

Breaking Down the Myths of Domestic Violence

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Back in 1990 - when officers often assumed the role of marriage counselor in domestic violence cases and arresting an abuser in front of a child was taboo - the San Diego Police Department, with the help of community experts, developed a training curriculum that armed officers with the truth about topics that had previously been too controversial to cover. Some of the components of that training now nearly a decade old, are being used nationwide by law enforcement agencies working to end domestic violence.

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS

The questions that San Diego's domestic violence curriculum answers based on facts not myths include the following: Who is the typical abuser? Is there provocation: Is this law enforcement's most dangerous call? Is it harmful for children to witness an arrest?

Who is the typical abuser? The curriculum emphasizes that there is no stereotypical batterer. Case studies show that men who abuse cross all racial economic and religious boundaries. Judges, lawyers, doctors, politicians, sports stars and even law enforcement officers are just as likely to abuse as those who earn their livings as bus drivers, factory workers and janitors.

Is there provocation? A common superstition is that domestic violence victims must somehow "provoke" their batterers. The curriculum shows that batterers are not forced to abuse their victims, but rather that, when faced with environmental stressors, they choose to use violence against "safe" targets – wives, girlfriends or children who are smaller than them and less capable of fighting back. Batterers take steps to escape detection by others and choose victims who can be intimidated into remaining silent. Some attempt to disguise the abuse by hitting victims in places that won't be easily seen (such as the back of the head), or that will be covered by clothing.

Is this law enforcement's most dangerous call? A myth that has been cultivated for decades is that domestic violence calls present the most danger to law enforcement officers. The Justice Department's 1994 statistics on deaths and injuries to officers responding to domestic violence incidents show that these calls do not pose the highest risk and have actually been steadily decreasing in risk since 1989. Despite this fact, officers shouldn't be any less cautious when responding to domestic violence calls.

Is it harmful for children to witness an arrest? Domestic violence affects scores of people. A look at the "big picture" shows how a lack of intervention leads to child abuse, juvenile delinquency, adult criminal behavior, drug and alcohol problems, workplace violence, and rising medical and legal cost to the community. Specifically, domestic violence has a huge impact on children who witness it. San Diego's revised curriculum instructs officers to always, without exception, interview children at the scene. In

California, this facilitates a cross-reporting system to child protection agencies and offers hope that the most at-risk children will receive counseling.

The training also teaches officers, through written scenarios and a videotape, to arrest the batterer in front of the children, or to privately explain to them why someone was arrested. This directive may disturb officers until they learn that perhaps their only opportunity to affect that child's life is at that moment. When kids witness parental abuse and see officers respond and then leave without taking action, they learn that violence within the context of intimate relationships is okay. Current strategies reinforce the message that law enforcement officers, as visible authority figures, have the power to make a credible difference to the next generation.

More Reality Training Other areas that the revised training addresses include the batterers modus operandi handling cases where both parties are injured and approaching domestic violence cases as criminal investigations.

How have batterers gotten away with assaults? One of the most contentious components of the curriculum explains how batterers have been manipulating law enforcement for years. Batterers often look for ways to connect with male officers. They will bring up that great touchdown yesterday, or if the batterer learns through conversation that both he and the officer served in the same military division, he will use that commonality to reminisce about the old days in Nam as a way to try to divert the officer's attention away from the purpose of the call frequently; the batterer will attempt to explain away the incident with a claim such as those listed below:

- * I was defending myself.
- * She was high (or drunk), and I had to restrain her
- * She was hysterical

The training helps even the most tenured officers who are often taken aback by the inference that they've been manipulated, to understand how batterers have been able to escape consequences for their actions for such a long time.

Identifying the red flags of self-defense. The domestic violence reports that San Diego's officers submitted before the curriculum was revised in 1990 demonstrated that they had problems distinguishing between assault and self-defense. In this segment, officers learn that the primary aggressor usually has bite marks on his or her chest arms or legs; scratches if the victim is being strangled; or injuries made by a weapon. Victims defensive injuries are usually consistent with being in a fetal position and result in bruises to the backs of the arms, legs, buttocks and back.

Investigate aggressively. Last but certainly not least the training teaches officers to approach domestic violence calls anticipating the victim's absence or recantation of testimony: To effectively deal with this reality and assist the prosecutors trying the cases, officers began aggressively investigating and thoroughly documenting incidents. It has become business as usual for officers to go beyond the victim's statement and conduct

the case as they would any other criminal investigation. As a result, San Diego P.D's average domestic violence report has increased – from a few paragraphs in length to six pages, plus a separate incident report, a domestic violence supplemental form, narratives and photos.

New Strategies Provide Favorable Results. This new approach has paid off handsomely. In 1992 San Diego's domestic violence homicides plummeted to eight. This was a decrease of more than 760 percent from previous years, and in spite of an increased population. Today, domestic violence homicides remain roughly 50 percent of what they were eight to 10 years ago.

Because of the department's aggressive approach to handling domestic violence incidents and the change in the police perspective, fewer domestic violence victims die in this Southern California city.