



Why Domestic Violence Victim Advocates Recommend Services They Know Don't Work

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Domestic violence affects one in three women and one in four men in the United States over the course of their life. Since the 1960s and 70s when activists began drawing attention to domestic violence, the number of support services available to victims has increased tremendously. Before these advocacy efforts, police often ignored victims' reports of violence, or blamed survivors for their own victimization. This inattention still, on occasion, continues. However, with rising awareness about domestic violence came greater alignment between the rates of arrest and prosecution and the rate of domestic violence crimes. Increasingly, advocates even team up with law enforcement officers to respond to domestic violence 9-1-1 calls.

Criminal-legal interventions, like arrest, incarceration, and restraining orders are now common means for addressing domestic violence. However, research shows that these interventions are often ineffective. Arrest does little to deter future violence, and a home visit from a police officer and victim advocate can even increase violence. Still, though, volunteer advocates talking with survivors are likely to encourage them to pursue these criminal-legal options over promising alternatives like social network building or counseling. My research explores why advocates recommend interventions they know are ineffective and what might be done to address this problem.

A New Study on the Stickiness of Ineffective Interventions

I spent over two years observing volunteer trainings, meetings, and social events in an anti-gender-based violence organization to understand why advocates recommend interventions they know to be ineffective. The organization, which I will call the Center for Healthy Futures, provides crisis counseling, legal support, and case management for victims of gender-based violence. Several aspects of the Center for Healthy Futures work make advocates more likely to rely on criminal-legal interventions.

Nonprofit professionals spend more time talking about criminal-legal interventions than alternatives.

Like similar organizations, the Center relies on volunteers to provide many of its services. Volunteers undergo a rigorous training program, which includes presentations both from the Center's staff and from representatives of partner agencies. While some of these trainings provide basic information on gender-based violence (roots of violence, common features, rates across gender and race, etc.), most focus on specific interventions. These sessions teach volunteers specific skills to use when working with victims of violence. Out of the 17 sessions providing specific skills, 13 relate explicitly to criminal-legal interventions. For example, volunteers learn how to fill out restraining orders, how criminal cases move through the courts, and how law enforcement gather evidence. Because volunteers are primarily presented with information on criminal-legal interventions, I argue they may feel better able to recommend criminal-legal interventions when working with victims.

Staff rely on extreme examples of violence rather than more typical cases. Although domestic violence stemming from extreme power imbalances and resulting in severe physical injury does occur, it is not the norm. Despite its relative infrequency, advocates learn primarily about this type of violence, called “domestic terrorism.” When staff describe what domestic violence looks like to volunteers, they often turn to illustrative examples of domestic terrorism, rather than examples of more typical instances of violence, called “situational partner violence.”

Domestic terrorism, which occurs in relationships marked by ongoing and patterned abuses of power and control, requires different interventions than situational partner violence. Because advocates are not taught to identify multiple types of violence, responses to domestic terrorism can be overapplied to all types of violence.

Staff defuse tensions between volunteers and law enforcement officers. Many volunteers enter the organization with critiques of law enforcement. Volunteers worry that law enforcement will further traumatize victims of violence, that they will fail to prosecute or only prosecute along racially-biased lines, or that they will refuse to connect victims with resources. Staff members validate volunteers’ concerns, agreeing that working with the police is sometimes challenging. However, despite this validation, staff discourage volunteers from confronting law enforcement. When worried about a police officer’s behavior, volunteers are encouraged to confide in a staff member who will handle the situation tactfully, thereby preserving the organization’s partnership with the police. This protocol makes possible volunteers’ ongoing relationships with law enforcement officers. Critiques, sometimes linked to the ineffectiveness of criminal-legal interventions, do not lead to changes in response strategies.

Take-Aways for Policymakers and Private Funders

Criminal-legal interventions will remain part of the toolbox for addressing gender-based violence. Many victims find comfort in criminal-legal interventions, and will continue pursuing restraining orders, arrest, and incarceration (just as the founding members of the battered women’s movement did). Other tools, though, must also be incorporated. Barriers to victims’ exit from abusive relationships must be dismantled – lack of economic opportunity, gaps in social support. Just as criminal-legal interventions are institutionalized in trainings and funding structures, building social support and economic justice, too, could be required components of organizations’ suite of interventions.

Take-Aways for Nonprofit Professionals

While many changes must happen at a structural level, requiring action from policymakers and philanthropic leaders, nonprofit professionals advocating for victims on the ground, too, can make changes. When training new advocates, professionals should emphasize the diversity of abuse. Rather than focusing primarily on domestic terrorism, professionals should discuss more typical cases of situational partner violence and their associated interventions. Extreme examples add a Law & Order intrigue to the work and may encourage volunteer commitment, as one respondent in my study suggested, but ultimately hinder advocates’ capacity to serve a wide range of victims. Instead, professionals should share their experiences working with victims of situational partner violence. Already, professionals help victims secure employment and rebuild relationships with family and friends. Discussing these alternative interventions with volunteers will expand their toolbox for working with survivors.

Read more in Benjamin R. *Weiss*, "'Who Can We Tell Survivors to Call?' The Institutionalization of Criminal-Legal Interventions in a Domestic Violence Organization," *Social Problems* (2019).