



Documenting Women's Experiences with the Toronto Police Services in Domestic Violence Situations

Prepared by: Stephanie Lanthier

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**Summary
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Project Description

The *Documenting Experiences with the Toronto Police Service* project emerged from discussions in the Violence Against Women (VAW) community in Toronto about the importance of being able to track both exceptionally good police responses to domestic violence incidents in the community as well as problematic responses.

The project was envisioned by the Support Services/Cultural Issues Committee of the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WACT) as a community survey that would be available to front line practitioners. Victims and/or service-providers would use the surveys to document their perceptions of police response to domestic violence incidents, by division. These surveys would then be submitted to WACT, compiled, and shared with senior members of the police service.

In a meeting with the Toronto Police Services (TPS), however, a Deputy Chief and member of the Council, suggested that the most effective way to proceed with the project would be to first gather a “baseline” of general police response and then move on to a second phase where community agency staff would identify specific situations, occurring in specific divisions.

This report contains the results of the baseline study of general police response to domestic violence incidents across the Toronto area. Many thanks to the TPS for their input and support of the project; the Family Service Association of Toronto for piloting the original survey tool; Sonia Brown of Tropicana Community Services, Verilia Stephens of the Assaulted Women's Helpline, and Lisa Manuel of the Family Service Association of Toronto for their work in creating and revising the survey; and finally to the Ministry of Community and Social Services for providing the funding for this pilot project.

Key Findings

- 1) The most common reason for women not wanting to call the police in Toronto was 'fear of retaliation' by the abuser, family or the community. Other reasons included: not believing the incident was "serious"; fear that the partner would be arrested; fear of immigration authorities; and language barriers.
- 2) Toronto police provided women with their name and phone number in most cases. Cards and badge numbers were given out much less frequently.
- 3) Charges were laid against the abusive partner in 54 % of the cases; while in 11 % of the cases the woman was charged. It is unclear from the data whether the women were solely or dually charged.

4) In all cases where the woman was charged, there are indications of past abuse of the woman by her partner. In 2 cases, the women had been drinking at the time of incident. In both these cases the women were charged with 'assault' for throwing objects though in one case the partner had punched the woman in the face and in the other, the partner had a lengthy criminal record for assaulting other women.

5) Women described Toronto police officers as helpful in 46% of the cases, while police were described as not being helpful 32% of the time.

6) Police officers described as helpful women did the following: provided resources and information; were empathetic to the victim; took action; provided follow-up phone calls; and charged the abuser. Those described as unhelpful: did not provide the woman with enough information; did not take the violence seriously or minimized the incident; and for some women, did not charge the abuser or remove him from the premises.

7) More than half the women described their overall experience with the TPS as being positive. Positive comments fell into three general categories: 1) police concern for the woman was apparent; 2) police provided information/referrals to the woman and 3) police followed-up after the incident.

8) Women that described their overall experience as negative believed that the police: 1) took too long to respond to the call 2) were cold or minimized the abuse; 3) did not provide adequate information/referrals and 4) did not conduct a proper follow-up after the incident.

9) The relationship between women who use substances and type of police response in domestic violence situations by the TPS needs to be delved into further, as does the relationship between the race/culture/ethnicity of the woman involved and type of police response in domestic violence situations.

10) In 76 % of the cases where women were asked whether they would call the TPS in the future, they answered that they would. Women who felt that the police had minimized the abuse were less willing to involve them again.

11) None of the women who were charged suggested that it was likely that they would call the police in the future. One woman with a long history of being abused stated that she would "rather die before she would call the police again".

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Introduction

Estimates of the number of domestic violence incidents reported to the police vary. The General Social Survey (2004) on victimization in Canada suggests that 28 % of individuals who had experienced domestic violence called the police, with the majority of these victims calling only after more than one incident had occurred (Statistics Canada, 2006). However, some studies put the number as low as 2% or as high as 50% (MacRae, 2003).

