

Police Officer Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence: An Analysis of Observational Data

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This article explores police officer perceptions of intimate partner violence (IPV) using observational data from police ride-alongs. We performed a qualitative analysis of narrative data from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN) to examine officers' views of IPV as well as whether policing philosophy is related to officers' attitudes toward IPV. Results indicate that POPEN officers expressed problematic views of IPV (including simplification of IPV, victim blaming, patriarchal attitudes toward women, and presumption of victim noncooperation) as well as progressive views of IPV (including recognition of the complexity of IPV, awareness of barriers to leaving, and consideration of IPV as serious and worthy of police intervention). Additionally, our analysis offers tentative support for a relationship between policing philosophy and officers' attitudes toward IPV. While this study is largely exploratory, we address the implications of our findings both for police practice and training and for future research.

Keywords: intimate partner violence; police perceptions; qualitative analysis; community policing

Unlike most other crimes, intimate partner violence (IPV) has a history of being regarded reproachfully by police. Officers historically were reluctant to become involved in IPV cases typically because they viewed IPV as a private matter falling outside police purview (Ford, 1983). However, the women's movement of the 1970s helped to advance IPV as a matter of serious concern in the criminal justice system generally (Mills, 1998) and in police departments specifically. Thirty years later, both state laws and departmental policies define IPV as a serious crime, though it is unclear to what extent individual officers endorse this view.

The purpose of this study is to explore police perceptions of IPV using narrative data from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN). We begin by examining the existing literature on police officer perceptions of IPV with a particular focus on "problematic" and "progressive" views of IPV. We also discuss whether and how policing philosophy—for

example, traditional versus community policing models—may be linked with officers' attitudes toward IPV. After describing the data and outlining our research strategy, we present the findings from our analysis and the implications of our results.

POLICE OFFICER PERCEPTIONS OF IPV

“Problematic” Views of IPV

Research suggests that police officers often dislike, resist responding to, or are easily frustrated by IPV calls for a variety of reasons (Ford, 1983; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; Sinden & Stephens, 1999). First, IPV calls can be very difficult for the police to “sort out.” Unlike stranger assaults, with intimate partner assaults there can be substantial uncertainty about who is the victim and who is the offender (Sinden & Stephens, 1999).¹ This is particularly true when cunning perpetrators manipulate officers by insisting that their partners initiated the abuse or by maintaining that their partners are drunk and out of control (Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). Because of this ambiguity, officers may find IPV calls especially difficult to handle and therefore unpleasant. A related issue is the tendency of some officers to express discomfort with taking action in IPV situations. For example, officers may be more comfortable handling IPV calls in which some physical violence has occurred because a determination of guilt is more easily made, thereby simplifying decision making (Walter, 1981). Further, officers interviewed by Ford (1983) believed that while responding to IPV calls “they were called upon to assume the role of counselor, for which they had no professional training” (p. 465). Thus, officers may feel unprepared or ill equipped to handle situations involving IPV.

Second, officers may fail to appreciate the complex nature of IPV, for example, the myriad reasons why victims stay with abusive partners. Of course, IPV victims face many and varied barriers to leaving their partners, including fear of reprisal (Bui, 2001; Erez & Belknap, 1998; Fischer & Rose, 1995; Ford, 1983; Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001; Zoellner et al., 2000), economic dependence on their partners (Abraham, 2000; Bui, 2001; Fischer & Rose, 1995; Goodman, Bennett, & Dutton, 1999; Horsburgh, 1995; Krishnan et al., 2001; Websdale, 1998), and reluctance to end their intimate relationships (Bui, 2001; Erez & Belknap, 1998; Fernandez, Iwamoto, & Muscat, 1997; Fischer & Rose, 1995; Goodman et al., 1999; Kingsnorth & MacIntosh, 2004). Accordingly, officers with a limited understanding of IPV may fail to appreciate the weight of these concerns for IPV victims.

