

Features[NCWP Home](#)[Publications](#)[Career Center](#)[In the News](#)[Related Links](#)[NCWP Store](#)[Become an Officer](#)[Policing Herstory](#)**About Us**[About NCWP](#)[About FMF](#)[Donate to FMF](#)[Other Projects](#)

Police Family Violence Fact Sheet

Two studies have found that *at least 40%* of police officer families experience domestic violence, ([1,2](#)) in contrast to 10% of families in the general population.⁽³⁾ A third study of older and more experienced officers found a rate of 24% ([4](#)), indicating that domestic violence is 2-4 times more common among police families than American families in general. A police department that has domestic violence offenders among its ranks will not effectively serve and protect victims in the community.[5, 6, 7, 8](#) Moreover, when officers know of domestic violence committed by their colleagues and seek to protect them by covering it up, they expose the department to civil liability.[7](#)

[Unique Vulnerability](#) | [Failure of Departmental Policies](#) | ["Exceedingly Light Discipline"](#) | [Performance Evaluations Not Affected](#) | [The LAPD Investigation](#) | [Legislative Response](#) | [Lack of Enforcement Undermines Law's Effectiveness](#) | [Resources](#) | [Footnotes](#)

Unique Vulnerability

Domestic violence is always a terrible crime, but victims of a police officer are particularly vulnerable because the officer who is abusing them:

- has a gun,
- knows the location of battered women's shelters, and
- knows how to manipulate the system to avoid penalty and/or shift blame to the victim.[5, 6](#)

Victims often fear calling the police, because they know the case will be handled by officers who are colleagues and/or friends of their abuser. Victims of police family violence typically fear that the responding officers will side with their abuser and fail to properly investigate or document the crime.[5, 7](#)

Failure of Departmental Policies

These suspicions are well founded, as most departments across the country typically handle cases of police family violence informally, often without an official report, investigation, or even check of the victim's safety.[5, 8, 9](#) This "informal" method is often in direct contradiction to legislative mandates and departmental policies regarding the appropriate response to domestic violence crimes. Moreover, a 1994 nationwide survey of 123 police departments documented that almost half (45%) had no specific policy for dealing with officer-involved domestic violence. In that same study:

- The most common discipline imposed for a sustained allegation of domestic violence was counseling.
- Only 19% of the departments indicated that officers would be terminated after a *second* sustained allegation of domestic violence.[9](#)
- A recent study of the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department found inconsistent policies and practices for officers accused of domestic violence, regarding arrests, seizure of firearms, and Employee Assistance treatment.[10](#) There is no reason to believe that the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department is unique in this; rather, this inconsistency is typical for police agencies responding to domestic violence committed by its own members.

Although the International Association of Chiefs of Police have prepared a model policy on police officer-involved domestic violence, there is no evidence that police departments across the country are doing anything other than simply including the policy in their manuals.

Violent Police Officers Receive "Exceedingly Light Discipline"

The reality is that even officers who are found guilty of domestic violence are unlikely to be fired, arrested, or referred for prosecution, raising concern that those who are tasked with enforcing the law cannot effectively police themselves.[5, 6, 7](#) For example:

- In 1998-1999, 23 domestic violence complaints were filed against Boston police employees, but none resulted in criminal prosecution.[6](#)
- The San Diego City Attorney typically prosecutes 92% of the domestic violence cases that are referred, but only 42% of the cases involving a police officer as the perpetrator are prosecuted.[11](#)
- Between 1990 and 1997, the Los Angeles Police Department investigated 227 cases of alleged domestic violence by officers, of which 91 were sustained. Of these 91 allegations that were sustained by the department, only 4 resulted in a criminal conviction. That means that the LAPD itself determined in 91 cases that an officer had committed domestic violence, but only 4 were convicted on a criminal charge. Moreover, of these 4 officers who were convicted on a criminal charge of domestic violence, one was suspended for only 15 days and another had his conviction expunged.[12](#)

In fact, an in-depth investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department conducted by the Office of the Inspector General concluded that the discipline imposed on officers found guilty of domestic violence "was exceedingly light when the facts of each incident were examined" (p. i).[12](#)

Performance Evaluations Not Affected; Violent Officers Often Promoted

The study of the Los Angeles Police Department further examined the 91 cases in which an allegation of domestic violence was sustained against an officer.