Responding to domestic violence incidents can be frustrating for police officers. Women in the midst of an emergency situation may have a difficult time providing the information that the police officers need or may minimize the extent of the violence (Center for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004). Some women may cooperate with police at the time of the incident only to request later that the charges be dropped (Center for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004).

To further complicate the situation, the criminal justice system tends to be limited in what it can provide to women victims of domestic violence. Police are generally called to intervene in situations where the offenses being committed - breach of an order, threatening, or assault - do not carry hefty penalties and thus do not, in the eyes of judges, warrant a lengthy pre-trial detention (Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004). Defendants therefore tend to be released very quickly, with protection orders in place that are difficult to enforce (Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004).

Police response to domestic violence incidents can be equally frustrating for victims and the social-service providers who assist and advocate for them- particularly if the police officers lack knowledge about woman abuse. Women may have encounters with the criminal justice system several times over the course of an abusive relationship - most often as a victim, but increasingly as a defendant as well - and still not be safe from her abuser (Woman Abuse Council of Toronto, 2005). She may encounter police officers that are unable to understand 'why she doesn't just leave' because they don't recognize that there are a variety of reasons why women *can't leave* - including loss of income, fear for their safety, worries about the children etc. (Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004).

Despite the understandable frustrations of police, victims, and social-service providers around police response to domestic violence situations, it is imperative to remember that the police can sometimes be the only entry point for women experiencing violence to access help. Police officers are in the position of being able to provide referrals for women and children; bring them to a safer place where they can receive support; and hold abusers accountable for their actions through laying charges. Thus, a positive police response can be vital to the safety of abused women and their children.

Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted on perceptions of the police by domestic violence victims and police response over the last twenty-five years. Apsler, Cummins and Carl (2003) point out that the results of these studies vary markedly from “mostly negative” to “very positive” with the bulk falling somewhere in the middle. More

recent studies on the topic indicate that women victims of domestic violence are increasingly reporting more positive experiences with police services. Davies, Block, & Campbell (2007) found that the majority of women (63%) in their study who had police contact stated that the police were 'helpful'. Similarly, 75 % of the victims interviewed in the Apsler, Cummins and Carl (2003) study gave the highest rating to the police of 'very helpful'.

Stephens and Sinden (2000) however, found that the perceptions of police and police response were considerably different in cases where the abusive partner was arrested. 71% of women found their experiences with the police 'positive' in incidents where their partner was arrested (Stephens and Sinden, 2000). In cases where the partner was not arrested, the percentage of women describing their experiences with the police as positive dropped significantly (Stephens and Sinden, 2000).

Positive Verses Negative Perceptions

According to Stephens and Sinden (2000) women who described their experiences as 'positive' tended to feel that the police held their 'moral character' in high esteem. This perception came from police officers assuring the victim that she "had done the right thing by notifying the police"; by listening to the woman's account without rushing her; by showing compassion; and by offering additional assistance or referrals (Stephens & Sinden, 2000). In these cases, women believed that the police had taken their situation seriously.

Women who described their experiences as negative however, tended to feel that the police had not taken their situation seriously. The authors identified four common

types of police demeanor that led to women having this perception. These include: minimizing the situation; disbelieving the victim; displaying a "we don't care attitude" and exhibiting a 'macho cop' demeanor (Stephens & Sinden, 2000). Types of police behavior that fall into the four categories included: downplaying what happened to the woman; verbal challenges to the woman's explanations; accusations that both parties were culpable; statements that the woman had provoked the altercation; lack of sympathy or compassion for the woman; being less likely to believe the woman if she was drinking and the attitude that the incident was not deserving of police time (Stephens & Sinden, 2000).

Reasons for Not Contacting the Police

Felson, Messner, Hoskin & Deane (2002) suggest that domestic violence victims are less likely to call the police than victims of other types of violence due to privacy concerns, fear of reprisal and a desire to 'protect' the offender. These authors note however, that women become more likely to call if they perceive the domestic assaults as 'serious'.

