as shape victims' perceptions of police

response (Coulter, Kuehnle, Byers, & Alfonso, 1999; Stephens & Sinden, 2000). Thus, it is important to gain a better understanding of police officers' attitudes relating to domestic violence. Specifically, it is critical to examine the degree to which police officers view domestic violence as a criminal activity compared with other crimes. It is possible that police officers view domestic violence as an interpersonal problem rather than a violent crime, which may help, in part, to explain the response to domestic violence.

Several studies suggest that police officers have complex attitudes about domestic violence and that situational factors may influence officer response to a domestic violence situation (Rigakos, 1997; Robinson & Chandek, 2000; Sinden & Stephens, 1999). For example, studies have shown that officers report that decisions about how to handle domestic violence cases rely on signs of injury, witnessing an act of violence, having previous reports from the household, involvement of substances, and characteristics of the neighborhood from which the call was made (Belknap, 1995; Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003). More specifically, one factor that may be important in the decision to arrest a domestic violence perpetrator is whether the suspect is under the influence of substances (Rigakos, 1997). Given that the use of substances is associated with domestic violence perpetration, it is important to examine police officer perceptions of situations involving intimate partner violence both with and without the presence of substance use. The purpose of the current study is twofold: (a) to examine police attitudes toward three kinds of sanctions (fines, hard labor, and incarceration) and toward treatment for domestic violence offenders compared with other types of violent and nonviolent offenders and (b) to examine police attitudes toward sanctions and treatment for domestic violence offenders who do and do not use substances.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were 315 officers from all divisions of one mid-sized city police department representing 69% of the 457 sworn officers on full duty during the time of this study. The average age of police officers in this study was 36 years (range = 22 to 84), and they were mostly White (89%) and mostly male (73%). Of the officers, 35% had been on the force between 3 and 9 years and 32% between 10 and 20 years, whereas smaller numbers had been on the force for less than 3 years (16%) or more than

20 years (17%). Of the participating officers, 69% were in the patrol division, 14% were in the bureau of investigation, 10% were in the bureau of traffic, and 7% were in some other bureau. Also, 79% were ranked at the officer level, 11% were sergeants, 4% were lieutenants, 1% were captains, and 5% were ranked something other than what was listed. Of the sample, 48% reported having a bachelor's degree or higher.

### Survey

This study involved the adaptation of a survey instrument to examine police attitudes toward sanctions (fines, hard labor, and incarceration) and toward treatment (mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence offender treatment) for different kinds of offenses, including drug possession, drug trafficking, domestic violence with and without alcohol or drug abuse, violent crime, property crime, and repeat DUI (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1996). Police officers were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements in three general areas: (a) general perceptions of whether or not drug use, drug trafficking, repeat DUI, and domestic violence crimes should be handled by the criminal justice system or treatment; (b) overall perceptions of how effective treatment is for different offenders—violent, nonviolent, repeat DUI, drug, sex, and domestic violence; and (c) perceptions of how specific types of offenders should be handled, including substantial fines, hard labor, incarceration, mental health services, and substance abuse or domestic violence offender specific treatment. Although hard labor is not a realistic component of contemporary sanctions, it was used to examine punitive attitudes toward criminal conduct.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited during roll call sessions in all three shifts (7:00 a.m., 4:00 p.m., and 10:00 p.m.) from June 2000 through August 2000. The sample included patrol and other divisions. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

### Analysis

Univariate and bivariate statistics were used to examine responses overall and by gender (7.3% reported they were female, 72.7% reported they were male, 20.0% did not report gender), education (51.7% had some or no college, whereas 48.3% had a bachelor's degree or higher), and time on the

**Table 1**  
**General Perceptions of How Various Crimes Should be Handled**

Crimes Should be Handled by:	Criminal Justice System	Treatment
Domestic violence	4.2	3.3
Drug use crimes	3.7	3.2
Repeat DUI	4.4	2.8
Drug trafficking crimes	4.4	2.1

Note: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*.

police force (17.5% were on the force for less than 3 years, and 82.2% had 3 or more years on the force).

