



## Evaluating Coordinated Community Responses to Domestic Violence

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With contributions from Susan McGee

Since the early 1980's, activists in the battered women's movement have been working to make reforms in the criminal justice system to create a more responsive, consistent and coordinated effort to address domestic violence cases. Reform efforts have focused on reducing cultural supports for battering and shifting the responsibility for holding batterers accountable for their use of violence from the victim to the community (Pence & Shepard, 1988). While initial efforts focused on reforming individual components of the justice system, concerns about fragmentation and the absence of a shared vision and public accountability, led to the development of coordinated community responses to domestic violence (Hart, 1995).

This report provides a summary and analysis of research on coordinated community responses to domestic violence. It provides an overview of different mechanisms for coordination, examines individual components of a coordinated community response, and addresses the overall response. The focus here will be on the justice system, advocacy and programs for abusers. In recent years more attention has been given to broadening the response to include other community agencies, such as health care facilities, child welfare agencies, substance abuse treatment agencies, and religious institutions (Clark, Burt, Schulte & Maguire, 1996). A comprehensive community response requires that other social problems that contribute to violence be addressed (e.g., poverty, adequate housing, affordable childcare, and child support enforcement).

A coordinated community response involves police, prosecutors, probation officers, battered

women's advocates, counselors and judges in developing and implementing policies and procedures that improve interagency coordination and lead to more uniform responses to domestic violence cases. Components of a coordinated community response include: pro-arrest or mandatory arrest policies; follow-up support and advocacy for victims; aggressive and prompt prosecution; active monitoring of offender compliance with probation conditions; court mandated participation in batterer rehabilitation programs; and monitoring of the system-wide response to domestic violence cases. Civil remedies have been strengthened by removing barriers to obtaining orders of protection, improving their enforcement, and requiring participation in batterer rehabilitation programs. Specific policies and practices vary depending upon state legislation, the structure of the court system, and the characteristics of local agencies.

### Mechanisms for Coordination

States and local communities have adopted different mechanisms for coordinating interagency intervention to address domestic violence. Three principle types of coordination, which may be used with each other, are (1) community intervention projects; (2) criminal justice system-based reform projects; and (3) coordinating councils.

#### *Community Intervention Projects*

Community Intervention Projects (CIP) are advocacy organizations that focus on reforming, improving, and coordinating institutional responses

to domestic violence within a community. They are distinguished from coordinating councils and criminal justice-based reform projects in that they are nonprofit agencies that are external to the criminal justice system and rooted in the battered women's movement.

The Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) is a well-known CIP that has been a model for communities in Minnesota, Colorado, California, Wisconsin, and Washington (Tift, 1993). DAIP has been successful in negotiating key agreements with intervening agencies by meeting with representatives from each agency separately and holding interagency meetings to discuss policy and programmatic issues after initial agreements have been reached (Gamache & Asmus, in press). DAIP has identified eight key components of community intervention projects: (1) creating a philosophical approach that centralizes victim safety; (2) developing policies and protocols that enhance victim safety; (3) enhancing networking among service providers; (4) building monitoring and tracking systems that strengthen system accountability; (5) advocating for battered women within the criminal justice system and the broader community to insure a supportive infrastructure; (6) providing sanctions and rehabilitation opportunities for abusers; (7) undoing the harm violence to women does to children; and (8) evaluating the coordinated community response for victim safety and offender accountability (Pence & Shepard, in press).

### ***Criminal Justice System-Based Reform Projects***

Leadership to coordinate the response to domestic violence may also come from within the criminal justice system. Innovative programs that focus on integrated case management are often located within prosecutors' offices, although they may be initiated by probation or the judiciary. This approach can be exemplified by the Quincy District Court in Massachusetts and the San Francisco Family Violence Project.

The Quincy District Court in Massachusetts initiated reforms, such as pro-arrest policies, vigorous prosecution, and closely supervised probation that includes batterer treatment. Restraining orders

are widely used and violations are prosecuted (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996). Initiated in 1980, the San Francisco Family Violence Project, a victim advocacy unit housed in the District Attorney's Office Project (Clark et al., 1996), developed vertical prosecution (i.e., the same prosecutor handles an individual case from arraignment through sentencing), victim advocacy units, and written guidelines for probation and diversion (Soler, 1987). Part of this project later became the Family Violence Prevention Fund and was incorporated as a nonprofit agency that focused on training, prevention activities, and public policy reform. The District Attorney's Office assumed responsibility for the victim advocacy unit, which remained the Family Violence Project (Clark et al., 1996).

### ***Coordinating Councils***

Coordinating councils (also known as domestic violence councils, task forces or committees) have been formed in many communities to provide a forum for interagency communication and collaboration. The Santa Clara County Domestic Violence Council has been a model for the development of other councils around the country. Established in 1991, the Council has sponsored successful conferences, established working committees, developed medical and probation protocols, published a domestic violence death review report, and implemented a program to provide victims with emergency electronic systems to alert police in case of danger (Carlson, 1997).

