

# DETECTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



## Hollywood, Florida's New Strategy Shows Promise

By Sara McFann, Rhett Cady, and Leonard Matarese

**W**hen this article's coauthor Police Sergeant Cady assumed responsibility for the Hollywood, Florida, Police Department's domestic violence unit three years ago, it was done under the cloud of a tight departmental budget that limited the unit's resources to educate residents on domestic violence and to bring violent offenders to justice.

Complicating matters was the fact that domestic violence was the agency's No. 1 call for service and demanded the highest proportion of personnel among all crimes in the city.

In the current environment of increased law enforcement scrutiny and media attention, coupled with slimmed-down budgets, it is imperative that police agencies consider nontraditional approaches to addressing crime and community safety concerns.

Business-as-usual for many police departments is not resulting in the desired crime reductions, nor is it helping improve community satisfaction with police. In fact, it may become more difficult for law enforcement agencies to placate the growing concerns of their communities without changing the way they think about police legitimacy, trust, and cooperation.

A growing body of research shows that strategies designed to strengthen police legitimacy may do more to reduce crime than the tough-on-crime alternatives that rely on mandatory arrest or other general approaches. The "focused-deterrence" framework shows potential for offering police agencies impressive crime reductions, coupled with a more positive perception of law enforcement by the community.<sup>1</sup>

A recent assessment of a focused-

deterrence program to reduce domestic violence in Hollywood (Wazir Ishmael, Ph.D., city manager), suggests that this approach can offer big returns without increasing the actual amount of personnel or funding required.<sup>2</sup>

Within the first two years of the program, the number of domestic reports declined significantly based on robust time-series analysis of data spanning over six years. The approach requires, however, a major shift in how a department, at all levels, thinks about its role in fighting crime.

### **Not a Special Class**

Domestic violence often represents a sticky crime problem for police because it is considered to be different from other types of violent crime for a number of reasons, particularly because of where it occurs and who it involves.



Somehow, the nature of domestic offenders sets them apart from what police would consider traditional offenders like robbers, car thieves, or burglars. Officers focus on offenders' psyche, offering treatment and counseling, and rely on victim-based solutions to provide safety for victims.

Research shows, however, that domestic offenders are not specialists who solely engage in domestic violence, but instead are generalists like most other criminals and are involved in the typical assortment of various violent and nonviolent crimes.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true for chronic domestic offenders.<sup>4</sup>

The finding that domestic offenders are not a special class of criminals suggests that police can and should treat domestic offenders more like generalists, not specialists, and that the same strategies used to prevent and reduce other forms of violent crime should be effective for domestic violence.<sup>5</sup>

The growing interest in and scientific support for focused-deterrence initiatives for violent crime reduction point to a new direction police agencies can use for domestic violence. Hollywood has implemented a version of this strategy, which has been adapted to target domestic offenders, and initial findings are encouraging.

### **Offender-Focused Initiative**

As one of the first examples of focused deterrence being used for domestic violence, Hollywood's domestic violence unit took some risks in ramping up what was, and still is, a promising yet understudied approach. The gamble appears to be paying off, at least after two years, with significant declines in the number of reports of domestic incidences being filed, and an eventual decrease in arrests after initial spikes early in the program.

Focused-deterrence programs involve a combination of policing, social and community services, education, and justice-system stakeholders who collaborate as part of a comprehensive approach to identify the highest risk

offenders and then apply pressure to deter them from offending.

This focus manifests itself in various forms depending on the targeted crime, but a major component of every program involves notifying offenders directly.

In Hollywood, official notifications are done by hand-delivering letters to arrested domestic offenders and those aggressors who have been involved in multiple non-serious domestic incidents in which no arrest was made. The letters, printed on official city letterhead and signed by the domestic violence unit sergeant, are addressed to the offender and explain the department's approach to domestic violence.

It defines the crime, warns of the potential consequences for continuing the targeted behavior, and urges *desistance* (defined in the field of criminology as cessation of offending). An accompanying brochure offers supportive resources for the offender and victim that may help relieve stressors that can contribute to domestic violence.

These letters are delivered by a uniformed officer to the offender, either at his or her residence for a repeat nonarrest incident, or while the offender is in jail immediately after an arrest.

Looking at the effects from a programmatic perspective, a decrease in reports translates to fewer police resources being spent on domestic incidences, freeing up officers to tend to other calls.

Nationwide, domestic calls for service are consistently the most common type of request for police service, meaning law enforcement resources are tied up in domestics more than any other type of crime. Considering that many domestics are not serious and most involve repeat aggressors and victims, even a small reduction in calls will benefit the department.

The offender-focused approach for domestic violence is not the first example of how Hollywood has changed its policies to adopt more progressive policies



for domestic violence. For more than a decade, every domestic incident attended to by an officer is documented in a report, no matter how trivial and regardless of whether an arrest was made.

