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Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survivors Should Feel Safe Seeking Police Help, Not Shame, Hostility, or Indifference



By Sandra Park, Senior Staff Attorney, ACLU Women's Rights Project

OCTOBER 27, 2015 | 4:45 PM



Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Tony Webster

Imagine that you were just assaulted and needed emergency assistance from

the police. But instead of responding with care and concern, the police reacted with hostility, shamed you for seeking help, and expressed disinterest in your safety or in investigating your case. This is too often the reality for the too many victims of sexual assault and domestic violence every year in the United States.

When discriminatory attitudes negatively affect the response that survivors receive from police, most survivors stop reaching out to the police for help altogether.

A new report by the ACLU and scholars from the University of Miami School of Law and CUNY School of Law exposes the widespread discrimination that survivors of these crimes face when dealing with law enforcement. We surveyed over 900 advocates, service providers, and attorneys who work with survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence from across the country about their concerns regarding policing and recommendations for improvement. *Responses from the Field: Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, and Policing* describes what they shared with us. This month, we presented our findings at the White House Domestic Violence Awareness Month Roundtable.

Advocates identified police inaction, hostility, and bias against survivors as a key barrier to seeking criminal justice intervention. Eighty-eight percent said that police sometimes or often do not believe victims or blame victims for the violence. Survivors also commonly experienced bias based on gender, race, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, and other identity characteristics. Many of these concerns are magnified within communities that are already entrenched in problematic policing practices. Over 80 percent of respondents believed that police relations with marginalized communities influenced survivors' willingness to call the police.

Police involvement can also trigger collateral consequences that make survivors think twice about reaching out for help. Nearly 90 percent of survey respondents said that contact with the police sometimes or often

resulted in involvement of child protective services, threatening survivors with loss of custody of their children. Other negative consequences named by respondents include initiation of immigration proceedings and loss of housing, employment, or welfare benefits. Some reported that victims themselves face arrest when reaching out to the police, particularly if they have a criminal record.

In addition, advocates said that many survivors' goals do not align with those of the criminal justice system or how it operates. Some survivors were looking for options other than punishment for the abuser, while others feared that once they were involved with the criminal justice system, they would lose control over the process. Still others were reluctant to engage the system because they believed that it was complicated, lengthy, and trauma-inducing.

In spite of these challenges, community meetings between social service providers, police, and prosecutors were reported to be helpful in addressing the needs of survivors. However, 72 percent did not know whether civilian complaint boards or other types of independent, community-based police oversight mechanisms exist in their communities. The majority were unaware of the Department of Justice's ability to investigate gender-biased policing.

Advocates recommended improvements in police training, supervision, and hiring of more women and people of color. Changes in police culture must include prioritizing domestic violence and sexual assault cases and greater partnerships between police and community-based organizations that provide support to survivors.

The ACLU and over 170 national and local organizations have urged Attorney General Loretta Lynch to provide guidance from the Department of Justice that would show how police departments can work with communities to end biased policing that strips victims of their civil rights.

The only way to ensure equal protection for survivors of domestic and

sexual violence is to institute more robust accountability for law enforcement and the child protection, immigration, and other systems that render people more vulnerable to violence.

TAGS: Violence Against Women, Women's Rights

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HawkAtreides

On top of everything already said here, sometimes the police manage to combine victim blaming with racist attitudes against the *perpetrator*. An acquaintance of mine reported an assault by her ex-boyfriend, only to be told "stop dating spics and this won't happen" when she described him to the officer. Despite having his home and work address, the make and model of his vehicle, and photo evidence of her injuries, no arrest was made and no charges were ever filed against him. Guess being a member of a race the officer believed to be inherently violent meant he wasn't responsible.

REPLY | OCTOBER 28, 2015 | 3:58 AM

Anonymous

Good grief. That is so terrible for such a multitude of reasons.

