ASSAULTS ON OFFICERS AT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CALLS

October 2015

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Domestic violence (DV) calls carry a popular reputation within the law enforcement profession for being extremely dangerous for officers. Some academics and DV victim advocates, however, have challenged this reputation and have suggested that DV calls are rarely dangerous for officers. This research newsletter will examine the empirical, scientific research on assaults on officers at DV calls. Specifically, it will examine the prevalence of officer assaults, the trend of officer deaths at DV calls over time, what factors predict these officer assaults, the characteristics of lethal force assaults on officers at DV calls, and the factors that predict an officer surviving a lethal force assault at a DV call.

Prevalence of Danger

In a U.S. Department of Justice report on family crisis intervention that was published in 1970, the authors wrote that DV calls were the "most dangerous calls handled by the police." They came to this conclusion from looking at FBI Uniform Crime Reports data on officers killed in the line of duty, finding that most of the officers killed between 1960 and 1969 were handling a "disturbance call" at the time they were attacked. At that point in history, however, DV calls were not a separate category within the FBI data, so the category "disturbances" also included gang fights, bar fight, neighbor disputes, suspicious persons, and a host of other potentially volatile situations. Once DV calls started being classified separately by the FBI in 1980, it was discovered that only 22% of the officer deaths from disturbances actually involved a domestic disturbance call.

During the 1980s and 1990s, eleven research studies examined the true prevalence of physical assaults (not just murders) of officers at DV calls. These studies revealed three main facts. First, the frequency of officer assaults at DV calls varied dramatically from community to community, suggesting that DV calls are more dangerous in some cities than others. The percentage of officer assaults that resulted from DV calls ranged from 2% to 28% across cities, with an average of 9% across the eleven jurisdictions in these studies (Johnson, 2008). Second, in every one of these eleven studies, DV calls were not the most dangerous duty officers performed, especially after controlling for rate of exposure (i.e., number of assaults per calls handled). In every community studied, other types of duties – serving warrants, transporting prisoners, bar fights – resulted in far more officer assaults per call handled (Johnson, 2008).
Third, while handling DV calls was not the most dangerous activity officers performed, DV calls clearly posed some danger. In the studies that considered rate of assaults per calls handled, DV calls never fell below fifth place for likelihood of an officer assault or an officer injury. Using FBI statistics, Johnson (2008) estimated that between 1980 and 2006 a total of 113,236 officer assaults occurred at DV calls in the U.S., and 160 officers died as a result of these assaults. That suggests an average of 4,194 officer assaults and 6 officer murders annually from DV calls (Johnson, 2008). Also, it appears that most assaults at DV calls are very likely to result in an officer injury. Four studies examined officer assaults at DV calls and the percentage of these assaults that resulted in an officer injury. On average, 46% of officers assaulted at DV calls received an injury requiring medical treatment (Johnson, 2008). So while DV calls may not be the most dangerous duty that officers face, it is inaccurate to say these calls are safe.

Due to improvements in emergency medicine and officer safety training, tactics, and equipment, overall officer deaths from assaults of all kinds in the U.S. have been steadily declining since the 1960s. A study of officer deaths specifically from DV calls from 1980 through 2006, however, revealed that the rate of officer deaths at DV calls has remained steady at an average of 6 deaths per year (Johnson, 2008). A quick review of officer deaths listed on the Officer Down Memorial Page website since 2006 reveals that still today, an average of 6 officers are murdered annually at DV calls. While officers have been doing a better job every year of surviving assaults in other types of situations, it appears that officers have not improved in their abilities to survive assaults at DV calls over the last 35 years. To improve officer safety at DV calls, it would be helpful to be able to predict when assaults at these calls occur.

**Predicting Assaults at DV Calls**

In a study that examined 3,078 DV calls handled by the Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Miami-Dade police departments, 117 calls resulted in an officer assault. That was an average of 1 officer assault incident for every 26 DV calls. A number of characteristics about the batterer and the DV situation were examined and 5 characteristics were found useful in predicting whether or not an officer assault occurred. If the batterer was unemployed, had damaged property in the incident, shared a residence with the DV victim, was drunk, and displayed a hostile demeanor toward the officers when they arrived, there was a 1 in 4 chance that the DV batterer would assault the officers. In situations where none of these characteristics were present (i.e., batterer employed, sober, lived apart from victim, didn't damage property, and did not display a hostile demeanor with officers), not one officer assault occurred (Johnson, 2011). The more of these 5 characteristics that were present at the call, the more likely an officer assault was to occur.

