

Domestic violence drop may deceive  
Hard times often discourage reporting  
By Stephanie Toone | Staff Writer  
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Domestic violence cases in Richmond and Columbia counties are down compared with last year, but domestic violence experts say those numbers might be misleading.

Unemployment and other financial concerns can put a strain on already violent situations, but concerns about finances dissuade victims from reporting abuse in many cases, said State Court Solicitor Harold Jones.

"Over 95 percent of all domestic violence victims are female. Many of these women are dependent upon the spouse or boyfriend for significant support," Mr. Jones said. "We are finding that some women are less inclined to prosecute or even report incidents of domestic violence."

Richmond County's domestic violence cases were down 20 percent between January and March, with 488 cases so far this year, compared with 608 cases the same time last year. Reports of domestic violence are down 36 percent in Columbia County this year compared with the same time last year, said Columbia County sheriff's Capt. Steve Morris.

Still, some experts are convinced that domestic violence intensifies and increases during an economic downturn. Research shows unemployment and financial distress exacerbates domestic violence, said Brian Namey, spokesman for the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

"We know that domestic violence often increases in high-stress situations," Mr. Namey said. "When there's unemployment or trouble paying the mortgage, that will often have an impact."

According to a study by the National Institute of Justice, there is a 4.7 percent rate of intimate partner violence among couples where the male remains employed compared with a 7.5 percent rate of violence when the male has one period of unemployment.

The severity of the violence also appears to be trending upward, Mr. Jones said. His office has seen increasingly violent attacks and more cases involving weapons.

"The conditions of the economy are increasing the violence of the batterer," Mr. Jones said. "The economy does not cause domestic violence, but frustration over economic conditions can exacerbate the violence in the home."

Victims should not allow fear to prevent them from seeking protection, said Aimee Hall, the director of SafeHomes of Augusta, a shelter and resource center for domestic violence victims. Crisis calls have been consistent and the shelter continues to be full despite the shaky economy, she said.

"Women may not be calling the police when things are violent at home, but they know we're here," she said.

SafeHomes provides shelter, resources for utilities assistance and referrals to other economic assistance, Mrs. Hall said.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence also provides financial assistance to victims of domestic violence and education on how to handle finances, Mr. Namey said.

"The financial cost of leaving an abusive relationship can be daunting, but there is help," Mr. Namey said. "Economics can be a barrier for abused women, but it doesn't have to be."

Reach Stephanie Toone at (706) 823-3215 or [stephanie.toone@augustachronicle.com](mailto:stephanie.toone@augustachronicle.com).

#### IN THE AREA

Victims are less likely to report abuse in an economic downturn because of concern that abusers will lose their jobs.

#### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE POLICE REPORTS, JANUARY-MARCH

Year Richmond Columbia

2008 608 329

2009 488 211

SafeHomes of Augusta, which serves 10 counties, including Richmond, Columbia and McDuffie, received 502 crisis calls between January and March compared with 498 during the same time last year.

Sources: Office of the Solicitor General for the State Court of Richmond County, Georgia; Columbia County Sheriff's Office; SafeHomes of Augusta

#### NEED HELP?

Those who need financial or other help can call the United Way 211 hot line, SafeHomes of Augusta at (706) 736-2499 or the National Network to End Domestic Violence at (202) 543-5566.

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