This seemingly small change is actually not common practice, despite the apparent benefits from a research and evaluation perspective. Additionally, for the new program, repeat offenders are placed in a database and graded on their risk level for future violence based on the domestic reports in their offending history.

From this database, it is possible to identify the most chronic, high-risk offenders who require the most police and justice system attention and resources, in addition to the lower-level offenders who may be deterred by softer elements of the focused-deterrence program, including the hand-delivered letters.

### **Research on Letter-Based Deterrence**

Research into the specific costs of letter-based deterrence programs is scarce and certainly needs more attention. An example of this line of research is a RAND Corporation study conducted on a Los Angeles, California, gun-letter



program in which letters were sent to buyers after a gun purchase to prevent illegal third-party gun sales or transfers that could result in gun crimes.<sup>6</sup>

Findings from this study showed that even a small decrease in crime, especially homicide, could easily offset the costs of a letter-delivery program. Prevention, while rarely researched in terms of potential cost savings,<sup>7</sup> eliminates the hours spent investigating a crime, providing victim outreach, and other major costs to society, which are ultimately funded by taxpayers.

The RAND study analyzed specific elements of the program, including the

out interviewing victims and analyzing hospital visits for domestic injuries, it would be difficult to rule out the possibility of the program making victims less likely to call the police, which would clearly reduce the number of reports without affecting the actual number of domestic incidences.

Similar concerns arise with mandatory arrest policies, though findings are mixed about whether this is a consistent backfire effect, or whether an opposing effect is seen due to the increased legitimacy and improved perception of the police response associated with tougher domestic policing strategies.<sup>8</sup>

an especially important role in crime deterrence. They are the ones responding to calls for service; gathering information to write up reports for every domestic incident; arresting offenders on scene; tracking down or writing not-in-custody arrest affidavits for suspects who flee the scene; taking arrestees to jail; and delivering the letters.

### Evaluation Is Essential

Research shows that police have the ability to alter people's perceptions on the risk of offending, thereby improving deterrence. The most effective tactics focus on improving police legitimacy and procedural justice by ensuring fairness and respect while carrying out law enforcement duties.<sup>9</sup>

The unique way in which the burden of action for domestic incidents has shifted from detectives to patrol officers is a key element of Hollywood's fundamentally different approach to domestic violence. It harnesses the power of swift police action to create an environment in which domestic violence is considered a serious, legitimate crime by both the officers and the individuals involved.

Currently, little is known about how these changes translate into measurable outcomes, including officer response time to calls, changes in resource demands and expenditures, and officer and community satisfaction with the procedures, which is a major drawback in assessing the initiative's overall effectiveness.

Despite these limitations, initial findings from Hollywood's initiative should spur interest in and funding for research to determine evidence-based solutions for domestic violence based on robust scientific methods, honest reporting of findings—either in favor of or in opposition to hypothesized and desired outcomes—and a format with easily comparable, standardized metrics that lends itself to systematic reviews and meta-analyses for future assessment.<sup>10</sup>

As more police agencies implement focused-deterrence domestic violence strategies, it is imperative that the

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cost of printing and sending the letters, retrieving returned letters, and answering questions from the public about the program, while accounting for the hourly pay and amount of time spent by each department employee involved in each task.

The costs, which declined over the course of the program, were found to be \$55,328 per year, or \$2 per person, and could be easily outweighed by preventing one homicide, suicide, or robbery per year.

Because domestics are typically the top call for police service, any reduction in the number of these calls is a benefit to the department in terms of resources. Further research needs to explore the potential backfire effects, or unintended negative consequences, of the intervention, as well as other elements of the program that may be contributing to the decline in reports.

It must be acknowledged that with-

Any department interested in pursuing emerging approaches for domestic violence should consider and evaluate these and other unintended consequences on victims to ensure, above all else, victim safety and security.

If focused-deterrence programs involving a robust letter-delivery element have the potential to influence offenders and ultimately reduce their likelihood of offending or re-offending, the approach exemplifies cost-effective delivery of policing that can produce long-term benefits to police departments and their communities.

Within the focused-deterrence framework, there are a wide variety of stakeholders involved, to varying degrees, that hold important roles in the larger comprehensive program to reduce the targeted violent crime.

In Hollywood's manifestation of the program for domestic violence, however, police, particularly patrol officers, hold



assessment and evaluation phase of the intervention process not be ignored. This is especially true for such a new and complex approach that has serious, immediate implications for victims and their families.

If the strategy truly does offer a cost-effective approach that can significantly reduce violence in the short- and long-term, these results should be documented to determine the best way forward for police departments interested in progressive approaches that offer potential increases in police legitimacy, improved police-community relations, and a reduction in both fear of crime and actual crime in their communities. **PM**

**ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES:**

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**April Event**

The authors of this *PM* article will conduct an ICMA webinar on the important topic of reducing domestic violence. For more information, go to [icma.org/events](http://icma.org/events).

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