- Over three-fourths of the time, this sustained allegation was not mentioned in the officer's performance evaluation.
- Twenty-six of these officers (29%) were promoted, including six who were promoted within two years of the incident.

The report concluded that "employees with sustained allegations were neither barred from moving to desired positions nor transferred out of assignments that were inconsistent with the sustained allegation" (p. iii).[12](#)

The LAPD Investigation

In 1997, the Los Angeles Office of the Inspector General conducted an investigation of the LAPD after a legal consultant named Bob Mullally leaked shocking LAPD personnel files to the press. These files documented scores of violent domestic crimes committed by LAPD officers. Mullally was so shocked by the LAPD's mishandling of this police family violence that he decided to violate the civil protective order in the case he was working on and turn the files over to the media, in the hopes of creating change in the LAPD.

- Rather than reviewing the problem or recommending improvements, the LAPD sued Mullally for leaking the information.
- In 2002, after multiple appeals, Mullally was sentenced to 45 days in federal prison. None of the police officers he exposed were ever prosecuted for their crimes, and many continue to serve as gun-carrying LAPD officers. Even the prosecutor in the case stated on record that this sentence was "extreme" for a violation of a civil protective order.
- Mullally is the first person in United States history to ever serve a jail term for this type of violation. He served his time in 2003, 6 years after he exposed the files.

The National Center for Women & Policing and the Feminist Majority Foundation have been actively involved in this case, which was featured in 2000 in a 60 Minutes segment with Mike Wallace. For more information on the case or to obtain documents including the amicus brief submitted by the National Center for Women & Policing and the Feminist Majority Foundation, please contact our office at (310)556-2526.

Legislative Response

In 1996, an important federal law was passed, which prohibits individuals -- including police officers -- from owning or using a firearm if they have been convicted of a misdemeanor domestic violence offense (18 U.S.C. § 925).[13](#)

- This bill was designed to expand the federal law which only barred gun ownership from those convicted of a felony offense.[14](#)
- A section of the 1994 Crime Bill also prohibits individuals from possessing a firearm while a protective order, restraining order, or harassment order is in effect.[15](#) There is an "official use" exemption, however, that allows police and military personnel who are subject to protective orders to possess their government-issued firearms while on duty. This exemption is in effect unless the protective order specifically states the officer can not carry a weapon at any time (18 U.S.C. § 925).

Lack of Enforcement Undermines Effectiveness of the Law

Unfortunately, an early analysis of the Domestic Violence Gun Ban on police officers shows that law enforcement officers have been able to circumvent the ban and retain their weapons. A 1999 survey of the nation's largest 100 police departments revealed that only six cities acted against officers because of the Domestic Violence Gun Ban and only eleven officers were affected. Part of the reason for the lack of enforcement is that police officers plead to a charge other than domestic violence.[16](#) However, there are also other problems.

- First, there is typically no procedure in place to ensure that the courts notify police departments that a court order is in effect against an officer. Most police departments rely on the police officer to personally inform the department of the order, thereby limiting its effectiveness.[15](#)
- The threat of losing their gun and job can also motivate police officers to work harder to insure that their victims tell no one about the abuse. This can make victims of police family violence even more reluctant to report the crime. [5](#), [17](#)

Finally, there is evidence that some officers convicted of domestic violence have their records expunged and remain on the department.[12](#), [16](#), [18](#), [19](#), [20](#)

Resources

For more information about police family violence, contact any of the following resources:

[Anne O'Dell, STOP Domestic Violence](#)

Founded in 1978, LifeSpan is a not-for-profit agency that provides comprehensive services to victims of domestic violence and their children. The Police Domestic Violence Program (known as S.A.B.L.E.) is a unique project that provides specialized counseling, legal, and advocacy services for victims whose abusers are police or other law enforcement personnel. LifeSpan can be reached at online or by calling 1-847-824-4454.

Handbook for Victims

A comprehensive handbook is available for victims of police domestic violence, published by LifeSpan and available at their web site (www.life-span.org) or by calling (847) 824-0382. Copies are also available through Volcano Press at www.volcanopress.com or 1-800-879-879-9636. The handbook costs \$6.50.

[Abuseofpower](#) is a unique web site devoted to providing resources for victims of domestic violence whose abusers are police officers and firefighters. Content includes tactics of abuse, impact upon victims and their families and friends, dealing with the justice system, and many other topics. The site also addresses the impact on the career of the police officer who is a victim of domestic violence. The website is published by Diane Wetendorf, Inc. Diane is a national expert in this area and longtime advocate for victims of police-perpetrated domestic violence. The Victim Handbook described above is also available for downloading.