## Results

### General Perceptions

Ratings of how much officers agreed or disagreed with whether each of four crimes should be handled by the criminal justice system and treatment are presented in Table 1. Results suggest that the officers agreed most with the statement that repeat DUI and drug trafficking should be handled by the criminal justice system. On the other hand, officers agreed most with the statement, "Domestic violence is a crime that should be handled by treatment," whereas they agreed the least with the statement, "Drug trafficking is a crime that should be handled by treatment." Table 2 suggests that police officers rated treatment for nonviolent offenses and domestic violence as more effective than treatment for repeat DUI offenses, drug offenses, violent offenses, and sex offenses. There were no differences in officers' ratings by gender, education, or time on the police force.

### Specific Perceptions of Sanctions and Treatment

When ratings of fines were examined, fines for DUI offenders were rated as most appropriate, followed by drug trafficking, nonviolent property offenders, violent offenders, drug possession, domestic violence with substance abuse, and domestic violence without substance abuse. In essence, domestic violence offenders with and without substance abuse had the lowest ratings compared with the other offenders. Hard labor ratings had a similar trend as did incarceration. However, for incarceration, domestic violence

**Table 2**  
**Effectiveness of Treatment for Various Crimes**

Treatment is Effective for:	Treatment Effectiveness Rating
Nonviolent property offenses	2.75
Domestic violence offenses	2.54
Repeat DUI offenses	2.32
Drug offenses	2.27
Violent offenses	2.24
Sex offenses	2.06

Note: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*.

without substance abuse continued to have the lowest rating, whereas domestic violence with substance abuse moved slightly higher in ratings above nonviolent property crime, drug possession, and domestic violence without substance abuse. On the other hand, when mental health and substance abuse treatment were examined, domestic violence with and without substance abuse were rated higher than the other types of offenders for mental health treatment. In addition, domestic violence with substance abuse was rated highest for substance abuse treatment.

Each of the treatment and sanction options for domestic violence offenders with and without substance abuse was examined for significant differences in ratings by gender, education, and time on the police force. Although there were no differences in ratings for gender and education, there were significant differences in some ratings dependent on police force tenure for domestic violence offenders. Results showed that officers on the police force for less time rated each of the sanctions (fines, hard labor, and incarceration) as more appropriate than did those on the force for 3 or more years: for domestic violence offenders without substance abuse, fines (3.56 vs. 3.01),  $F(1, 312) = 10, p < .01$ , hard labor (3.58 vs. 3.03),  $F(1, 312) = 9, p < .01$ , and incarceration (4.09 vs. 3.74),  $F(1, 312) = 7.5, p < .01$ ; for domestic violence offenders with substance abuse, fines (3.95 vs. 3.37),  $F(1, 310) = 10.2, p < .01$ , hard labor (4.02 vs. 3.43),  $F(1, 311) = 10.2, p < .01$ , and incarceration (4.38 vs. 3.98),  $F(1, 311) = 9.7, p < .01$ .

### **Comparison of Domestic Violence Offenders With and Without Substance Use**

When examining treatment options and punishment sanction ratings for domestic violence offenders without substance use compared to domestic

violence offenders with substance use, the largest gap between the two is with regard to substance abuse treatment, as would be expected. Mental health services, anger management, domestic violence offender treatment, and family or marital counseling ratings were slightly lower across these options for domestic violence offenders who use substances compared to those that do not. On the other hand, the three more negative sanctions—fines, hard labor, and incarceration—show police officers rating these as slightly more appropriate for domestic violence offenders who use substances compared to those who do not.

## Discussion

The importance of police attitudes toward domestic violence is critical for several reasons. Interactions with police officers in a domestic violence situation can be demoralizing to victims if the interaction is negative. More specifically, Erez and Belknap (1998) concluded that

the attitudes, comments, opinions or assumptions of criminal justice processing personnel who deal with battered women can be, and often are, harmful and demoralizing to victims. Inappropriate or inadequate system's response may cause battered women a deeper despair than the abuse itself. Negative comments or discouraging attitudes by criminal processing agents underline victims' powerlessness and helplessness. (p. 263)