Third, officers holding patriarchal or misogynistic views may blame women for their own victimization or believe that arrests should not be made in cases involving IPV (Saunders & Size, 1986).² Evidence suggests that officers are most likely to blame IPV victims when victims are intoxicated (Stewart & Maddren, 1997) or when they have antagonized their partners prior to being assaulted (Lavoie, Jacob, Hardy, & Martin, 1989). One study of officers' attributions of blame reveals that “the provocative behavior of an abused wife may overshadow many other factors in determining who police will blame for an assault” (Waland & Keeley, 1985, p. 363). Similarly, a study of police response to protection order violations found that officers were less likely to make an arrest if the victim was intoxicated or if she allowed her abusive partner to enter her property (Rigakos, 1997).

Fourth, some officers wrongfully assume that IPV victims are unreliable or that they will not assist in the prosecution of their partners if an arrest is made (Sinden & Stephens, 1999; Stanko, 1989). This belief is not entirely without merit, however, as IPV victims

do sometimes resist prosecuting their partners (Bennett, Goodman, & Dutton, 1999; Goodman et al., 1999). In fact, interviews with battered women reveal that as many as half (Erez & Belknap, 1998) to three-quarters (Ford, 1983) drop charges against their partners or fail to appear for their court dates, often out of fear, economic disadvantage, or reluctance to get their partners in trouble (Bennett et al., 1999). Whatever their motivations, IPV victims who do not cooperate with the prosecution of their partners may be viewed by officers as deviant, uncooperative, ungrateful, or complicit in their abuse (Websdale, 1998). For example, when a woman fails to pursue prosecution or obtain a protection order against her partner, the officers may conclude that she is acting illogically, that she is not serious about getting help, or that she somehow condones the abuse (e.g., see Ford, 1983; Websdale, 1998).

“Progressive” Views of IPV

The problematic views described previously are by no means representative, though, as many officers recognize the complexity of issues surrounding IPV. Unfortunately, little empirical evidence of these attitudes exists, as most studies of police perceptions of IPV focus on officers’ negative or stereotypical views. However, a small number of studies reveal positive or enlightened views of IPV among police. For example, using an open-ended survey instrument, Sinden and Stephens (1999) interviewed 21 officers in a semi-rural area of New York State and found that most officers believed that IPV is degrading and painful and causes suffering to victims. Similarly, most officers agreed that IPV involves not only physical abuse but also patterns of mental abuse (such as degradation and/or intimidation of the victim) over time (Sinden & Stephens, 1999). Further, contradicting the notion that police are reluctant to become involved in IPV situations, Robinson’s (2000) analysis of police decision making revealed that officers view arrest as being as appropriate in domestic assaults as in stranger assaults and that officers make arrests on victims’ behalf regardless of their own attitudes about victims’ perceived cooperativeness or willingness to prosecute. Of course, the question remains whether these examples are really indicative of “progressive” views toward IPV or merely are evidence that officers are doing their jobs and responding appropriately to IPV. As a significant void exists in the literature concerning officers’ positive attitudes, part of our intent in this analysis is to identify empirical evidence of officers’ progressive views of IPV.

Policing Philosophy and Perceptions of IPV

Given the enormous amount of criminological research examining police response to IPV and to the differences between traditional and community policing strategies, it is surprising that the potential relationship between policing philosophy and officers’ attitudes toward IPV has been almost wholly unexplored. Although the community policing philosophy in particular seems to hold promise for officers’ attitudes about IPV given its focus on building positive relationships and increasing communication between officers and citizens (Mastrofski, Parks & Worden, 1998; see also Jolin & Moose, 1997), we are aware of only one study that examines this issue empirically: Miller’s (1999) analysis of the differences and similarities between neighborhood police officers (NPOs) who practice community policing and patrol officers who practice traditional policing. The results of Miller’s detailed field research suggest that the community policing philosophy did indeed coincide with the generally more positive views of IPV by NPOs. For example, Miller found that the “familiarity and rapport” that NPOs shared with citizens meant that they

“no longer dreaded answering domestic calls because they could feel the trust the residents placed in them” (p. 182) and that they felt better equipped to handle such calls. Further, though mandatory arrest laws ensured that the outcome of IPV calls often was identical for NPOs and patrol officers, their pre- and postarrest strategies differed greatly. For example, NPOs “turned more frequently to mediation and crisis intervention than did patrol officers because they knew the citizens” (p. 185). NPOs also expressed heightened awareness of the need to intervene early in IPV situations before the violence escalated. Thus, policing philosophy may indeed be related to officers’ perceptions of IPV, yet this issue lacks adequate investigation in the current literature. In this study, we aimed to explore the possible linkages between policing philosophy and POPN officers’ attitudes about IPV.