OCTOBER 28, 2015 | 9:23 PM

Manny

When my Ex-Mother-In-Law was beaten by her deceased Husband at the time, we tried to file a Police report with the San Antonio Police. The whole time the officer rolled his eyes, and could care less about what happened. A week later she was put in to the hospital by that Monster. I have SEEN first hand how Police Officers treat Women subjected to violence, and it sickened me to no end! Then when I tried to file a restraining order on her behalf

against that Monster, I got nothing by the run around and a "Sorry we cannot help you if she is not here with you". And this was AFTER I had explained over and over again that she was in the Hospital with serious head injuries due to the attack. This Country can care less about Women, and EVEN LESS when they are a Minority. The Police are a joke, and do nothing to protect Minorities and Women. Ever since then, I refuse to seek help or interact with the Police. I pay taxes for a reason, and it was awesome to see my Money simply go to waste.

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 12:12 PM

Anonymous

LE hired today are of the same ilk as the abusers. They have become the new 'good ole boys', laughing and making jokes about the abuse happened in front of me, in my home! I was told to leave my children and go elsewhere if I were so scared. They refused to take my statement or press charges. The lone female; stood in front of me facing the others and passed me a folded 'note' from behind her back....it was a rape hotline. I called. I got tips. I got out. I know what the true nature of LE is today.

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 2:37 PM

Anonymous

I am a survivor of Officer Involved Domestic Violence. The fact is you have a 2 out of 5 chance of a officer responding to your DV call is a abuser themselves. Even with the Chief of Police model policy on OIDV they refuse to follow it. The lasting affects of OIDV posions civilian cases, it keeps abusers on the force. This leads to everything from civilian DV cases falling through the cracks, brutality and at it's worse as in the Freddie Gray case death. One of the officers involved in his case was twice accused of DV....for a one stop book on OIDV read Police Wife by Susanna Hope and Alex Roslin. Ten years in the making. Based on every reashed study and high profile cases. This book could be a class based on the full scope of cross references. OIDV victims/survivors are the silent suffering group who deserve better. OIDV is the silent epidemic plaguing departments across this country and around the world

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 3:11 PM

Patty OConnell

My daughter didnt survive, two women heard her scream for help, a gunshot, a second scream for help, a gunshot...her boyfriend said she killed herself. A bloody teeshirt, with bullethole thrown in trash??? By SJSO, her boyfriend was Deputy Jeremy Banks, badge 3504..

Michelle Oconnell asked for help, i heard her ask her brother badge 3550 for help, do you have any marks, any bruises? He didnt help her, code of silence...please help..

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 3:47 PM

Anonymous

I needed help and they treated me badly too. They even let my perpetrator hurt me again, and they interfered with the process to get me in front of a judge! I am sorry your family member didn't make it. I got out, but it cost me all I had... only to come to Gainesville to find out it's no better. The whole area is corrupted with this.

NOVEMBER 1, 2015 | 8:31 AM

Anonymous

The DOJ responded to my letter a year later with the Domestic Violence Hotline number. I even addressed my letter to the DOJ violence against women branch. Not impressed with their lack of action in my OIDV case. The DOJ refuses to make departments enforce the standards written for handling officer involved domestic violence. What hope do we have when the DOJ doesn't care about our lives? Just another government agency stealing our tax dollars

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 4:47 PM

Anonymous

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A AN EPIDEMIC THAT CAN NO LONGER BE TOLERATED. MY DAUGHTER WAS KILLED BY HER SPOUSE 07/17/14 . I AM DOING WHAT I CAN TO RAISE AWARENESS BUT IT TAKES MORE THAN JUST ME I THINK EVERYONE THAT HAS A INTEREST IN THIS

SHOULD TEAM UP WITH ME AND LETS BRING THIS TO CONGRESS! THIS CAN NO LONGER BE SWEPT UNDER THE RUG.

REPLY | OCTOBER 29, 2015 | 7:06 PM

Anonymous

How I could team up with you?

The first step is to get all of us together and address this issue to nij.gov
(look for victims/victimization)

OCTOBER 31, 2015 | 3:15 PM

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