

The National Domestic Violence

HOTLINE

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WHO WILL HELP ME? Domestic Violence Survivors Speak Out About Law Enforcement Responses

TK Logan, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Behavioral Science
University of Kentucky

Rob (Roberta) Valente

Vice President of Policy
National Domestic Violence Hotline

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In April 2015, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline), with the help of Professor TK Logan, a nationally and internationally recognized expert on partner violence and stalking at the Department of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Kentucky, conducted a survey about law enforcement responses to partner abuse with survivors who used The Hotline's chat services.

Overall, 637 women with experiences of partner abuse agreed to participate in the survey. Participants were an average of 30 years old and mostly white (56%), Hispanic (15%), and African-American (11%).¹ Because some of the survey was conducted on The Hotline chat line, results include both quantitative information and non-personally identifying quotes. Results are presented in two main sections:

- (1) Women who had not yet interacted with the police about their partner abuse experiences (n=328); and,
- (2) Women who had interacted with police about their partner abuse experiences (n=301).

Both the women who had called the police and the women who hadn't called the police shared a strong reluctance to turning to law enforcement for help:

- **1 in 4 reported that they would not call the police in future**
- **More than half said calling the police would make things worse**
- **Two-thirds or more said they were afraid the police would not believe them or do nothing**

This is what those who work in the domestic violence field hear every day.

Survivors overcome many barriers before calling police for help.

Survivors frequently cite fear of reprisal by the abuser as a reason for not calling law enforcement.² Some jurisdictions have nuisance laws that allow a landlord to evict a survivor for calling the police too many times.³ Many survivors report that law enforcement fails to investigate domestic violence cases appropriately.⁴ In some cases, the victim is threatened with arrest rather than the offender.⁵ Studies show that officers who tend to arrest survivors believe that domestic violence is justified in some situations and that women stay in abusive relationships for psychological reasons.⁶ All of these factors present huge obstacles for women trying to cope with domestic violence.

¹ The results of the survey are not generalizable. The survey responses are only from those women who used the National Domestic Violence Hotline services during a one-month period. The sample likely under-represents a number of individuals (e.g., those with sexual assault experiences, disabilities and those from specific racial/ethnic groups). Further, these results do not represent all victims, or all victim interactions with police.

² Felson, R. & Pare, P., *The Reporting of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault by Nonstrangers to the Police*, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, Document No. 209039 (March 2005). <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209039.pdf>.

³ Covert, B., *When Calling the Police On An Abusive Partner Leads To A Victim Losing Her Home*, ThinkProgress (August 27, 2015). <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2015/08/27/3696108/domestic-violence-nuisance-ordinances/>; American Civil Liberties Union, *How Local Nuisance Ordinances Undermine Effective Law Enforcement Responses To Domestic Violence*. <http://www.naperville.il.us/emplibrary/Local%20Nuisance%20Ordinances%20Undermine%20Law%20Enforcement%20Responses.pdf>.

⁴ One victim services program has developed an evaluation form for use by victim advocates and survivors to evaluate police responses; they are encouraged to use the results to provide feedback to law enforcement about what survivors need when police respond to domestic violence calls. Women's Justice Center/Centro de Justicia para Mujeres, Santa Rosa, CA, *Form for Evaluating Police Responses to Domestic Violence*. http://justicewomen.com/police_evaluation.pdf.

⁵ CBS News, *Arizona Woman Sues Cops After Being Arrested Naked* (July 17, 2015) <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/arizona-woman-esmeralda-rossi-sues-chandler-police-officers-violation-naked-arrest/>; Crager, M., Cousin, M., & Hardy, T., *Victim-Defendants: An Emerging Challenge in Responding to Domestic Violence in Seattle and the King County Region*, King County Coalition Against Domestic Violence, published by the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse (April 2003). <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/victimdefendant/victimdefendant.html>; NBC News, *Limited English Can Lead to Domestic Violence Victims' Arrests* (November 10, 2014) <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/limited-english-can-lead-domestic-violence-victims-arrests-n245501>.

⁶ Saunders, D., *The Tendency to Arrest Victims of Domestic Violence*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 147-158 (June 1995). <http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/10/2/147.abstract>.

PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE NEVER CALLED THE POLICE

The survey participants who had never called the police shared very specific concerns about what they feared would happen if they call the police.

Personal Barriers to Calling the Police

Women who had not interacted with the police reported several personal barriers, including:



IN THEIR WORDS

"I am afraid that my husband will talk his way out of trouble, and I will end up in a dangerous situation or will get deported."

"[I am afraid] of making the situation worse. They might arrest my abuser, and **when he is out, he will hurt me like he has threatened.**"

"I am afraid that they will take him to jail, **and once he gets out, he would try to obtain sole custody of my son.**"

PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE NEVER CALLED THE POLICE

The survey participants who had never called the police shared very specific concerns about what they feared would happen if they call the police.

Fear of Calling Police Because of Their Response

4 in 5 (80%) of those who had not previously called the police were **somewhat or extremely afraid** to call them in the future.



70% were afraid calling the police would make things worse; the offender would only get a slap on the wrist; or calling the police would have negative consequences for them.



59% were afraid the police would not believe them or would do nothing.



45% were concerned that the police would be rude to the offender or that calling the police would have negative consequences for the offender's life.⁷



17% were afraid that the police would be violent or would threaten to arrest or actually arrest them.

IN THEIR WORDS

“The police removed the weapons from the home but **didn't take the rapes and injuries to me and my animals seriously.**”

“My boyfriend has told me if I were to call the police **he would kill himself** (death by cop).”

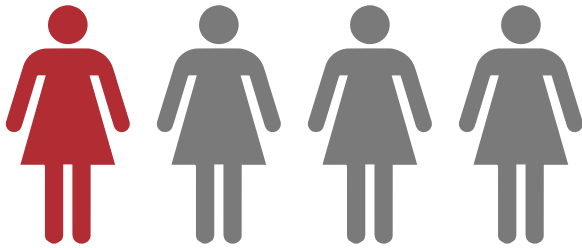
“**Police shoot people of different races or those who are mentally ill**, of which my family has both.”

⁷ There are a range of legitimate reasons why a survivor may believe that any harm to the offender may end up impacting her adversely as well.

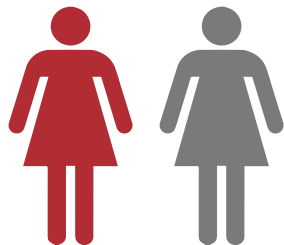
PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE NEVER CALLED THE POLICE

Likelihood of Victims Calling the Police in the Future

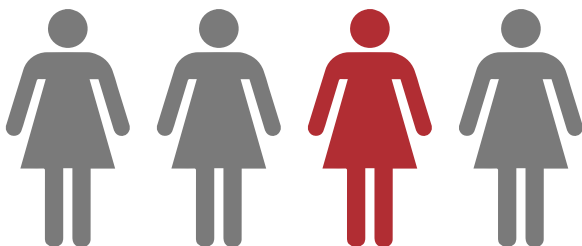
Approximately **1 in 4** women (24%) who had not previously talked to police reported that they would **not call the police in the future** for partner abuse or sexual assault.



1 in 2 women (50%) were **unsure** about whether they would call the police in the future.



Approximately **1 in 4** women (26%) were **extremely likely** to call the police in the future.



IN THEIR WORDS

“[I am afraid] they will take my daughter because of his lies. **Everyone believes him because he’s so nice, sweet and respectful to them, but it’s different.** He will say it’s me, and the police will believe him.”

“I’m terrified that they **would not do anything, and it would only make matters worse.** No protection for me or my children.”

“Because he is [in the military] and several convictions about abuse [have] been brought against him in the past, **nothing is going to happen now except more anger towards me.**”

“I have two kids, five year[s] and 7 month[s] old. I try to **avoid the police intervening in front of them.**”

PARTICIPANTS WHO CONTACTED THE POLICE

A large number of survivors do call the police. Studies show that survivors are more likely to consider calling law enforcement for help after multiple prior victimizations.⁸ Depending on the study, researchers find that calls relating to domestic violence constitute up to 50% of all calls to police.⁹