Given these findings from the existing literature on police perceptions of IPV, we identified the following research questions for our study:

1. Do POPN officers hold problematic views of IPV? If so, what are they?
2. Do POPN officers hold progressive views of IPV? If so, what are they?
3. Does policing philosophy appear related to POPN officers’ attitudes toward IPV?

METHODOLOGY

Police attitudes and beliefs about IPV have been assessed using a variety of methodologies. Most of this research has used closed-ended survey questions (Johnson, Sigler, & Crowley, 1994; Robinson, 2000), open-ended interviews (Sinden & Stephens, 1999), or hypothetical scripts, vignettes, and scenarios (Lavoie et al., 1989; Stalans & Finn, 1995; Stewart & Maddren, 1997; Stith, 1990). Additionally, Ferraro (1989) utilized an observational study of police ride-alongs in combination with open-ended interviews to assess officers’ opinions about mandatory arrest policies. In contrast, our analysis uses narrative data from police ride-alongs to assess officers’ perceptions of IPV, a methodological approach that makes this study unique. The use of narrative data is advantageous because it allowed us to examine the extemporaneous statements POPN officers made in response to each call rather than their responses to prepared questionnaires or hypothetical scenarios. Further, officers completing survey instruments may edit their remarks out of concern for social desirability or to conform to departmental expectations. Although POPN officers sometimes were asked specific questions by observers, their responses in most cases were impromptu and therefore are more likely to represent their actual attitudes.³

Data

Using a variety of data collection techniques, POPN sought to examine whether and to what extent “regular” patrol officers differed from officers on a community policing assignment (see Parks, Mastrofski, DeJong & Gray, 1999). POPN researchers collected observational information from ride-alongs with police officers in Indianapolis, Indiana (in 1996), and St. Petersburg, Florida (in 1997), as well as from interviews with officers and citizens in the community. There has been a wealth of research using these data, focusing mostly on the quantitative coded data. This study, however, utilizes the narrative data from ride-alongs conducted by observational researchers. While these data were not originally collected to study IPV, narrative accounts of each ride completed by observers are a rich data source for exploring many types of police–citizen encounters.

The data contain 7,443 total encounters with citizens in the two research locations. To assess officers' perceptions of IPV, only encounters involving intimate partners (including both physical assaults and verbal altercations) were analyzed. Of the 7,443 total encounters, 576 were defined as domestic arguments, fights, assaults, or aggravated assaults.⁴ Each encounter coded as having any kind of "domestic" characteristic was isolated and read by the researchers.⁵ After removing 94 incidents involving nonintimate domestic disputes and 21 that were not domestic disputes at all, the final sample consisted of 461 IPV encounters (see Table 1). A total of 925 citizens interacted with the police in these encounters, and information is available on 209 individual officers. The majority (62.0%) of the 461 encounters were classified by observers as "domestic arguments," followed by "domestic fights" (20.4%), "domestic assaults" (11.7%), and "aggravated domestic assaults" (5.9%). Although there was little evidence of physical violence in the incidents characterized as "domestic arguments" (i.e., they involved only verbal abuse), these incidents nonetheless prompted officers to share their views of IPV with observers.

Analytic Strategy

The narratives were divided evenly between the three authors. First, we systematically reviewed the narratives for evidence of problematic and progressive views as well as for references to policing philosophy. The authors read observers' descriptions of each encounter as well as statements made by officers to the observer after leaving the encounters and identified themes that characterized officers' perceptions of IPV. We paid special attention to the "debriefing" section of each narrative. In these sections, observers probed the officers for more specific information following each encounter. These debriefings took place away from citizens, so officers often spoke freely about the call they had just completed. Once each author had completed coding the narratives, the first author collapsed and grouped similar themes. The final themes were reviewed, revised, and agreed on by all three authors. Finally, to ensure interrater reliability, a percentage of the narratives was coded by all the authors. In all cases the authors identified similar if not identical themes, increasing our confidence in the results of the analysis.

