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Peter H. Neidig; Harold E. Russell; Albert F. Seng,
Interspousal Aggression in Law Enforcement Families: A
Preliminary Investigation, 15 Police Stud.: Int'l Rev.
Police Dev. 30 (1992)

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Thu Jan 17 23:36:00 2019

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Interspousal Aggression in Law Enforcement Families: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

Although there is growing interest in the impact of work-related stressors on law enforcement families, the absence of empirical data severely limits knowledge about the prevalence of specific problems and the ability to secure support for preventive programs. The current study represents a preliminary effort to investigate the prevalence and correlates of spousal aggression in law enforcement families through the use of a self-report survey procedure. Survey results revealed that approximately 40% of the participating officers reported marital conflicts involving physical aggression during the previous year. The fact that significantly higher rates of marital violence were found to be associated with several work-related factors, including the shift and number of hours worked per week, current assignment, and the amount of leave taken, suggests that: 1) it is possible to identify groups that are at relatively higher risk for marital aggression and 2) the risk may be considered to be, in part, a function of working conditions.

At the recent congressional hearing, *On the Front Lines: Police Stress and Family Well-Being*, Chairwoman Patricia Schroeder noted that the tendency for law enforcement officers to bring society's problems home to their own families may lead to a range of problems, including "emotional numbness, communication breakdown, officer burnout, depression, suicide and marital problems" that may in turn result in the police family becoming yet another victim (Schroeder, 1991). It was

recommended that the well-being of officer and families should be a national priority with police departments providing education and family support services as an integral component of their operations. The family support and family advocacy services mandated by the Department of Defense for delivery at the military installation level through family support centers were identified as a model for the provision of such services to law enforcement families.

Testimony asserting the relationship between work stressors and the functioning of the family was presented by a number of experts. For example, a survey of Toronto law enforcement personnel cited that 63% were divorced or separated, a rate almost double that of the larger population of Canadians. Other studies indicated that law enforcement has one of the highest divorce rates of any occupation (Stratton, 1976, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin) with as many as 75% of police marriages in large metropolitan areas ending in divorce (Came, et al., 1989).

Although the relationship between police stress and family functioning has been noted in numerous clinical observations, primarily by police psychologists (Russell & Beigil, 1990; Reese, 1986), there is little empirical data available. As Ellen Scrivner testified (1991), the absence of comprehensive data on the incidence and prevalence of police family problems limits both the understanding of the extent of family problems and more importantly impedes the ability to secure support and to implement effective intervention strategies.

This is particularly true in the area of

domestic violence within police families which appears to remain a hidden problem of unknown proportions. The only study to date which includes prevalence rates for violence in law enforcement marriages is that of a survey of 728 officers and 479 spouses conducted by Lanor Johnson (Johnson, 1991). She found that approximately 40 percent of the officers surveyed reported that they had behaved violently toward their spouse and/or children in the last six months and that 10 percent of spouses reported having been physically abused by their partner. However, as there was no operational definition of abuse employed, it is not possible to determine from this work the severity of the abuse or what proportion of the officers may have been referring to verbal as opposed to physical abuse, nor is it possible on the basis of this study to determine the rates of violence relative to other normative samples.

The present study represents a preliminary attempt to replicate in a law enforcement sample a self-report methodology for determining the prevalence and correlates of marital aggression that has been found to be an effective tool in securing support and designing domestic violence treatment and prevention programs in military communities (Neidig, 1988). This effort would appear to be particularly timely given proposals currently under consideration in the United States Legislature for providing treatment and preventive services, The Law Enforcement Family Support Act (H.R. 3101), modeled on the military family advocacy program. Additionally, the focus on marital violence seems appropriate as it is possible to operationally define, measure, and find appropriate normative data on spousal aggression, and 2) few would dismiss the issue as unworthy of concern, particularly among law enforcement personnel. This is true in part because of the frequently repeated concern that the nature of the work may potentiate aggression and/or emotional detachment in the family lives of officers, and because of the growing concern that severe marital conflict may also increase the risk for engaging in excessive force on the job (Bibbins, 1986). It may be hypothesized that difficulties in either the home or work setting can exacerbate difficulties in the other resulting in a negatively accelerating feedback

loop of increasingly dysfunctional personal and professional functioning.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were volunteers attending in-service training and law enforcement conferences in a southwestern state. Three-hundred eighty-five male officers, 40 female officers and 115 female spouses completed an anonymous survey on the prevalence and correlates of marital aggression in law enforcement marriages. Seventy-six percent of the respondents were between the ages of 30-49 with most officers having served between 15-19 years in law enforcement. All subjects included in the analysis had been or were currently married or cohabiting. Eighty-seven percent indicated that they were currently married and living with their spouse, with 39% having been married more than once. The racial distribution was 85% White, 11% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 1% Black (a distribution that is more representative of departments in the Southwest than other regions of the country).