Women Felt Less Safe After Calling the Police

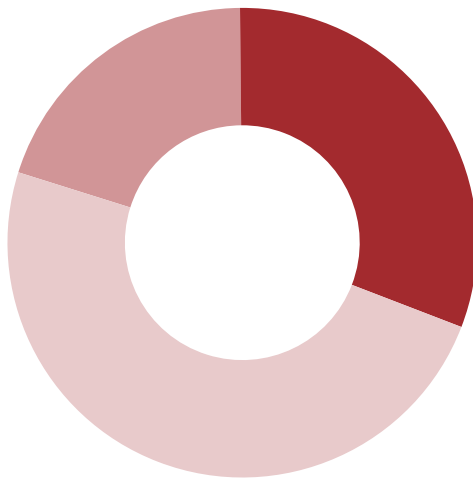
Women overcome many personal barriers when thinking about calling the police for partner abuse or sexual assault victimization, such as fear of retaliation from her abusive partner, fear of making things worse, negative life consequences, fear of not being believed, embarrassment and concern for the offender and children. This section focuses on women who overcame those barriers and called the police.

1 in 5

victims felt safer

1 in 3

victims felt less safe



1 in 2

victims felt there was no difference in safety

IN THEIR WORDS

“They sympathized with him and said he [just] needed to stay away from me. Then they pointed me in the direction of [City] and said to call someone when I got there and they left me by the side of the road alone in my car with my daughter and afraid.”

“I think they feel that I do not matter, that as an ex-wife, I have to withstand the harassment and stalking.”

⁸ Klein, A., *Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research: For Law Enforcement, Prosecutors, and Judges*. National Institute of Justice (2009). <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/225722.pdf> at 2.3.

⁹ Klein, A., *Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research* at 2.1.

PARTICIPANTS WHO CONTACTED THE POLICE

Fear of Calling Police Because of Their Response

2 in 5 (43%) felt police had **discriminated against them**. Of that 43%, the following responses indicated discrimination due to:

53%

Not being a “perfect” victim (income, reputation, disability, sexual identity)

46%

Gender (men side with men and won't believe me)

24%

Lack of understanding by police about partner abuse and sexual assault

22%

Race / ethnicity or immigration status

20%

Politics, offender connections

IN THEIR WORDS

“I live in a poor building; they stood there criticizing my apartment and talked down to me. **I know if I lived in a nice neighborhood, they wouldn't have said the things they did.**”

“**I am a black female so I felt like they automatically saw me as dumb, poor and ignorant...** I didn't have any marks besides a swollen lip, so I felt like they didn't take it as an immediate threat.”

“**I felt the police were buddy-buddy with my partner and ignored what I had to say** and the reality of the situation. I was scared and they ignored me.”

PARTICIPANTS WHO CONTACTED THE POLICE

Fear of Calling Police Because of Their Response

2 in 3 of women who contacted the police are **somewhat or extremely afraid** to call the police in future because:



80% were afraid police would not believe them or would do nothing



51% were afraid calling the police would make things worse, the offender would only get a slap on the wrist or calling the police would have negative consequences for them.



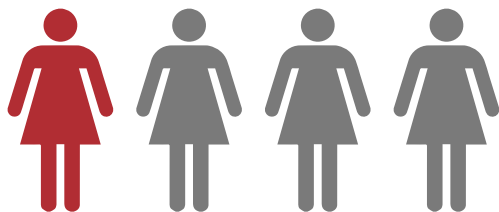
28% were afraid the police would be violent or would threaten to arrest or actually arrest them.



22% were concerned that the police would be rude to the offender or that calling the police would have negative consequences for his life.¹⁰

Victims Are Sometimes Threatened With Arrest or Arrested When Asking For Help

1 in 4 women (24%) reported they had been **arrested or threatened with arrest during a partner abuse incident or while reporting a sexual assault incident** to the police.



IN THEIR WORDS

“I am the victim and the third time neighbors called female officers came, **one of them was blaming me because I went back to my abuser; I had no money, no place to go and no transportation.** She also told my abuser I was crazy.”

“Police were called out 3 times and refused to do anything all 3 times. What does she need to do to end this? **What are the magic words to say to the police to get help?** He has threatened to kill her. I don’t want my daughter to die.”