TABLE 1. Description of Sample

	<i>N</i>	%
Total number of encounters	461	
Encounter location		
Indianapolis	265	57.5
St. Petersburg	196	42.5
Encounter type		
Domestic argument	286	62.0
Domestic fight	94	20.4
Domestic assault	54	11.7
Domestic aggravated assault	27	5.9
Other characteristics		
Total number of officers	209	
Total number of citizens	925	

RESULTS

Problematic Views of IPV

Echoing many of the findings in the existing literature, we identified four themes representing officers' problematic views of IPV: simplification of IPV, victim blaming, patriarchal attitudes toward women, and presumption of victim noncooperation.

Simplification of IPV. POPN officers who simplified IPV failed to recognize that it is a complex phenomenon. In particular, officers tended to view victims' decisions to leave abusive relationships as an easy one. As one observer notes, "[The officer] said that he thought 'some people are so stupid' and that they don't know enough to leave harmful relationships." Clearly, this officer regards the decision to leave an abusive partner as straightforward and easy to make. As is evidenced by the victim-blaming attitudes discussed in the following section, officers who hold simplistic views of IPV may be unaware of the many factors that can complicate victims' decisions.

A related sentiment expressed by officers with simplistic views of IPV involved viewing parties in domestic disputes as immature and childish. Several officers believed that IPV calls consist of little more than "babysitting" the disputants. After one IPV call the observer noted, "[The officer] says that this is just another fight between idiots. He says he hates domestics and that he feels as if most of them can just be resolved without involving the police, if people could learn to grow up." Officers who share this view may fail to differentiate between mild forms of verbal and physical aggression that may indeed necessitate little police intervention and more serious forms of abuse involving severe physical violence and use of control tactics in which police is required (see Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

Victim Blaming. POPN officers who engaged in victim blaming typically stated that victims deserve or are partially responsible for their abuse. For example, "[the officer] says that he cannot understand why women put themselves through these things." In addition to blaming victims for abuse, two officers commented that victims must enjoy being beaten. Although possibly made in jest, these comments can be viewed as an extension of the simplification of IPV described previously. According to this logic, the decision to leave an abusive partner is a simple one, and if victims choose to stay, then they must, at some level, enjoy being abused. An exchange between a male and female officer illustrates this view:

[The female officer] mentions that she can't believe that there are women out there that put up with domestic abuse. [The male officer] says "not only are there women who put up with it, there are also women who like it." [The female officer] is surprised by this and says "like it"? [The male officer] says "well, I'm sure they don't like it at the time, but they sure as hell don't want to prosecute the guy or have him stop."

Although the male officer later retracts his statement that women enjoy being abused, it is clear that he engaged in victim blaming nonetheless.

As another example, officers sometimes blamed victims if they purposefully disregarded a protection order by inviting their partners into their homes. As one officer points out, this action can mean a reduced likelihood of assistance from police in the future: "[the officer] said she doesn't make a report if the victim wants the suspect back when a restraining order is involved because the victim is partially to blame."

Patriarchal Attitudes Toward Women. POPN officers expressing patriarchal attitudes toward women made derogatory comments (including name-calling) about the female IPV

victims in their encounters. In the following example, the officer impugns the victim's intelligence by remarking that she is not smart enough to leave her abusive partner:

[The officer] says that he is frustrated by calls like this. He says that first of all, one never knows who to believe and second of all the women are not smart enough to get out. He says that [the victim] needs someone to beat her for being so stupid and letting [her partner] beat her in the first place.

Clearly, for a police officer to say that a woman deserves to be beaten for staying with her partner—even if it was said with sarcasm—means that patriarchal attitudes that devalue women are at work.

Misogynist attitudes also were expressed by officers who called female citizens derogatory names. For example, in one encounter the observer notes, “[The male officer] said that [the victim] was a ‘bitch’ and said that she should be glad that she has a boyfriend, even though he hit her. [The officer] jokingly said that [the victim’s] boyfriend probably hit her because she was ‘so damned ugly.’” Although the observer notes that the officer made his comments in jest, it does not negate the fact that he called her a “bitch” and dismissed her as “damned ugly,” even in the presence of the observer. These types of comments are particularly damaging given that the officer appears to make light of the violence the woman experienced.