Measures. The survey included demographic information (sex, age, race, marital status and length of marriage), work related items (years in law enforcement, current and previous assignments, shift, and rank), and The Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (Neidig, 1984), a version of an instrument widely used to investigate aggression in marriage (Straus, 1979). This measure has been used in several large-scale surveys of the prevalence of marital violence in civilian and military subjects and has been found to have significant interpartner agreement on the occurrence of aggression (O'Leary & Arias, 1988). Respondents were asked to report the number of times they had engaged in each of 25 conflict behaviors during a disagreement with their spouse during the previous year and how many times their spouse had done each to them. Frequencies were reported on a 7-point scale ranging from "never" to "more than 20 times a year."

Results

Results are presented for: a) the prevalence of marital aggression for the law enforcement sample and for comparison groups, b)

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demographic variables associated with risk for aggression (gender, age, years married and marital status), and c) work variables related to marital aggression (duty assignment, shift, leave and hours worked).

Prevalence of Marital Aggression

Prevalence rates are reported for three categories of violence, Minor, Severe and Any Violence (see Table 1). Minor Violence consists of throwing something at spouse; pushed, grabbed or shoved spouse; slapped; and kicked, bit or hit with a fist. Severe Violence includes choked or strangled spouse; beat up spouse; threatened with a knife or gun; and used a knife or gun on spouse. The Any Violence category includes subjects reporting any level of physical aggression (Minor and/or Severe Violence). The frequency data was collapsed so that each item was coded simply in terms of whether or not it had occurred. Prevalence rates are based on the most severe tactic reported for each subject; for example a subject who reported having slapped and beaten up his/her spouse would be included in the

Severe Violence group only. It should be noted that most individuals who have engaged in severe violence have also engaged in episodes of minor violence; however, in order to have unduplicated counts they are listed only in the more severe category.

Table 1

Items Comprising Minor and Severe Violence

Minor Violence

- Thrown something at your spouse
- Pushed, grabbed, or shoved your spouse
- Slapped your spouse
- Kicked, bit or hit with a fist

Severe Violence

- Choked or strangled your spouse
- Beat up your spouse
- Threatened spouse with a knife or gun
- Used a knife or gun on your spouse

Table 2

Annual Incidence Rates for Assaults Against Spouses:

Respondents	Level of Physical Aggression			n
	Minor	Severe	Any	
Male Officers				385
Self	25%	3%	28%	
Spouse	27	6	33	
Relationship	33	8	41	
Spouses (Wives of Male Officers)				115
Self	30	3	33	
Spouse	22	3	25	
Relationship	31	6	37	
Female Officers				40
Self	27	0	27	
Spouse	17	20	37	
Relationship	20	20	40	

In using the terms Minor and Severe Violence, we are following the approach of Straus and Gelles in reporting the results of their national surveys of domestic violence (1990). This permits the comparison of the law enforcement findings with the norms derived from other comparison groups. The term Minor Violence is meant only to convey that these are individuals who have engaged in violence that is not as potentially lethal as the Severe Violence. It is not meant to suggest that the behavior is acceptable or is not cause for concern. Indeed, findings that: a) individuals engaging in minor violence often progress to severe violence, b) that serious injuries and psychological trauma can result from acts of minor violence, and c) a tendency to under-report the severity of one's own violence and/or spouses over-report their partner's violence has been noted in clinical samples (O'Leary, Barling, Arias, Rosenbaum, Malone, and Tyree, 1989) suggest that all reports of physical aggression regardless of purported severity should be considered to be serious.