In addition, interactions with police officers can influence future help-seeking behavior, such as calling the police, filing for a protective order, or pursuing a violation of a protective order through the justice system (Miller & Krull, 1997). In fact, one study found that criminal justice system representatives and victim service representatives reported victim follow-through as one of the most frequently cited barriers to enforcing a protective order (Logan, Shannon, & Walker, 2005). However, it may be that many other factors, such as officer attitudes, are influential in whether or not a woman pursues a protective order violation through the justice system.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine police officer attitudes toward domestic violence offenders compared with other kinds of offenders (violent and nonviolent) and also to examine attitudes toward domestic violence offenders who do and do not use substances. There are two main findings from the results of this study. First, there is a general trend across all of the ratings that treatment, rather than sanctions, was more appropriate

for domestic violence offenses compared with the other offenses, especially other violent offenses. This is consistent with Belknap's (1995) finding that officers reported a preference to handle domestic violence cases with mediation rather than arrest. Second, officers rated the use of sanctions higher for domestic violence offenders who use alcohol or drugs compared to domestic violence offenders who did not use alcohol or drugs while rating treatment options as more appropriate for domestic violence offenders who did not abuse substances compared to those with substance abuse (with the exception of substance abuse treatment).

The findings from this study suggest that although society has come a long way in recognizing domestic violence as a serious issue worthy of resources and attention, it seems that there are still weaknesses in the societal response to domestic violence. It is interesting to note from the study results that violent crimes were rated as less amenable to treatment compared with nonviolent crimes, yet domestic violence ratings were nestled between nonviolent property offenses and DUI offenses—both nonviolent offenses. One major implication from these results may be that police officer training needs to include more information about the fact that domestic violence perpetration is a violent crime. Several other research studies support this notion, including the fact that there is a huge overlap between partner violence and more general violence (Logan, Walker, & Leukefeld, 2001a, 2001b). Many domestic violence perpetrators have a history of repeat offending in terms of domestic violence and a history of criminal justice system involvement for a variety of types of crimes (Buzawa, Hotaling, & Klein, 1998; Keilitz, Hannaford, & Efkenman, 1997; Logan et al., 2001b; Logan, Nigoff, Jordan, & Walker, 2002), providing ample evidence that perpetrators of domestic violence are likely to be violent offenders involved in other aspects of the criminal justice system.

There were no differences across officer ratings for gender or education level. However, one interesting finding is that officers on the force for less than 3 years reported higher ratings of each of the three sanctions for domestic violence offenders with and without substance use, although the trends were similar to the overall findings. In other words, although the newer officers' sanction ratings were higher for domestic violence offenders, their other ratings were consistent with more senior officers' ratings. Interestingly, it seems that as officers gain experience, they view sanctions as less appropriate for domestic violence offenders. This finding suggests that ongoing education and training of police officers is critical in continuing to address the response to domestic violence. In fact, one of the important implications of this study is that officer attitudes may be a silent contributor to situation

interpretation and enforcement responses. Examining officer attitudes in different jurisdictions might offer clues about enforcement patterns in particular communities, independent of other factors including local policies. Future research should examine the relationship between police officer attitudes and actual enforcement practices, controlling for differences in jurisdictional policies and state laws.

Furthermore, although officers seemed to view sanctions as more appropriate for domestic violence offenders who abuse substances than for domestic violence offenders who do not abuse substances, it is not clear why. It may be that in cases where substance abuse is involved, other kinds of charges can be filed, which makes officers believe the crime is more serious. It may also be that officers who encounter intoxicated individuals expect more difficulty in dealing with them, thus increasing the perception that sanctions are more appropriate. Whatever the case, this is another opportunity for education. Although research does show there is a high overlap of substance abuse and domestic violence (Logan et al., 2001b; Stuart, 2004), the crime of domestic violence itself needs to be considered as serious as other types of crimes. This finding also suggests that future research is needed to better understand police response to domestic violence, which includes offender and victim characteristics but also comparisons of how officers respond to offenders committing other kinds of crime. This study suggests a need for future research to more closely examine police officer attitudes as the officers enter the force and at later times in their career to measure changes in attitudes over time. It may be that fundamental attitudes and beliefs remain fixed over time, and, if so, officer recruitment strategies could include examining key beliefs about crimes and sanctions.

There are several limitations to this study. This study of attitudes consisted of self-reports by officers; these reports may or may not accurately reflect true attitudes and beliefs. Also, this study focused on only one jurisdiction, and this could limit the generalizability of the study results. Even within these limitations, this study highlights the need for continued education with police officers regarding their response to domestic violence and the importance of police officer demeanor toward the general crime of domestic violence and more specifically toward victims who intersect with police officers. This study suggests that police officer attitudes about domestic violence are different from their views of other crimes and that officer attitudes should be examined to see if they are related to enforcement practices.



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