An Urban Institute study of community responses to domestic violence in six communities found that all of them had some type of coordinating council (Clark et al., 1996). The councils in the communities studied varied in terms of their membership, structure and purpose. For example, the San Diego Domestic Violence Council has representatives from over 200 agencies that provide services to victims and offenders. Subcommittees focus on different aspects of the community response: law enforcement; shelter and support services; medical; legal action; child abuse/domestic violence collaboration; ethnic concerns; treatment and intervention;

grants and data collection; and education and prevention. In other communities, coordinating committees are more narrowly focused on criminal justice issues. For example, Baltimore's Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee is made up of judges and senior staff from criminal justice agencies. There is also a separate work group for front-line workers (e.g., police officers, advocates) to discuss coordination issues and policy changes.

Statewide coordinating councils also play an important role in shaping the response to domestic violence. A survey conducted by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Coordinate Judges (1995) found that of 43 state domestic violence coalitions contacted, 23 participated in some form of statewide coordinating council or task force. While the structure and form of these coordinating councils were diverse, the study found that "their statements of purpose can be distilled into the following three major functions: assessment of the legal justice and social systems involved; policy development; and planning" (p. 8).

### **Evaluating Components of a Coordinated Response**

Most studies have focused on individual components of coordinated intervention, rather than the entire community response. There have been many studies on the impact of arrest (Weisz, 1996) and batterer treatment programs (Gondolf, 1997). Few studies have examined prosecution and sentencing options, the use of restraining orders, and victim advocacy services. In general, studies that have examined the impact of individual components of a coordinated response have been inconclusive, leading some researchers to call for more study of the combined effects of community interventions (Jaffe, Hastings, Reitzel, & Austin, 1993; Tolman & Weisz, 1995).

Studies that have examined the use of police arrest illustrate the difficulties involved in examining one aspect of criminal justice intervention without considering subsequent interventions (e.g., prosecution and sentencing). One well-known experimental

study in the field of domestic violence was conducted by Sherman and Berk (1984) comparing the impact of arrest to other forms of police response. Arrest was found to reduce the chances of renewed violence at a six-month follow-up when compared to separation or mediation. However, a series of studies in six cities across the United States has provided less support for arrest as a deterrent to future violence (National Research Council, 1996). In a review of the findings Weisz (1996) concludes: "while arrest was sometimes related to a deterrent effect, it often faded by the end of one year" (p. 2).

What was missing from these arrest studies was consideration of the total community response in terms of subsequent prosecution, sentencing and rehabilitation outcomes, and the availability of victim advocacy and support services (Zorza, 1992). In each site the social environment influenced how the studies could be implemented given the policies, practices, and beliefs that existed in each city. Ultimately, it was difficult to compare and isolate the effect of arrest across the cities studied because they each had different practices that influenced the outcomes.

Few studies have examined the use of different practices within a criminal justice system other than that of arrest. Ford and Regoli (1993) studied prosecutorial tracking options by randomly assigning cases to one of three options: (1) pretrial diversion to a counseling program; (2) prosecution to conviction with a recommendation of counseling as a condition of probation; or (3) prosecution to conviction with presumptive sentencing not including counseling. (In this study presumptive sentencing meant a sentence of up to one year in jail and a fine not exceeding \$5,000, or if jail time is suspended, probation up to one year, along with court costs and whatever conditions a judge might attach to probation). Cases initiated by victim complaints were also randomly assigned to an option under which they would be allowed to drop charges. There was little difference in terms of renewed violence for the different policy tracks except the condition under which victims could drop charges. When there were warrant arrests because of a victim complaint, there

was less repeat violence experienced by the victims who were in the group allowed to drop charges (Ford & Regoli, 1993). It should be noted that this study compared prosecutorial tracking options for processing cases, not the actual case outcomes. For example, not all victims that were in the group allowed to drop cases did so and they were not necessarily safer if they did (Ford & Regoli, 1993).

Another difficulty in evaluating individual components of a coordinated community response is that the carrying out of one component may not lead to the expected outcomes in other parts of the system. For example, the effect of conviction may be diminished by the failure to enforce the requirement of counseling program attendance. Given the high rates of attrition in batterer programs, it cannot be assumed that ordering treatment as a condition of probation means that it was received. In a review of studies of treatment compliance, Hamberger and Hastings (1993) conclude that “not all mandating systems are alike in their effectiveness to compel wife assaulters to seek treatment” and they also differ “in the consistency with which no-shows are actively penalized for failing to comply with orders to attend treatment” (p. 193).