In Tables 2-4, the reported perpetrator, either self, spouse or both, of the violence is listed. The category "Relationship" includes all couples where violence was reported for either partner. This more inclusive category is arguably the most relevant, as whether or not violence is occurring in a relationship may be worthy of note regardless of which partner may be identified by the respondent as the perpetrator.

The annual prevalence rates as reported by the male and female law enforcement officers and by the spouses of 115 of the male officers are summarized in Table 2. The overall rates of violent relationships are highly consistent across respondents ranging from 37-41%. Although the obtained rates are likely to appear to be quite high, there is some reason to assume that these figures may represent a conservative estimate of the amount and severity of violence in law enforcement couples, given the tendency to under-report socially undesirable events.

The pattern of violence reported by female officers is somewhat different from that of the males in that: a) rates of severe violence are considerably higher than those reported by male officers or their spouses (20% vs 6-8%), and b) it appears that the female officers are

less violent than are the officers' wives by both their own self-report and that of their husbands. However, given the limited sample of female law enforcement personnel in this study, they have been omitted from the other analyses presented which are based only on the reports of the male officers. (Additional studies to included larger samples of female officers are in progress.)

The issue of the reliability of self-reports data is problematic when considering any socially undesirable behavior. It seems reasonable to be particularly cautious in relying on self reports of marital aggression by law enforcement officers as they may be expected to be sensitive to potentially adverse consequences to reputation and career, even when assurances of anonymity are given. Although this issue was not directly investigated by this study, some indication of the reliability of the self-reports is available by comparing the rates of violence reported for self and spouse by the participating male officers and wives. As can be seen from Table 2, the reported rates of violence perpetrated by each gender are highly consistent regardless of whether the respondent is the self or spouse. Twenty five percent of the male officers reported engaging in minor physical aggression; whereas 22% were identified by their wives as perpetrators of minor physical aggression. The identical rates of severe physical violence by males are obtained from both husbands (self-report) and wives (spousal report). Wives' self-reports of severe violence were slightly lower than that attributed to them by their husbands. These findings suggest that anonymous, self-report data on marital aggression in law enforcement officers may be sufficiently reliable for aggregate analyses. It should however be noted that as all surveys were completed anonymously, it was not possible to match the responses of individual married couples. Consequently, more precise statements concerning the reliability of the self-report methodology will have to be left to subsequent studies designed specifically to investigate this issue.

The distinction between perpetrator and victim in episodes of interspousal aggression is another of the more controversial domestic violence issues. In studies involving the aggressive behaviours of non-clinical samples it is generally found that both genders are more-

Table 3
Reciprocity of Marital Aggression for Couples Experiencing Any Violence:
Aggressive Behavior Reported for Each Partner by Couples

Violence Reported for Spouse: Violence Reported for Self:	None Violence	Violence Violence	Violence None	n
Male Officer Respondents:	19%	50%	31%	159
Female Spouse Respondents:	33	53	14	43

or-less equally aggressive (Straus, 1980, Steinmetz & Luca, 1988; O'Leary, et al., 1989), whereas studies based on clinical samples (i.e., those in shelter and treatment programs) find that most of the offenders are males (Pagelow, 1981). Obviously this is an issue that involves a number of variables not addressed in this study, such as the context and function of the aggression (i.e., whether it was offensive or defensive in intent). As can be seen from Table 3, for the 159 husbands and 43 wives in this study experiencing marital aggression, mutual or bilateral involvement in physical aggression was the most common, with 50% of husbands and 53% of wives reporting this pattern of aggression. In those cases where only one party

was reported to have been aggressive, both husbands and wives indicate that the wife was more likely to be the sole aggressive partner (reported by 31% of husbands and 33% of wives).

The frequency and severity of injuries sustained represent another measure of marital violence. We have found in a treatment population that when injuries are inflicted, wives are much more likely to be the victims and that they are more likely to be psychologically traumatized by conflicts (Cantos, Neidig, and O'Leary, in press). In this survey, subjects were asked whether they or their partner had received an injury requiring medical treatment and/or absence from work. Only 1% of male of-

Table 4
Annual Incidence Rates for Spousal Aggression:
Law Enforcement, Civilian and Military Samples

Severity & Perpetrator of Aggression	Law Enf	Civilian ¹	Military ²
Any violence by Husband	28%	11%	27%
Severe violence by Husband	3	3	7
Any violence by Wife	33	12	28
Severe violence by Wife	6	4	8
Any violence by either partner	41	16	32
Severe violence by either partner	8	6	10

¹ The National Family Violence Resurvey (Straus and Gelles, 1990).