This suggests the need to train officers to observe for these 5 danger warning signs at DV calls. It also suggests the need for 911 dispatchers to gather this type of information for responding officers so that they can have a better assessment of the situation before they arrive. If possible, dispatchers should ask the reporting party if the batterer is employed, has been drinking, is damaging property, and resides with the other party in the DV situation. If these details can be gathered, they should be communicated to the responding officers.
Lethal Force Assaults on Officers

Recall that the number of officers killed annually while handling DV calls has remained steady for more than 35 years. According to FBI data, the majority of the fatal officer assaults at DV calls (99%) involved a firearm. In response, Johnson (2007) conducted a study of firearms assaults against officers at DV calls to determine the characteristics of these calls and what officers could do to increase their chances of survival. Examining a national sample of 143 firearms assaults on officers at DV calls revealed that firearms assaults at DV calls differed from other types of officer-involved shooting incidents. According to FBI data, the “typical” firearms assault against a law enforcement officer involves a younger male assailant (usually age 15 to 35) with a lengthy criminal record. The assailant generally uses a handgun and most often does not open fire on officers until the point of arrest or search. In most of the shooting incidents the officer and assailant were within 15 feet of each other when the shootout began.

Firearms assaults on officers at DV calls, on the other hand, are more likely to involve an older male assailant (in his 40s or older) with or without a prior criminal record, and armed with a rifle or shotgun. Half of these firearms assaults at DV calls occurred shortly after the officers’ arrival, with the assailant firing from the front door of the residence or lying in ambush in some outside location. In the majority of these firearms assaults, the officers had not yet entered the residence when the batterer fired upon them, and half of these shootings occurred at a distance of greater than 50 feet (Johnson, 2007).

When examining what factors were associated with whether or not the officers survived the shooting incident, none of the batterer characteristics seemed to matter. The strongest predictors of surviving the incident were officer body armor, distance between the officer and the assailant, whether the officer returned fire, and whether the shooting occurred during hours of darkness. If the officer was wearing body armor, the officer was 6 times (510%) more likely to survive the encounter than if not wearing body armor. For every 5 feet of distance between the officer and the shooter, the officer was 2 times (100%) more likely to survive the encounter. If the officer was able to return fire, the officer was 1.4 times (40%) more likely to survive the encounter than if unable to return fire. In incidents that occurred during hours of darkness, officers were 3 times (200%) more likely to survive the encounter than if it occurred during daylight hours. Of the 225 officers fired upon in this study, 14% were killed and 43% received bullet wounds but survived. The remaining 43% of officers survived without serious injury (Johnson, 2007).

Obviously, as more than half of the officers involved were hit by gunfire, body armor helped protect many of the officers’ vital organs. Greater distances between the assailant and the officer made shooting accuracy more difficult for the assailant and provided the officer greater opportunities to seek cover. If the officer was not incapacitated and had a safe field to return fire at the assailant, this return fire at the least caused the assailant to stop firing and seek cover. In some situations the officer’s returning fire disabled the shooter. DV call shooting situations during hours of darkness also allowed officers, if they took advantage of it, to approach the scene in the concealment of darkness, or retreat into darkness once the shooting began. While greater than 1 out of every 2 officers in these incidents was hit by the assailant’s gunfire, only 1 out of every 7 officers died, revealing the importance of the psychological will to survive even after being shot.
Conclusion

In summary, the research on officer assaults at DV calls reveals a paradox. While DV calls are not the most dangerous duty officers perform, and the majority of DV calls do not result in an assault on officers, on average about 1 in 26 such calls do. The likelihood of an officer assault is greatest when the batterer is unemployed, intoxicated, resides with the DV victim, has just damaged property, and displays a hostile demeanor when officers arrive. An assault on officers is least likely when all of these elements are absent. If an assault does occur at a DV call, officers involved have about a 50/50 chance of sustaining an injury requiring medical treatment. If the assault involves a firearm, it is most likely to occur as the officers approach the scene or shortly after their arrival. The assailant is likely to be lying in ambush inside or outside the residence, utilize a long gun (rifle or shotgun), and open fire from many feet away. Officers have a 50/50 chance of being hit by the assailant's gunfire but are most likely to survive the encounter if they wear body armor, maintain distance from the shooter, utilize cover and concealment, and return controlled, accurate fire.

References


Note: Court holdings can vary significantly between jurisdictions. As such, it is advisable to seek the advice of a local prosecutor or legal adviser regarding questions on specific cases. This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case.