Presumption of Victim Noncooperation. POPN officers sometimes assessed individual victims' likelihood of cooperativeness based on erroneous assumptions about IPV. In one example, “[the officer] explained how this situation was *typical* of many domestic disputes [emphasis added]. [The perpetrator’s] girlfriend called 911 after she had been beaten up then ended up changing her story when it came time to file charges.” Similarly, in another encounter, “[the officer] said that often women wouldn’t press charges against their boyfriends, they would just call the police to get the guy to leave. He predicted that [the victim] would be back with [her partner] soon.”

In yet another encounter, a victim with obvious facial bruising claimed that her boyfriend beat her after she had walked away from him during a verbal argument. In defending herself, she caused some defensive wounds to her partner, who had fled the scene shortly before police arrived. Despite the woman's facial bruising and her partner's disappearance from the scene, the officer concluded that the situation involved mutual combat and decided not to issue an arrest warrant for the woman's partner. According to the observer,

[The officer] also said that he figured that [the victim] and the boyfriend would be back together by the next day or two and nothing will change after tonight. [The sergeant] said that if it were her, she would not fill out a probable cause pick up in these circumstances because it was probably a waste of time.

Unlike the previous two examples in which officers' decision making was not necessarily tied to their assumptions about victims, in this example the officer failed to issue a warrant based in part on his determination of mutual combat but also based on the presumption that the woman would not cooperate. The narrative contains no evidence to suggest that the officer is familiar with the couple, yet he nonetheless concludes that the woman would reconcile with her partner and fail to cooperate with the police. In cases like these, a “why bother?” attitude appears present among officers who presume that victims will not cooperate with the police.

Progressive Views

In addition to these problematic views, we also identified three themes representing progressive views of IPV that contribute new insights to the existing literature: recognition

of the complexity of IPV, awareness of barriers to leaving, and consideration of IPV as serious and worthy of police intervention.

Recognition of the Complexity of IPV. POPN officers who recognized that IPV is a complex phenomenon often noted that IPV calls are rarely clear-cut or easily resolved. In one example, “[the officer] said that it was sometimes difficult to tell who was wrong, and it was often extremely difficult to predict future violence.” This officer makes two informed observations: first, that it is not often the case that one party is clearly the aggressor and the other party is clearly the victim and, second, that partners who appear calm in one encounter may be violent in the future. Similarly, another officer recognized the potential for repeat victimization:

The officer felt very badly for the woman, speculating that if [the perpetrator] did this to her this time, he’d probably done it many times in the past. [The officer believed that the perpetrator] was a [woman] abuser and would probably be a child abuser if he ever had children.

As these examples reveal, some POPN officers expressed understanding of abusive relationships more advanced than simplistic or dismissive notions of IPV.

Awareness of Barriers to Leaving. Similarly, POPN officers also acknowledged that victims’ decisions to leave abusive relationships are seldom straightforward and are influenced by a variety of factors. In one example, officers dealt with an IPV victim who was known by police to be a chronic shoplifter:

[The first officer] said that he had met with [the victim] after she had been arrested for shoplifting, so he knew her. [The second officer] laughed and told [the first officer] that in that case [the victim] might not call him [if she needed help].

Although the second officer laughs while making his comments, he still acknowledges that the woman’s prior criminal history may discourage her from contacting the police if her partner again became violent. Later, the first officer noted that the woman was “trapped in a cycle of violence,” further underscoring his awareness of the difficulties victims face in leaving their abusive partners.

In another example, the on-scene officer recognizes the barriers faced by economically marginalized women, in this case due to discriminatory treatment. In this encounter, the officer is informed that the prosecutor would not issue a restraining order because the offender did not have a permanent address and thus could not be served. After the encounter, the observer probes the officer for more information, asking whether the prosecutor really would refuse to file a protection order on those grounds. “[The officer] said it was unfortunate but when people came from a slum area their problems were not taken seriously. He said the prosecutor’s office might tell people anything to get rid of them. [The officer] said it was sad, and the only thing he could do was try to educate people about how they could beat the system.” Clearly, these examples suggest that some POPN officers do not believe that it is easy for victims to simply leave their abusive partners and that they recognize the barriers to leaving that exist for victims.