² Survey results of 10419 male service members (Neidig, 1991).

Table 5
Physical Aggression Rates by Marital Status

Marital Status	Level of Physical Aggression			n
	Minor	Severe	Any	
Divorced/legally separated	49%	17%	66%	41
Married, not live together	40	20	60	5
Married, live together	31	6	37	339

ficers reported that they had received an injury of this severity and 2% reported their wives having been so injured. The officers' wives reported having inflicted no treatable injuries, with 1% indicating that they had been injured. Thus, relative to the frequency of potentially lethal conflict behaviors, serious injuries would appear to be infrequent in the altercations of the law enforcement families.

In order to compare the prevalence of marital aggression in law enforcement relative to other populations, the findings from studies with two other samples are summarized in Table 4. The civilian data is from the National Family Violence Resurvey, a stratified random sample of 6002 U.S. households conducted in 1985 (Straus & Gelles, 1985). The military rates are based on the responses of 10419 male service members participating in a series of written surveys conducted in 1990 (Neidig, 1991). The results reported for military, civilian and law enforcement samples are all based on the reports of male respondents using similar survey items and definitions of Severe and Minor violence. It is obvious that the obtained rates of violence for law enforcement couples are considerably higher than that of either the civilian or military samples. However, when only the severe violence items are considered, the rates of civilian and law enforcement samples are roughly comparable and are lower than the military rates.

Demographic Variables and Marital Aggression

Age and Years Married. Rates of physical aggression in the marriages of law enforcement officers are significantly related to age ($X^2 =$

24.5; $p = .0004$, $df = 6$) with the highest rates of aggression reported by younger subjects. Sixty-four percent of those officers ages 21-29 report Any Violence, followed by 43% of those 30-39, and 29% of the 40-49 year old subjects. Interestingly, the rate of violence for those over 49 increases to 42%. Although not statistically significant ($X^2 = 17.4$; $p = .06$, $df = 10$), there appears to be a similar trend between rates of aggression and length of time married. None of the 7 respondents married less than a year reported violence; however, the highest rates were for those married 1-4 years, with the rates declining to 28% for marriages of 15-19 years. The rates increased to 32% of those married more than 19 years.

Marital Status. The rates of physical aggression by marital status are represented in Table 5. It is apparent that the rates of violence are significantly greater for those divorced, separated, and living apart than for intact marriages, $X^2 = 15.1$; $p = .004$, $df = 4$. This is particularly true of Severe Violence rates which are approximately three times higher for the non-intact relationships. Although the data do not permit conclusions about whether the separations are a cause and/or an effect of the violence, they do suggest that those officers who are experiencing marital separations should be considered at high risk for violence.

Work Variables and Marital Aggression

Rank. Physical aggression was reported by all ranks, Deputy through Captain and above, represented in the study. Although there was a tendency for Deputies/Officers to report somewhat higher rates of aggression, no

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statistically significant differences in rate were found related to rank. These findings suggest the risk of marital violence is likely to cut across all law enforcement ranks.

Current Assignment. There is a significant relationship between the officers' assignment and rates of marital aggression ($X^2 = 21.1$; $p = .05$, $df = 12$), as reflected in Table 6. The rates of Any Aggression range from 42% to 8%. The highest rates of aggression are found for those assigned to Narcotics and Uniform duties with a rate of Severe Aggression among the Narcotics group that is more than 4 times the total male rate.

Shift and Hours Worked. Significantly higher rates of violence are found for those working midnights, swing, and other shifts than for those working days ($X^2 = 10.5$; $p = .03$, $df = 4$). For example, 49% of those on midnight and swing shift report Any Violence compared with 36% of those working days. Although the differences are not statistically significant, there is a tendency for those working longer hours to report increasingly high rates of Minor and Severe Violence in their relationship, as those working 50 or more hours per week report half again as much Severe Violence as the officers reporting 40 hour work weeks. The clearest relationship between the average number of hours worked per week by male officers and marital aggression is

found in reports of violence engaged in by the spouse. Twenty six percent of those officers averaging a 40 hour work week report physical aggression by their spouse, 35% of those working between 40 and 50 hours, and 47% of the officers who average more than 50 hour work weeks report spousal aggression ($X^2 = 9.8$; $p = .04$, $df = 4$).