Batterer programs have also been studied largely in isolation from other components of a coordinated community response. A recent report from the National Institute of Justice (Healey, Smith & O’Sullivan, 1998) on batter intervention identified the “need for a broader systemic examination of the efficacy of batterer intervention” (p. 10). The report found that evaluations of batterers programs were largely inconclusive because of methodological problems. Most studies considered methodologically sound found modest, but statistically significant reductions in recidivism (Healey et al., 1998).

Efforts to evaluate components of a coordinated community response have also been hampered by the failure to adequately carry out and enforce protective measures. For example, restraining orders (sometimes called orders for protection) have not been found highly effective in protecting women from further abuse and they are often not enforced by the criminal justice system (Grau, Fagan, & Wexler, 1985; Harrell & Smith, 1996). Klein (1996)

reported that men who had restraining orders issued against them frequently had extensive criminal histories, suggesting the need to coordinate intervention with the criminal justice system.

Advocacy programs for battered women are an integral part of a coordinated community response, but there has been little formal evaluation of them. In one experimental study, Sullivan and Bybee (in press) found that women who worked with advocates experienced less violence and reported higher quality of life and social support than those that did not. Another study found that women victims of domestic violence experienced significant improvements in social and emotional functioning and significantly less physical and nonphysical abuse by their partners after participating in support groups (Tutty, Bidgood & Rothery, 1993). Services in the form of shelter, support, education, and legal advocacy may be crucial in determining the success of other community efforts to address domestic violence.

### **Evaluating the Overall Response**

System-wide evaluations are necessary to understand the impact of different components of a coordinated community response, and the effectiveness of the overall response. A variety of sources of data may be used to measure the effectiveness of the overall response: criminal justice statistics; interviews with victims; observations of the intervention provided; interviews with practitioners; and the administration of standardized tests. Evaluating the overall response can be difficult because of the many agencies involved, inconsistency in the systems’ responses, and a wide variety of methodological problems. Given these difficulties few studies have been undertaken, although some have shown promising results.

### ***Community Intervention Projects***

It has been shown that CIPs increase rates of criminal justice intervention in domestic violence cases. Gamache, Edleson, and Schock (1988) compared three community intervention projects and found significant increases in arrests, successful

prosecutions, and the numbers of men court ordered to counseling after the projects were initiated in each of the three communities. These increases mirror what was found in the Duluth community after a community intervention project was initiated (Pence, 1985).

In a study that examined the effect of a CIP, Syers and Edleson (1992) collected case information immediately after arrest, six and twelve months later. Data were collected from interviews with women, police incident reports, and advocacy records. The least repeat violence was found among men who were arrested and ordered to treatment, followed by men who were arrested but not ordered to treatment, with the highest amount of violence among men who were not arrested.

In another study of a CIP, batterer characteristics and some aspects of intervention were examined to determine their relationship to recidivism over five years (Shepard, 1992). No combination of the interventions studied (i.e., jail time, civil or criminal court intervention, completion of the men's program, number of sessions attended) determined whether a man was identified as a recidivist. Men who had been abusive for a shorter duration before the program, court ordered to have a chemical dependency evaluation, treated for chemical dependency, abused as children, and previously convicted for non-assault crimes were more likely to be recidivists. This study suggests that batterer characteristics were more important than the types of intervention provided in determining recidivism. However, the impact of coordination itself was not examined because all of the men in the sample lived in a community that had a coordinated community response.

### ***Criminal Justice System-Based Reform Projects***

Tolman and Weisz (1995) examined recidivism rates in a county that had adopted a domestic violence protocol that included a pro-arrest policy, proactive prosecution, victim advocacy, and sentencing disposition guidelines that included mandated batterer treatment. They found that arrest significantly deterred subsequent domestic violence

incidents. The deterrent effect for arrest was maintained over an 18-month follow-up period. Offenders who had been previously arrested and who had previous police contact without arrest were more likely to be arrested again during the follow-up period. Recidivism rates for cases that were successfully prosecuted were lower than those that were not prosecuted, but the differences were not statistically significant.

A recent study by Babcock and Steiner (1998) examined the effects of batter treatment and incarceration on recidivism in a community that had a coordinated community response. Batterers who completed treatment were compared to those who dropped out and to those who were incarcerated and did not receive treatment. Batterers who were jailed without treatment were more likely to reoffend than both treatment completers and those that dropped out. The number of sessions attended was related to a reduction in further arrests for domestic violence.

### ***Coordinating Councils***

In a study of recidivism rates in a community that used monthly Domestic Violence Coalition meetings to coordinate intervention, a pre-intervention period (prior to a coordinated response) was compared to an intervention period (when a coordinated response was being used). Arrests by police prior to a coordinated response led to more abuse, but served as a deterrent after a coordinated response was initiated.