Other studies have also found that the most common reason for women not contacting the police was that the women perceived that the incident was too minor or not serious enough (Davies, Block & Campbell, 2007; Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas & Engel, 2005). Davies, Block, & Campbell (2007) note that in 18% of the cases included in their study where the woman felt the incident was not serious, the violence was actually life-threatening. Additionally, in comparing abused women who had not had police contact with those who had, the authors found that women who had police contact

were: “more likely to have experienced more severe abuse; more likely to have left or tried to leave their abusive partner; and more likely to report harassing behavior by their partner” (Davies, Block & Campbell, 2007).

Other reasons why women are reluctant to call the police include: a desire to excuse or protect the abuser; fear that police contact would intensify the violence; fear that immigration will be called for those without status; fear the children will be taken away; or a fear of becoming homeless. The authors found that in 5 % of the cases there were “practical barriers” such as not having access to a phone, or one of the individuals involved was a police officer.

A previous study found almost identical reasons expressed by their participants for not calling the police (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas and Engel, 2005). They note two additional ones which include the perception of women that they must be “prepared to end the relationship” in order to get help from social services or the police and a general mistrust of the police that exists in some communities.

Willingness to Call the Police in the Future

Apsler, Cummins, and Carl (2003) found that “willingness to call the police in the future is consistent with victims’ finding the police helpful in the current incident” but go on to suggest that there are “other plausible reasons for calling the police in the future” whether the police had been helpful or not. For example, a woman might believe that the police are her only source of assistance, regardless of whether she had perceived them to be helpful in the past (Apsler, Cummins, and Carl, 2003).

These same authors identified that 8 of the 22 women interviewed in their study would be unlikely to call the police in the future. The authors found that in 2 of these cases if the woman was unlikely to call the police in the future because the offender had been arrested against the women's wishes. However, the authors note that in most of the incidents where the police arrested the abuser, the victim's willingness to call the police in the future was not diminished (Apsler, Cummins, and Carl, 2003).

Methodology

Two Project Coordinators were involved with the project. The original Coordinator created a survey for front-line practitioners in the VAW sector to fill out on behalf of their client's. This Coordinator left the position in early 2007. The new Coordinator received feedback from the Toronto Police contacts about the survey and revised it accordingly. The survey was then approved by the Support Services/Cultural Issues Committee and tested for one day by the Family Service Association of Toronto in order to provide a "snapshot". The feedback from this "snapshot" study was collected and integrated into the survey. Finally, a subcommittee of the Support Services/Cultural Issues Committee made up of representatives from the Assaulted Women's Helpline, Tropicana Community Services, Family Service Association of Toronto and WACT met to finalize the modifications.

A letter of information and the surveys were forwarded to the Support Services/Cultural Issues Committee, as well as the Shelter Committees. A notice was posted on CLEOnet and other outreach was done through colleague's contacts.

Upon receiving copies of the survey, the Shelter Committee raised a number of concerns about how the surveys were to be completed. They believed that having the service provider fill out the survey on behalf of the woman was problematic because it effectively silenced the voices of abuse survivors. A number of the committee members felt uncomfortable with, in their words, “speaking for the woman” (Personal Communication, 2007). The committee decided that they would not be able to participate in the project if the survey remained in its present form.

In order to encourage the Shelter Committee to participate in the project, the Coordinator created a new survey. This new survey was for clients to fill out directly, either on their own or with the assistance of a service provider. Agencies were offered the option of choosing either format. Both surveys elicit the same sorts of information, but through different lenses. It should be noted as well, that the surveys are currently only available in English.

Four agencies agreed to participate in the project. They include: Jewish Family and Child Services, Catholic Family Services, The Toronto Western Hospital, and The Family Service Association of Toronto. Surveys were completed for 63 individuals, either by the individual themselves or in conjunction with a social worker. In 56 out of the 63 cases, the participant had an interaction with the Toronto Police Service.