Consideration of IPV as Serious and Worthy of Police Intervention. POPN officers who took IPV seriously did not endorse the traditional belief that IPV is a “private family matter” outside of police purview but rather regarded it as a problem worthy of police intervention. In many of these cases, officers’ attitudes seemed rooted in awareness of the potential for lethal violence. One officer warned the victim he encountered about this danger, saying, “He got your eye this time, just think about what might happen next time.”

Another commented to the observer that “[the victim] was in serious trouble. Whether she filed the charges or not, her ex-boyfriend was a predator and would probably end up killing her someday.” In both of these examples, the officers clearly understood the potential for lethal violence and consequently treated the encounters seriously. Further, the officer in the first example expressed eagerness to write up a report on the woman’s behalf, therefore demonstrating his advocacy for police intervention in such situations.

In another example, the officer’s awareness of the dynamics of IPV led him to encourage victims to call the police. As the observer recalls,

[The officer] mentioned that he wouldn’t be surprised if he got another run to this address. [The officer] stated that many domestics take place when one of the [partners] is leaving the relationship and said that these can often be the most volatile of domestics because tempers and emotions are elevated. I asked [the officer] if he typically tells citizens to call the police again if they have any more trouble. [The officer] explained that with the number of runs he receives he probably didn’t have to do this but he commonly does so when he expects that there may be some continued conflict later on.

This narrative is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the officer exhibits a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of IPV that many officers (particularly those with problematic views) do not share. Second, the officer clearly is aware of the risk of separation violence (e.g., see Mahoney, 1991) and is correct in his assessment that a period of separation from their partners can be an especially dangerous time for victims. Third, it is useful to note that the officer uses a generalized view of IPV (“many domestics”) to provide sound advice to the individual victims he encounters. Finally, by encouraging citizens to call the police, this officer treats IPV as a crime worthy of police intervention.

Finally, officers who advocate for police intervention in IPV situations may become frustrated by their fellow officers’ inaction, as the following example reveals:

As soon as [the officer] got back into his cruiser it was evident that he was very unhappy with the way the other officers handled the situation. Just from what the [victim] had told them, there were possible trespassing, stalking, and burglary charges which could be pursued. He was appalled that neither of the officers even took a control number down or got the woman’s information. He asked aloud, “Now what are those guys gonna say if her ex-boyfriend comes back later today and beats the tar out of her? She had three police officers there and explained her situation and she was essentially blown off.”

Policing Philosophy and Perceptions of IPV

Despite the fact that both the St. Petersburg and the Indianapolis departments subscribed to a community policing philosophy, few of the POPN officers in our study specifically identified a link between community policing and their attitude toward IPV. In fact, the typical attitude of POPN officers toward IPV seemed to be more strongly rooted in the traditional “crime control” model of policing. However, some POPN officers did indicate that they used problem solving and other strategies characteristic of community policing in approaching IPV calls. For example, one officer described his desire to “make [citizens] admit to liking the police” and was pleased when both parties in an IPV call appeared satisfied with the outcome of the encounter. This officer also remarked that “he liked domestics because it allowed him to try to do some ‘problem solving’ . . . [and] that he liked it when he was able to use his skills to calm someone down.” Another officer felt a particular responsibility to act as an emissary to female victims in abusive relationships,

remarking to the observer that “the most important thing that she could do at this point was to build a good first impression with the police. If this was the first encounter [the victim] had with the police, then if [the officer] was positive and caring . . . [the victim] would not hesitate in the future to call if there were any more problems.” This is a remarkably perceptive statement and indicates that some POPN officers worked hard to facilitate positive relationships with IPV victims in accordance with the tenets of community policing. Of course, the cross-sectional nature of the data means that it is not possible to identify causal ordering in this relationship. That is, it is not known whether these officers’ attitudes toward IPV are rooted in their adherence to the community policing model, whether they adopt community policing ideals because of their existing attitudes about IPV, or a combination of both. Still, our data offer tentative support for a link between policing philosophy and perceptions of IPV.