Clark et al. (1996) conducted a qualitative study of six communities that used coordinating councils (Baltimore, Maryland; Kansas City, Missouri; Carlton and Northern St. Louis Counties in Minnesota; San Diego, California; and San Francisco, California). In each community the process of changing the response to domestic violence had taken place over a long period of time. Key events that drew attention to deficiencies in the system, leadership from different sources, the activities of coordinating councils, the involvements of advocates in promoting change, and a shift in awareness and attitudes were identified as important elements in

creating and maintaining change. It was noted that none of the communities in the study had information systems in place that would allow for an extensive quantitative analysis of coordination efforts, although several were working on new data systems.

## Summary

Reform efforts have been successful in heightening the response of the criminal justice system. While the successes of individual components of a coordinated response have been modest, there is evidence that combining these approaches in a coordinated approach reduces future incidents of violence. Preliminary studies suggest that coordinated responses are not as effective with offenders who have had previous involvement with the criminal justice system.

Further study is needed to compare mechanisms for coordination in terms of their effectiveness in different types of communities. Process evaluation can assist in determining what components make for an effective response (e.g., regular meetings, active involvement, strong leadership). Communities must develop information systems that will better allow them to monitor and evaluate the system-wide response to domestic violence. The impact of advocacy and victim services within a coordinated community response should receive greater attention in future studies.

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***In Brief:***  
**Evaluating Coordinated Community Responses  
to Domestic Violence**

A coordinated community response involves police, prosecutors, probation officers, battered women's advocates, counselors, and judges in developing and implementing policies and procedures that improve interagency coordination and lead to more uniform responses to domestic violence cases.

**Components of a Coordinated Response**

- pro-arrest or mandatory arrest policies
- advocacy for victims
- aggressive and prompt prosecution
- monitoring individual cases
- batterer rehabilitation programs
- strengthening civil protection
- system-wide monitoring

In general, studies that have examined the impact of individual components of a coordinated response have been inconclusive, leading some researchers to call for more study of the combined effects of community interventions (Jaffe, Hastings, Reitzel, & Austin, 1993; Tolman & Weisz, 1995).

**Mechanisms for Coordination**

***Community Intervention Projects*** (CIP) are advocacy organizations that focus on reforming, improving, and coordinating institutional responses to domestic violence within a community.

- CIPs increase rates of arrests, convictions, and court ordered treatment in communities where they have begun (Pence, 1985; Gamache, Edleson, & Schock, 1988).
- One study found that the least repeat violence was among men who were arrested and ordered to treatment, followed by men who were arrested but not ordered to treatment, with the highest amount of violence among men who were not arrested (Syers & Edleson, 1992).
- Batterer characteristics may be as important as the combination of interventions provided in determining recidivism. In a study of recidivism over five years, no combination of the interventions studied (i. e., jail time, civil or criminal court intervention, completion of the men's program, number of sessions attended) determined whether a man was identified as a recidivist. Chemical dependency history, history of abuse, and previous criminal justice involvement did predict recidivism (Shepard, 1992).



***Criminal Justice System-Based Reform Projects*** provide leadership within the criminal justice system to coordinate the response. Innovative programs that focus on integrated case management are often located within prosecutors' offices, although they may be initiated by probation or the judiciary.

- Use of a domestic violence protocol within the criminal justice system significantly deterred subsequent domestic violence incidents, which was maintained over an 18-month follow-up period. Offenders who had previous contact with police were more likely to be arrested again during the follow-up period. Recidivism rates for cases that were successfully prosecuted were lower than those that were not, but the differences were not statistically significant (Tolman & Weisz, 1995)
- A recent study compared batterers who completed treatment to those who dropped out and to those who were incarcerated and did not receive treatment. Batterers who were jailed without treatment were more likely to reoffend than both treatment completers and those that dropped out. The number of sessions attended was related to a reduction in further arrests for domestic violence (Babcock & Steiner, 1998).

***Coordinating councils*** at the state and local levels provide a forum for interagency communication and collaboration.

- In one study a pre-intervention period (prior to a coordinated response) was compared to an intervention period (when a coordinating council was being used). Arrests by police before a coordinated response led to more abuse, but served as a deterrent after a coordinated response was initiated. There were some situations where a coordinated response was not found effective, such as when the offender had a criminal record (Steinman, 1990).
- A qualitative study of six communities that used coordinating councils found that the process of changing the response to domestic violence had taken place over a long period. Key events that drew attention to deficiencies in the system, leadership from different sources, the activities of coordinating councils, the involvements of advocates in promoting change, and a shift in awareness and attitudes were identified as important elements in creating and maintaining change (Clark, Burt, Schulte & Maguire, 1996).

## Summary

Reform efforts have been successful in heightening the response of the criminal justice system. While the successes of individual components of a coordinated response have been modest, there is evidence that combining these approaches in a coordinated approach reduces future incidences of violence. Preliminary studies suggest that coordinated responses are not as effective with offenders who have had previous involvement with the criminal justice system.