



Domestic Violence Prevention & Investigation

with David Cropp

Understanding domestic violence calls and tips for a safe response

Domestic violence calls are chaotic and dangerous, not only for victims and children, but for also for responding officers

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In addition to a fractured sociopolitical dialogue and impulsive aggressions toward officers in this country, we must contend with the intense implications of responding to domestic violence calls. Boston and Palm Springs are two recent examples of the dangers involved in domestic violence response.

DV calls are chaotic and dangerous, not only for victims and children, but for also for responding officers. It is a unique crime requiring unique knowledge and effective strategies for a safe response. Individual departments have respective policies and procedures for dispatching and responding to these calls for service. Likewise, officers are well trained in the use of non-lethal and weaponless defense. Nothing herein is designed to alter existing policies or tactics. Still, here are a few tips that I believe may help us stay safe:

Abusers

We must label something in order to study it, otherwise the brain has no way to understand its nature. It is frustrating and potentially dangerous not to label, study and understand the nature of domestic violence abusers. There are many ways to categorize abusers—no one way is correct. California recognizes the implications of primary and dominant aggressors. This is a start. In his fascinating book, “Murderous Minds,” Dean Haycock suggests that 15-30 percent of [dominant] domestic violence abusers may be psychopaths.

Author Margaret Elbow describes four categories of abusers, suggesting that an emotional need for validation becomes so intense in some incorporator abusers that they become desperate and unable

to control themselves. In Citrus Heights, California, officers are trained to recognize the incorporator type of abuser.

John Hamel and Tonia L. Nicholls, citing a large literature review, comment on types of abusers including those labeled as patriarchal terrorists, or if you prefer a more gender-neutral term, controlling coercive abusers. Ola Barnett and Alyce LaViolette, in their review of the literature, point to types of abusers characterized by their childhood exposure to violence, mental health or neurobiological development.

Donald Dutton points to the calculated use of emotional, non-verbal control tactics by some abusers to threaten and control their victims. And Lenore Walker discusses types of abusers including those who may be predisposed with antisocial or borderline personality traits and capable of committing a wide range of violence.

911 call takers and dispatchers

Our dispatchers are the *real* first responders. They must train alongside officers and be just as knowledgeable in the implications of domestic violence. They are required to initiate questions designed to clarify the following:

1. The level of risk (weapons).
2. Any witness involvement.
3. The severity of the current abuse.
4. Past patterns of threats.
5. Whether or not the abuser is still at the scene.

A good telecommunicator not only makes officers look good, but helps us stay safe. In one recent call for service, a dispatcher was told by the young caller that she knew just when to call the police to keep the violence from getting bad. Imagine the myriad follow up questions we could ask based on this loaded statement. And imagine how useful this information is for responding officers. Remember that dispatchers are our partners in responding to domestic violence.

Priors

Prior calls for service may highlight a pattern, which may be useful for prosecutors. Officers make brief notes in their reports of prior police contacts. These notes help detectives gather follow-up evidence for trial. But this is after the fact. What can we learn from prior contacts that we can provide to first responders? For example, what does it tell us if a particular family has seven prior calls for service and twelve prior contacts by Child Protective Services? What if, additionally, an intimate partner had several prior contacts with CPS as a child, therein suggesting an intergenerational cycle of abuse?

At my agency, I enter notes into personal descriptor screens indicating prior law enforcement and CPS contacts. I add other salient notes such as threats to commit suicide or gang activity or access to

weapons. When calls come in, dispatchers, depending on the information they're provided, can run a quick search on the people involved. If my notes have been entered and are germane to a particular person, they can share this historical narrative with responding officers. Officers can run names from their squad cars and see these notes (if they exist and apply to that particular person).

These notes are not designed to provide any level of probable cause, but they may help responding officers adjust their approach and consider safety options. They may also help officers with investigatory strategies. This information may also be useful for collaborative partners such as advocates who follow up and deliver services to victims and families, potentially minimizing future calls for service.

A strong understanding of abuser types and their respective potential for violence is important for contemporary law enforcement professionals. The existing literature is filled with references on this topic. We don't need a comprehensive list of theoretical concepts, just a foundational perspective that helps us understand what we are getting into.

Second, including dispatchers into our trainings as partners and crediting them as being valuable first-responders is critical for information gathering and providing officers with crucial information they need for a safe response. They must learn about and discuss the implications of domestic violence alongside officers. Dispatchers and officers must become attuned to each other's role in responding to this type of call.

Collecting data on the nature of domestic violence in our respective jurisdictions, including prior contacts, may give us valuable information. Let's find out what we can learn. Data is not only useful for detectives and prosecutors, but may provide responding officers with just the information they need to adjust their response accordingly.

Good luck and stay safe!

About the author

David Cropp is a retired sergeant with the Sacramento Police Department and has a combined 35 years of law enforcement experience. He is a regional domestic violence expert witness and consultant, and holds a POST Master Instructor Credential and a Master's Degree in Behavioral Science.

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