Interestingly, the opposite scenario also suggests a relationship between policing philosophy and perceptions of IPV. In particular, POPN officers often expressed frustration with IPV victims who refused to cooperate with police and prosecutors, suggesting an adherence to a traditional model of policing in which officers expect to arrive on scene, receive full cooperation from victims, and make an arrest. For example, after visiting a female victim at her home for the fourth time, one officer stated, “There are all kinds of free programs for women to utilize if they want out, so there’s no excuse for her staying. She wants to be in that situation.” Another officer remarked, “If she’s not going to help herself, I’m not going to help her either.” Therefore, attitudes toward IPV characterized by frustration and bitterness seem to accompany adherence to a traditional policing philosophy in which arrest and prosecution are the expected outcomes. Further, this finding suggests that officers subscribing to a traditional model of policing may not adequately understand the dynamics of IPV or may be unaware that alternatives to formal sanctions may be more attractive to some victims. As with the previous examples, it is not possible to know whether these officers’ preexisting attitudes toward IPV led them to follow a traditional model of policing, whether their policing philosophy shaped their attitudes about IPV, or some combination of the two. Nonetheless, it does appear that a relationship may exist between POPN officers’ policing philosophy and their attitudes toward IPV.

DISCUSSION

Results of our analysis indicate that POPN officers in both jurisdictions expressed perceptions of IPV ranging from problematic (simplification of IPV, victim blaming, patriarchal attitudes toward women, and presumption of victim noncooperation) to progressive (recognition of the complexity of IPV, awareness of barriers to leaving, and consideration of IPV as serious and worthy of police intervention). That is, while some officers expressed attitudes demonstrating negative or stereotypical perceptions of IPV, other officers exhibited a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of abusive relationships. Additionally, there is tentative evidence to support a link between policing philosophy and officers’ perceptions of IPV. Although the limited nature of the data allows only speculative conclusions, we observed that POPN officers who endorsed community policing ideals also appeared to approach IPV situations with a sense of collaboration and caring, while officers who seemed more closely aligned with traditional policing ideals often expressed frustration with IPV calls. Accordingly, these findings may be useful in informing police IPV practices and have implications both for police training as well as for future research.

First, the problematic views of IPV expressed by POPN officers suggest that challenges remain where police IPV training is concerned. In fact, it is unlikely that any amount of training can alter individual officers' patriarchal attitudes toward women, for example. However, other themes identified in this study, including simplification of IPV, victim blaming, and presumption of victim noncooperation, are issues that certainly can and should be addressed in police IPV training modules. We are reluctant to make a blanket recommendation for increased IPV training and instead suggest that training curricula specifically focus on the particular sources of problematic perceptions of IPV. In other words, in light of the examples we present identifying specific problematic perceptions of IPV, more targeted training that can confront these views seems warranted. It is also important to acknowledge that the progressive views of IPV expressed by POPN officers may represent relative degrees of success where IPV training is concerned. Consequently, recognition of the complexity of IPV and the barriers to leaving faced by victims and consideration of IPV as worthy of police intervention may be fruitful avenues for continued IPV training.

Second, it is especially disheartening that POPN officers' perceptions were, at times, based on victims' demographic characteristics. In one case, an officer expressed annoyance to the observer that the victim took too much time to complete her victim statement. "As [the officer] walked away from the scene, he stated that he was ready to pull the victim statement from [the victim] because she wrote so slow and was so uneducated." In fact, attitudes about social class at times played a major role in shaping POPN officers' attitudes during IPV calls. In particular, officers in Indianapolis frequently encountered poor White citizens whom they referred to as "White trash" or "hillbillies" (and, in one case, as "drunk, inbred, and brain dead"). These attitudes suggest the need for ongoing cultural sensitivity training (in addition to more targeted IPV training) in order to educate officers about issues of structural disadvantage in their neighborhoods.

Third, we hope that the results from this exploratory analysis lead others to ask more in-depth questions of officers regarding their perceptions of IPV. Specifically, we hope to see future research that explores positive as well as negative attitudes held by officers, as our data clearly indicate that POPN officers expressed both. More important, our analysis adds modestly to our nascent understanding of the relationship between policing philosophy and officers' attitudes toward IPV. The specific ways in which policing philosophy and officers' attitudes toward IPV may be linked requires further study, particularly using research designs that can flesh out issues of temporal ordering.

