



# How Dangerous Are Domestic Violence Calls to Officer Safety?

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Domestic violence (DV) calls carry a reputation for being extremely dangerous for officers. Some academics and DV victim advocates, however, have challenged this reputation and have suggested that DV calls are rarely dangerous for officers. **This research brief will examine the research on assaults on officers at DV calls.** Specifically, it will examine the **prevalence of officer assaults, the trend of officer deaths at DV calls over time, what factors predict these officer assaults, the characteristics of lethal force assaults on officers at DV calls, and the factors that predict an officer surviving a lethal force assault at a DV call.**

## Prevalence of Danger

In a 1970 U.S. Department of Justice report on family crisis intervention, the authors wrote that DV calls were the “most dangerous calls handled by the police.”<sup>1</sup> They came to this conclusion after examining FBI Uniform Crime Reports data on officers killed in the line of duty while handling disturbance calls, not realizing this category also included gang fights, bar fights, neighbor disputes, suspicious persons, and a host of other potentially volatile situations. Once DV calls started being classified separately by the FBI in 1980, it was discovered that only 22% of the officer deaths from disturbances actually involved a DV situation.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, eleven research studies examined the true prevalence of physical assaults (not just murders) of officers at DV calls. These studies revealed two main facts. First, the frequency of officer assaults at DV calls varied dramatically from community to community, ranging from 2% to 28% of DV calls resulting in an officer’s assault. The average across the eleven jurisdictions of these studies was 9% of DV calls resulted in an officer’s assault.<sup>3</sup> Second, in every one of these eleven studies, DV calls were not the most dangerous duty officers performed, especially after controlling for rate of exposure (i.e., number of assaults per calls handled). In every community studied, other types of duties – serving warrants, transporting prisoners, bar fights – resulted in far more officer assaults per call handled.<sup>4</sup>

**While handling DV calls was not the most dangerous activity officers performed, DV calls clearly posed some danger to officers.** Using FBI statistics, one study estimated that between 1980 and 2006 a total of 113,236 officer assaults occurred at DV calls in the U.S., and 160 officers died as a result of these assaults.<sup>5</sup> This suggests **an average of 4,194 officer assaults (and 6 officer murders) annually from DV calls.** Assaults at DV calls are also very likely to result in an officer injury. Four studies examined officer assaults at DV calls and revealed **46% of officers assaulted at DV calls received an injury requiring medical treatment.**<sup>6</sup> In other words, while DV calls may not be the most dangerous duty that officers face, it is inaccurate to say these calls are by any means safe—and it is therefore vitally important to work to understand the factors that increase risks to officers.

### **Predicting Assaults at DV Calls**

A 2011 study examined 3,078 DV calls handled by the Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Miami-Dade police departments. Of these calls, 117 calls (3.8%) resulted in an officer assault. That was an average of an officer assault incident for every 26 DV calls handled. A number of characteristics about the batterer and the DV situation were examined and five characteristics were found to predict whether or not an officer assault occurred.<sup>7</sup>

**If the batterer was unemployed, had damaged property in the incident, shared a residence with the DV victim, was drunk, and displayed a hostile demeanor toward the officers when they arrived, there was a 1 in 4 chance that the DV batterer would assault the officers. The more of these characteristics that were present at the call, the more likely an officer assault was to occur.** In situations where none of these characteristics were present (i.e., batterer was employed, sober, lived apart from victim, had not damaged property, and did not display a hostile demeanor with officers), the odds of attacking the officers was less than 1 in 2,000.<sup>8</sup>

### **Lethal Force Assaults on Officers**

**Another study in 2008 examined firearms assaults against officers at DV calls to determine the characteristics of these calls, and what could increase chances of survival. Examining a national sample of 143 officer-involved shootings at DV calls revealed that firearms assaults at DV calls differed from other types of officer-involved shooting incidents.** According to FBI data, the “typical” firearms assault against a law enforcement officer most often involves a younger male assailant (usually age 15 to 35) with a lengthy criminal record. The assailant generally uses a handgun and most often opens fire at the point of arrest or bodily search. In most of the shooting incidents, the officer and assailant were less than 15 feet from each other when the shootout began.<sup>9</sup>

Firearms assaults on officers at DV calls, on the other hand, have different characteristics. **DV shootouts are more likely to involve an older male assailant (in his 30s, 40s, or older) with or without a prior criminal record and armed with a rifle or shotgun. Half of these firearms assaults at DV calls occurred very shortly after the officers’ arrival, with the assailant firing from the front door of the residence or laying in ambush at some outside location. In the majority of these firearms assaults, the officers had not yet entered the residence or made contact with the batterer when the batterer opened fire. Half of these shootings began at a distance of greater than 50 feet.**<sup>10</sup>

**When examining what factors were associated with officers surviving the incident, the strongest predictors were wearing body armor, distance between to the shooter, cover and concealment, and returning fire.** Of the 225 officers fired upon in this study, 14% were killed, 43% received bullet wounds and survived, while the remaining 43% of officers survived without serious injury.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

In summary, the research on officer assaults at DV calls reveals a paradox. While DV calls are not the most dangerous duty officers perform, and the majority of such calls do not result in an assault on officers, about 5%-10% of such calls do. The likelihood of an officer assault is greatest when the batterer is unemployed, intoxicated, resides with the DV victim, has just damaged property, and displays a hostile demeanor when officers arrive. An assault on officers is least likely (but not impossible) when all of these elements are absent. If an assault on officers does occur, officers involved have about a 50/50 chance of sustaining an injury requiring medical treatment. If the assault involves a firearm, it is most likely to occur as the officers first approach the scene or shortly after their arrival. The assailant is likely to be laying in ambush inside or outside the residence, utilize a long gun (rifle or shotgun), and open fire from many feet away. Officers have a 50/50 chance of being hit by the assailant's gunfire but are most likely to survive the encounter if they wear body armor, maintain distance from the shooter, utilize cover and concealment, and return controlled, accurate fire.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Bard, M. (1970). *Training Police as Specialists in Family Crisis Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2008). Assessing the true dangerousness of domestic violence calls. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 8(5), 19-29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2011). Predicting officer physical assaults at domestic violence calls. *Journal of Family Violence*, 26, 163-169.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2008). Officer firearm assaults at domestic violence calls: a descriptive analysis. *Police Journal: Theory, Practice, and Principles*, 81(1), 25-45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2007). Surviving firearm assaults at domestic violence calls. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 7(6), 155-167.