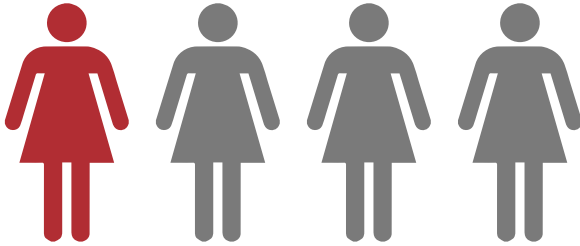
“**They believed him every time because he didn’t leave marks,** but this time he did and they accused me of hitting myself in the face. Before they would tell me I need[ed] to leave, and since I had nowhere else to go, I should sleep in my car. **He had cuts on his knuckles from hitting me and they said I could be charged with assault.**”

¹⁰ There are a range of legitimate reasons why a survivor may believe that any harm to the offender may end up impacting her adversely as well.

PARTICIPANTS WHO CONTACTED THE POLICE

Likelihood of Victims Calling the Police Again in the Future

1 in 4 women (24%) reported that they would **not call the police again in the future** for partner abuse or sexual assault.



62% women were **unsure** about whether they would call the police in the future.



1 in 7 women (14%) were **extremely likely** to call the police again in the future.



IN THEIR WORDS

“Between the police and the criminal **I’m dead already.**”

“**If I call the police he will kill me.** He made that very clear while shoving a gun in my mouth.”

“**They [made] things worse and act[ed] like I was the bad guy** because I came in crying, but my abuser was calm after 2 years of hell—duh I was scared and he was fine.”

“**There were so many police taking pictures in embarrassing places, but not one was a female officer.** Then after his arrest, I received absolutely no support and what the system has done is almost if not just as bad as what he did to me for almost 5 years. I am very disappointed and hurt by all the injustice. **He was found guilty and pled guilty but still walked even after holding me for 3 days at gun point and threatening to kill me.** If I hadn’t gotten out he would have killed me.”

POLICE NEED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND PARTNER ABUSE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

“The cops acted as if they did not care. There have been two cases here that women were killed by their husbands because they did not do their jobs. **They sat in the drive while my ex poured gas all over my decks to my home and took what he wanted.** Even though I had an OP and told them he could not enter the home.”

“The police have never handled any call very professionally. **They are in desperate need of training in dealing with domestic violence calls They have threatened to arrest me more than once. I am the victim!** They blame me for taking him back. I have a master’s degree in social work and when I first had to call the police, they saw my degrees up on my bedroom wall. They joked about them and that I thought I was so smart!! Literally!”

“I feel that they have done nothing to affect the situation at all. **I feel it is because my husband tells them I am a lazy gold digger—they assume that I can just flip a switch, and get up, get a job and leave, and it is my choice not to. They don’t react to the fact that he has been financially, emotionally, verbally, and physically abusing me for almost 6 years,** to the point where he has isolated me from my entire life that I had previous to meeting him.”

MOST HELPFUL THINGS POLICE HAVE DONE TO HELP VICTIMS OF PARTNER ABUSE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Some of the **most helpful things police have done** when responding to a partner abuse or sexual assault incident:



Provided information about my options including specific safety suggestions and referrals



Provided tangible help like helping me get a protective order, transporting me to safety or connecting me with a victim advocate



Arrested or charged the abuser



Believed me or validated that what had happened to me was a crime

IN THEIR WORDS

“**[They made] me feel that I was not to blame** or at fault and not crazy.”

“**[They] arrested the abuser, helped me get a protective order**, connected me to a victim advocate, told me my options, [and were] supportive.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Law enforcement responses to survivors must be based on the following principles:

- **Treating survivors with dignity and respect**
- **Giving survivors their “voice” during encounters**
- **Being neutral and transparent in their actions¹¹**

To address the many concerns survivors raised in this survey, we recommend the following:

- Law enforcement personnel (including dispatchers) should receive comprehensive training regarding the best practices for responding to calls for help from domestic violence survivors.
- Training, however, is not enough. Law enforcement agencies should adopt and ensure that officers make daily use of promising practices, such as:
 - Establishing specialized domestic violence units;
 - Conducting lethality assessments;
 - Providing language access through interpreters;
 - Conducting thorough investigations;
 - Removing firearms when they have been used to threaten or harm the survivor;
 - Ensuring that survivors know their rights and have access to help developing safety plans.
- Law enforcement agencies should develop strong collaborative relationships with state domestic violence coalitions and/or local domestic violence programs to ensure that their practices will not have unintended or adverse consequences for victims; additionally, such collaborations will ensure that police are able to quickly connect survivors with appropriate community resources in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.
- Federal, state and local governments should fund promising practices for law enforcement and the important role of victim advocacy organizations.
- **Any response to a survivor of domestic violence should be based on the premise that survivors need support, safety and resources, provided in a manner that respects the dignity of the survivor.**

