



Officer Safety Column: Officer Safety and Violence Against Women Crimes



Recent events that have occurred nationwide have reminded us of the risk posed to law enforcement when responding to violence against women calls. Crimes of domestic/dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking are complex and multifaceted, and the importance of establishing officer and victim safety cannot be overstated. Through increased awareness and education, we now have a greater understanding of the complexities of these crimes, and it is incumbent upon law enforcement executives to ensure their officers are equipped with the tools and understanding necessary to deal with these situations.

The vision of the Center for Officer Safety and Wellness is to enhance the law enforcement profession's ability to be well equipped, well trained, and physically and mentally prepared to confront violence and other threats and dangers inherent in policing. To do this, the Center for Officer Safety and Wellness builds on the solid foundation built by other IACP project, programs, and initiatives. The IACP's National Law Enforcement Leadership Initiative on Violence Against Women is one example. By highlighting the information and resources available through these projects, the IACP seeks to ensure officer safety in these unique situations.

Responding to violence against women calls carries a great deal of inherent risk; unfortunately these calls are too often seen as common and routine. Through education and training about the dynamics of these crimes, officers will be better equipped to address not only victim safety, but their own safety as well. Although the majority of violence against women does not escalate to homicide or suicide, years of research and studies have revealed certain factors that contribute to the dangerousness of a relationship. Prior victimization, access to weapons, stalking behaviors, threats to kill the victim, children, third parties, or the police, and the status of the relationship (whether the parties are separated or in the process of separating) are just a few of the factors that add to the level of risk. Understanding the lethality factors and recognizing the danger signs, as well as having strong data collection at both the time of the call and any past history, can help maintain safety.

Law enforcement executives can reinforce the realities of the dangers of responding to calls of violence against women and integrate risk management through several avenues. First, executives should incorporate thorough policies and procedures on violence against women with clear guidance for all individuals involved, beginning with dispatch and responding officers through follow-up investigators. Secondly, supervisors should review officers' actions and reports and monitor policy compliance, addressing any questions or concerns. Next, agencies should conduct regular training events and disseminate resources that can strengthen the understanding of the dynamics and the dangers of calls involving violence against women. Another best practice is for officers to effectively enforce court orders protecting victims of violence against women. Lastly, it is essential for agencies to build and implement a strong collection and analysis process to capture data regarding violence against women to strengthen department efforts. Taken together, these strategies will provide a foundation of safety for both the officer and the victim.

It is essential for law enforcement agencies to create a culture of safety not only for the victims of these crimes, but for all agency personnel. The IACP offers model policies that departments can adapt and implement to address the crimes of violence against women. The IACP also offers officer and executive guidebooks and roll-call training videos to enhance responses and investigations. Department members owe it to themselves, as well as the communities they serve, to take the time necessary to implement promising practices to best address these crimes and keep officers safe. To learn more about the resources and training opportunities offered by the IACP Violence Against Women project, please visit: <http://www.theiacp.org/Publication-sGuides/Projects/ViolenceAgainstWomen/tabid/313/Default.aspx>

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