Participants

All participants were women. They ranged in age, with the majority falling into either the 25-34 year range or the 35-55 year range. Two participants were under the age of 25 and two were over the age of 55. The ethno-cultural groups with which the women

identified varied. Some examples recorded on the surveys included: Pilipino, Jewish, Cambodian, Chinese, Caucasian, Caribbean, Portuguese, South American, Italian, Malaysian, First Nations, Ukrainian, Korean and South Asian. Six of the women stated that they were newcomers to Canada. Three women identified as having a disability.

For some of the women, the police had been called previously to intervene in a domestic violence situation. Twenty-one women recorded that the police had been involved before – of those twenty-one, two women stated that the police had been called more than 10 times.

Types of Incidents for which the Police were Called

The types of incidents for which the police were involved varied. Assault was the most frequent occurring in 33 of the 56 cases. Other incidents included: Uttering threats (11 cases); Uttering death threats (6 cases); Criminal harassment and/or stalking (4 cases); Breach of a Court Order (3 cases) and Child abuse (2 cases). Eight women indicated that the police were called for reasons other than those indicated above including disturbing the peace, forcible confinement, and property destruction, among others. Four women declined to answer.

The incidents ranged in severity. Examples include: hitting and punching walls; ripping off woman's clothes and forcing her to run half-naked to the closest police station; locking woman in her car, slashing her tires, and threatening her; stalking and threatening bodily harm; physical assaults; dragging woman down the driveway bleeding; breach of court orders; punching woman in the face; yelling and throwing things etc.

Reasons for Not Calling the Police

Ten women indicated that they did not want to call the police. The most common response for not wanting to call was ‘fear of retaliation’ by the woman’s abuser, family or community. Two women expressed that they did not want anything bad to happen to their partner (including being arrested and going to jail), while one woman suggested that she didn’t think there was anything “criminal” about the abuse she experienced. One of the ten women stated that in her “home country”, calling the police would have made the situation worse, making her unsure about calling the police in Canada. Another woman, who is in Canada without status, suggested that language barriers and fear of immigration authorities made her too scared to call. Three women did not provide reasons.

Police Response

Contact Information

In the majority of cases the police provided the participants with their name and their phone number. Badge numbers were given out less frequently, with only 17 of the 56 women reporting that they received this information. In roughly half the cases, women reported that the police officer had given her their card.

Charges

Charges were laid against the abusive partner in 30 out of the 56 cases, while the victim was charged in 6 cases. It is unclear from the data whether the women victims that were charged in the incident were solely or dually charged.

The surveys for the 6 women charged indicate that the male partner was the primary aggressor in the incident. In all 6 cases, there are indications of past abuse of the woman by her partner. In 2 cases, the women were drinking at the time of the incident. In both these cases the women were charged with 'assault' for throwing objects at the abusive partner (a book and a beer can), though in one case the partner "hit and punched [the woman] in the face" and in the other, the partner had a lengthy criminal record for assaulting other women.

Providing Interpreters

Only one woman identified as needing a Language Interpreter. In this case an Interpreter was not provided because the “circumstances were high risk for [the] woman, her child and [the] police since the perpetrator showed up unexpectedly at the scene”. Given that only one participant indicated that she needed an interpreter, it is not clear from this data whether women who need Interpreters are being provided with them by the Toronto Police Services.

Helpfulness Rating

Women described police officers as “helpful” in 46% of the cases. The police were considered helpful by: providing resources and information; being cooperative; being empathetic; “taking action”; “always being there and getting back to [me]”; “being there if [I’m] in trouble”; “[taking the] matter seriously”; “following protocol”; “documenting everything”; “[providing] follow-up phone calls; and making the “decision to charge”.