Leave. Items concerning ordinary leave taken and lost and sick leave were included on the survey. There is a statistically significant relationship between the number of sick days taken and episodes of physical marital aggression by the officers against their spouse ($X^2 = 15.3$; $p = .02$, $df = 6$). Forty-four percent of officers taking more than 20 sick days report engaging in Any Aggression, with fully 17% of the episodes being Severe Violence.

The relationship between the amount of "ordinary" leave taken and rates of aggression suggest that those who take no leave and those that take more than 19 days of leave are at increasing risk, particularly for Severe Violence ($X^2 = 9.2$ $p = .06$, $df = 4$). Of the 24 subjects reporting having taken no leave the rates of Severe Violence are three times that of those that take 1-19 days (21% vs 7%).

Forty-six officers report losing leave presumably because they chose not to take it or had accrued more than they could use through working overtime. The rates of violence for these subjects was significantly

Table 6
Physical Aggression Rates by Current Work Assignment

Work Assignment	Level of Physical Aggression			n
	Minor	Severe	Any	
Narcotics	28%	14%	42%	29
Uniform	30	2	32	178
Detective	23	3	26	74
Other Assignments	18	2	20	40
Tac./Plain Clothes	20	0	20	15
Administration	18	0	18	28
Traffic	8	0	8	12

higher than for those who did not lose leave (38% vs 61%), $X^2 = 8.7$; $p = .01$, $df = 2$. The leave-related findings, taken together, suggest that it may be those officers who experience illness or injury and those who may be invested in their work to the extent that they don't take leave and/or lose it who are most at risk for marital aggression.

Discussion

This study represents a preliminary attempt to determine through the use of anonymous surveys the prevalence rates and correlates for interspousal aggression in law enforcement families. The anonymous, self-report survey methodology has been used by the U.S. Military to establish prevalence rates and risk factors for a number of military installations (Neidig, 1991). This information is then used to: 1) secure command support for treatment resources and for systemic and instructional preventive interventions, 2) identify high risk target groups to receive the prevention programs, and 3) to design the preventive programs to meet the identified needs of the populations at risk (Neidig, 1988).

The results of this preliminary investigation suggest that this methodology has relevance for law enforcement personnel. By self-report, approximately 40% of the officers surveyed report at least one episode of physical aggression during a marital conflict in the previous year with 8% of the male officers reporting Severe Violence. The overall rates of violence are considerably higher than those reported for a random sample of civilians and somewhat higher than military samples. The rates reported by a sample of the officers' wives were quite consistent with the officers' self-reports. The obtained rates and the consistency with spousal reports support the merits of the survey methodology as a tool for the development of prevent programs for law enforcement families.

The obtained rates suggest that the issue of domestic violence among law enforcement personnel can not be dismissed as a low frequency phenomenon. Several considerations in addition to the obtained prevalence rates suggest that domestic violence in law enforcement families should be of particular concern. These include: 1) the impact of marital conflict on

morale, retention, efficiency, and judgment of law enforcement personnel; 2) the critical and highly visible role of the police in enforcing the increasing number of domestic violence statutes; and 3) issues of departmental liability and the potential for seriously adverse publicity should officers become identified as involved in personal episodes of interspousal violence.

In this study, the significant relationships found between work related variables such as current assignment, shift and hours worked per week, and marital aggression, suggest that marital violence in law enforcement officer families can be understood, at least in part, as a function of the unique demands of the profession and of specific working conditions experienced in discharging those responsibilities. Additionally, the fact that those officers in the sample who work excessively long hours and fail to take leave have higher rates suggests that marital violence may be associated with increased job dedication. And finally, there may be assignments within law enforcement (i.e., narcotics work) that involve risk for marital violence as an unique occupational hazard.

Although the limited sample size and narrow range of variables investigated limit the conclusions that can be drawn, these preliminary findings would indicate that it is possible to identify groups at relatively higher risk within the law enforcement profession. And the relationship between work factors and marital aggression would indicate that it is appropriate to give as much emphasis to the conditions that place law enforcement officers at risk for marital conflict as is given to reduce the risk for other hazards associated with police work.

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