Fourth, the small number of gay or lesbian couples in our data made it impossible for us to make any conclusions regarding officer attitudes toward same-sex IPV. Specifically, we wonder whether officers view same-sex IPV differently than violence in heterosexual intimate relationships.⁶ Far more research is required in order to have fuller understanding of police perceptions of gay and lesbian IPV. Future research also should focus on how officers perceive victims' use of self-defense. In some cases, POPN officers commented that if they arrested the perpetrator, they would have had to also arrest the victim because both parties had used physical violence. However, in many of these cases, victims claimed that they had acted in self-defense. Again, the data from this study are not detailed enough to explore this issue in sufficient detail, but preliminary evidence suggests that some officers may feel pressured by mandatory arrest laws. These statutes may lead officers to make fewer arrests out of hesitation to arrest someone whom they believe to be a victim; therefore, further research of these complex issues is required.

LIMITATIONS

Interestingly, the primary advantage of our study is also its chief limitation. While the use of narrative data makes our study unique among investigations of police officer perceptions of IPV, the POPN study was not originally designed to explore IPV, nor was it intended to measure officer attitudes on IPV. Rather, the POPN study was developed to investigate the implementation of and officer attitudes toward community policing. Yet the original authors also intended to make the study as broad as possible by focusing on “what officers do.” As it turns out, much of what the officers did was respond to IPV calls. Therefore, the study—albeit unintentionally—provides a unique opportunity to examine officers’ responses to and perceptions of IPV.

An additional limitation is the age of the data. At this writing, 11 years have passed since data collection, and attitudes might certainly have changed in that time. However, few data sets exist that contain such rich information about the daily work of police, and fewer still contain examples of extemporaneous statements made by police about IPV, making the use of such “old” data worthwhile. Finally, not every officer offered his or her perceptions about IPV. We were disappointed to find that some officers were more “tight lipped” than others and did not (for reasons unknown) discuss with observers their perceptions of IPV. Thus, while we were able to identify general themes that emerged from officers’ statements, the large percentage of cases in which no comments were made prevented us from further analyzing these data quantitatively as we might have liked.

CONCLUSION

We performed a qualitative analysis of observational data from the POPN to examine officers’ perceptions of IPV as well as whether policing philosophy is related to officers’ attitudes toward IPV. We found evidence of both problematic and progressive views among POPN officers, and our data offer tentative support of a link between policing philosophy and officers’ attitudes toward IPV. We hope that our findings, which are preliminary and largely exploratory, will inspire other, more robust investigations of police perceptions using observational data in order to facilitate a more thorough understanding of how police officers perceive and respond to IPV.

NOTES

1. This uncertainty may be a particular problem in cases involving same-sex IPV, when officers cannot rely on gender cues to differentiate between perpetrator and victim.

2. Stith (1990) did not replicate this finding in her analysis of sex role egalitarianism and “anti-victim” attitudes, although she did find that approval of marital violence is significantly related to anti-victim attitudes.

3. Indeed, several examples of derogatory, vulgar, and racist statements made by officers support our belief that, in many instances at least, officers did not edit their comments in the presence of observers.

4. We also included the 12 homicide cases in our preliminary analysis to determine whether any of them involved IPV; none of them did, so those cases were removed from the sample.

5. Observers were asked to classify problems at each encounter. We used four different variables to identify which encounters were likely to be IPV calls: the problem as stated by dispatch, the

initial problem during the encounter, the problem identified at the end of the encounter, and the most serious problem during the encounter. This method helped to account for instances when several problems occurred simultaneously.

6. Our data included one encounter with a same-sex couple. Unfortunately, the officer in this encounter expressed homophobic attitudes toward the two men involved. After noticing that one of the men was bleeding, the officer notified the victim that he was “unable to take any official action” and left. Afterward, the officer told the observer that he “left so quickly because [the man] had been bleeding, and he did not want to deal with any ‘bleeding fags.’” Although the officer said that “he genuinely hoped that [the men] resolved their differences . . . he was not going to expose himself to a health risk in order to help them.” The assumption that all gay men are HIV positive is evident here.

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