We must continue building strong, collaborative relationships between law enforcement agencies and victim service programs that ensure that survivors’ safety and dignity are enhanced—not harmed—by law enforcement responses.

¹¹ President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2015) p. 24.

APPENDIX: There are some promising practices that can address some of the concerns survivors have raised in the survey.

- In Maryland, law enforcement uses the Maryland Lethality Assessment Program, a program developed by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence that uses evidence-based lethality assessment tools to identify victims at great risk of homicide, in order to help them obtain the services and protections they need to be safer.¹²
- The U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women identified four sites across the country to improve law enforcement efforts to institute screening models and evidence-based strategies that will allow local law enforcement to anticipate potentially lethal behavior and take steps to stop the escalation of domestic violence in their communities.¹³
- The International Association of Chiefs of Police recommends a comprehensive range of strategies that law enforcement officers should use when responding to domestic violence calls, including enforcing protection orders, conducting lethality assessments, linking survivors to community resources like housing and transportation, providing information to survivors about their legal rights and protecting children in the household.¹⁴
- The National District Attorneys Association encourages prosecutors to take a victim-centered approach to responding to domestic violence, describing the most effective protocols as those that “give victims a voice.”¹⁵
- The New York City Police Department has developed in-house interpreting services that make it easier for victims of sexual assault to report victimizations.¹⁶
- In 2012, Connecticut established a statewide model policy requiring all police departments to designate a supervisory officer to expeditiously review and oversee the police department’s response to victims, community and court personnel in domestic violence cases.¹⁷
- In Pennsylvania, the city of Pittsburgh has trained all 800 police officers to conduct lethality assessments and connect survivors on site of calls with the local domestic violence hotline. Pennsylvania’s Protection From Abuse database is operated jointly by the Pennsylvania state police and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.¹⁸
- In Rhode Island, several victim advocacy programs partner with local law enforcement to place a Law Enforcement Advocate (LEA) at the police department to work directly with victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, consult with detectives or other investigative officers and link survivors to ongoing advocacy/supportive services. Towns with an LEA had a lower rate of dismissed domestic violence cases, improving the safety of survivors.¹⁹

¹² Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, *Lethality Assessment Program*. <http://mnadv.org/lethality/> and *Annual Report (2013)* http://mnadv.org/_mnadvWeb/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2013-LAP-Maryland-Annual-Report-Summary.pdf.

Also see International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Training Key #653: Domestic Violence Risk Assessment (2011)* <http://www.culpeperjdr.com/resources/Domestic%20Violence%20Risk%20Assessment%20IACP%20Training%20Key.pdf>.

¹³ U.S. Department of Justice, *Attorney General Holder Announces \$2.6 Million in Grants for Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention* (September 22, 2014) <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-holder-announces-26-million-grants-domestic-violence-homicide-prevention>.

¹⁴ The International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Protecting Victims of Domestic Violence*. <http://www.theiacp.org/portals/o/pdfs/ProtectingVictimsOfDV.pdf>

¹⁵ Long, J. & Kristiansson, V., *Taking a Process-Oriented Approach to Domestic Violence Prosecutions*, National District Attorneys Association Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women (2007). http://www.ndaa.org/pdf/the_voice_vol_1_no_9_2007.pdf.

¹⁶ Bellafante, G., *In Grim Rape Statistics, Signs of Progress*, New York Times (June 5, 2015). <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/nyregion/in-grim-rape-statistics-signs-of-progress.html?emc=eta1>

¹⁷ Personal communication from Joe Froelich, Director of Law Enforcement Services, Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (September 14, 2015).

¹⁸ See <https://www.pavtn.net>.

¹⁹ Personal communication from Deborah Debare, Executive Director, Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (September 9, 2015).