Chicago Police Department

The Chicago Police Department has taken the lead in implementing progressive policies to handle domestic violence perpetrated by its employees. The department has established an independent unit within the Office of Professional Responsibility to investigate these cases, under civilian leadership. Active outreach is also conducted with families of police officers and an advocate is employed by the department solely to work with spouses of CPD personnel.

Victims of CPD personnel can report domestic violence through a 24-hour complaint desk, and a supervisor is immediately notified of the problem. Free, professional counseling is available for any employee whose abusive behavior comes to the attention of the department, and allegations are thoroughly investigated and referred for prosecution when appropriate. The unit deals with approximately 250 cases of police family violence a year, on a department with approximately 13,500 sworn personnel. For more information, contact Callie Baird at the Office of Professional Responsibility (312) 747-1591 or Sgt. Judith Martin at the Domestic Violence Program (312) 745-6340.

IACP Model Policy

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has developed a model policy for police agencies on how to handle cases of domestic violence perpetrated by a police officer. They have also produced a concept and issues paper on the topic. Both can be obtained by contacting the IACP at www.theiacp.org or 1-800-the-iacp (843-4227).

Footnotes

1 Johnson, L.B. (1991). *On the front lines: Police stress and family well-being*. Hearing before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families House of Representatives: 102 Congress First Session May 20 (p. 32-48). Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

2 Neidig, P.H., Russell, H.E. & Seng, A.F. (1992). Interspousal aggression in law enforcement families: A preliminary investigation. *Police Studies*, Vol. 15 (1), p. 30-38.

3 Straus, M. & Gelles, R. (1990). *Physical violence in American families - risk factors and adaptations to violence in 8,145 families*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

4 P.H. Neidig, A.F. Seng, and H.E. Russell, "Interspousal Aggression in Law Enforcement Personnel Attending the FOP Biennial Conference," *National FOP Journal*. Fall/Winter 1992, 25-28.

5 Levinson, A. (June 29, 1997). Abusers behind a badge. *Arizona Republic*.

6 Police departments fail to arrest policemen for wife abuse (November 15, 1998). *The Boston Globe*.

7 Feltgen, J. (October, 1996). Domestic violence: When the abuser is a police officer. *The Police Chief*, p. 42-49.

8 Lott, L.D. (November, 1995). Deadly secrets: Violence in the police family. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, p. 12-16.

- 9 Arlington, Texas Police Department and Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute (1995). *Domestic assaults among police: A survey of internal affairs policies*. Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute.
- 10 Cassidy, M., Nicholl, C.G. & Ross, C.R. (2001). *Results of a Survey Conducted by the Metropolitan Police Department of Victims who Reported Violence Against Women*. Executive Summary published by the DC Metropolitan Police Department.
- 11 Thornton, K. (May 11, 1998). Police and domestic violence. *San Diego Union-Tribune*.
- 12 Domestic Violence Task Force (1997). *Domestic Violence in the Los Angeles Police Department: How Well Does the Los Angeles Police Department Police Its Own?* Office of the Inspector General.
- 13 Omnibus Appropriations Bill (H.R. 4278), Section 658.
- 14 Kime, R.C. (December, 1996). New federal gun ban tied to domestic violence convictions. *The Police Chief*, p. 10.
- 15 Culp, M.H. (March, 2000). Officer-involved orders for protection: A management challenge. *The Police Chief*, p. 10.
- 16 Ed Meyer et al. (1999, December 5). Few lose jobs. *Akron Beacon Journal*.
- 17 Model policy overlooks views of Chicago's in-house expert (April 30, 1998). *Law Enforcement News*, p. 9.
- 18 Tobar, H. (May 26, 1997). Officer's expunged conviction angers ex-wife. *Los Angeles Times*.
- 19 Tobar, H. (May 9, 1997). 3 Deputies go to court, regain right to carry guns. *Los Angeles Times*.
- 20 Records deleted in assault case involving Louisville policeman. (November 1, 2001). *Louisville Courier Journal*.

[Donate](#) | [About Us](#) | [Search](#) | [Shop](#) | [Home](#)

Copyright 2001-2013 Feminist Majority Foundation's National Center for Women and Policing