In 32% of the cases, women indicated that they felt the police officers were not helpful. In these cases women seemed to feel that the police had not provided them with enough information or had not taken the violence seriously. For example, women expressed that the police officers had "minimized the incident" or "didn't care at all". Women also suggested that they felt the police "could have charged" the abuser or "removed him" while others stated that "referral to services could have been given".

Overall Rating

More than half the women described their overall experience with the Toronto Police Service as being "positive". Positive comments tended to fall into three general categories: 1) concern for the woman was apparent; 2) information was provided; and 3) there was follow-up after the incident.

Women who rated their experiences as positive stated that the police officers were "very caring", and suggested that "their [police officers] concern for me [was] very evident." Some women stated that the police "came right away" and one pointed out that the police made her feel that she "didn't do anything wrong". Giving women information appears to be a marker of a 'positive response'. One woman noted that the police officer "explained everything very, very well - I just had to call if he came around to bother me" while another said that they "explained to me the Canadian laws and what he was doing to me was wrong". Positive experiences also seemed to include, in the words of one woman, a "superb follow-up". Another participant who had a good experience with the police stated that the "Detective responded quickly to every call". In the opinion of one social-service provider, a police officer responded particularly well to a woman by

"review[ing] her safety plan, encourag[ing] her to leave, [and] inform[ing] [her] they would document".

Those who described their overall experience as challenging tended to find the police officers to be "hostile and uncooperative"; taking too long to respond to the call; not providing adequate information and not conducting a proper follow-up after the incident. For example, one woman stated that she "felt like a bother, like they were not interested in my case". Police were also described as "cold" and as "minimizing" the abuse. One worker stated that in the case of her client, the police "showed up half an hour after the 911 call and took the abuser's statement first". This same woman was told by police that "she didn't appear injured" even though the incident had included the woman being hit in head several times. In the case of a woman who identifies as Aboriginal, the police were slow to respond to two incidents - occurring just one week apart - in which her partner assaulted her, suggesting the need to look more closely at the impact of race/culture of the victim on police response in domestic violence situations.

A proper follow-up appears to be lacking in cases rated as 'challenging'. One participant said that "...no one checks how things are since he returned." A social-service provider spoke to the fact that while the initial contact with the woman is generally positive, the level of engagement decreases as time goes on. She said "when this [the case] goes further (ie/ detective level) then it becomes less involved (less updates, phone calls) and [there is] less follow-up and less interest in what further information [the] client may have".

Likelihood of Contacting Toronto Police Services Again

Thirty-four of the surveys indicated whether or not a woman was likely to call the Toronto Police Services in the event of a future incident. In 26 of the 34 surveys (76%) women suggested that they would be likely to call the police again. One woman explained that she "felt reassured" after the incident and that it "let her know that she could call whenever she wants". A social-service provider who was pleased with the response her client experienced stated: "Message to him – she will call and they will come."

Women, who answered that they were unlikely to call the police, again suggested that their reluctance was due to the way their previous encounter had been handled. Women who felt that the police had minimized the abuse were less willing to involve them again. Speaking about her client, a social-service provider stated: "She is only going to contact police if he [the abuser] comes back and she believes he will kill her. Not impressed by lack of follow up regarding breaching bail conditions – felt dismissed and minimized by police response – concerned by what message this gave him".

None of the women who were charged with assault suggested that it was likely they would call the police in the future. In fact, one woman with a long history of being abused stated that she would rather "die before she would call the police again". Another service-provider expressed concern that her client, who had been charged, was unwilling to contact the police. The woman was currently residing in a shelter, but wanted to go back to her apartment to get her personal belongings. She refused however to call for police accompaniment because of her experience and therefore was at a high safety risk.

Conclusion

Police contact remains vital for many women acting to stop the abusive behavior of their partners. This pilot project has revealed the importance of how women's perceptions of the TPS impact future use of their services. More research, information-sharing and dialogue is needed to ensure that at risk women continue to access this important avenue of safety for themselves and their children.

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