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FINAL REPORT SUMMARY

AN EVALUATION OF VICTIM ADVOCACY WITHIN A

TEAM APPROACH

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FINAL REPORT

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SUMMARY

Responding to the scarcity of published research about advocacy services for battered women, this study evaluates advocacy services offered to battered women in the city of Detroit. Our study focuses primarily on advocacy services but also investigates other aspects of coordinated community responses to domestic violence. We chose to focus on advocacy partly because the project was initiated when a police department supervisor asked, "How do we know that the advocates are doing any good?" We also chose this focus because of the scarcity of published evaluations of advocacy for battered women, especially for women of color. We defined advocacy as those services provided to support victims during the legal process or to enhance their safety. Advocates employed by the police department and prosecutors' office provided most of the advocacy we studied.

The evaluation used official records to address questions that were important to criminal justice personnel. It investigated whether advocacy at the precinct and/or prosecutor's level is associated with: a higher rate of completed prosecution of batterers, a higher rate of guilty findings against batterers (or pleas of guilty); or decreased rates of subsequent violence. It also addresses victims' assessment of safety and their views on how well the criminal justice process met their needs.

Our findings suggest that for battered women in Detroit, who are often grappling with economic problems, neighborhood crime, and the long-term effects of racism, the domestic violence teams and advocacy that the community offered were just beginning steps in helping them. Women seemed to appreciate it when criminal justice personnel and advocates responded seriously and sympathetically to incidents of violence. However, these services were not intensive enough to substantially increase victims' the participation in the prosecution of

batterers. Most interviewees reported that criminal justice intervention did not increase their safety.

Research Methodology

Our project was a quasi-experimental comparison of cases originating in precincts with and without special police domestic violence teams that include advocates. We also examined the effectiveness of advocacy associated with the prosecutor's office. Our project included telephone interviews with victims, which enabled us to gather data about victims' perceptions of services and their help-seeking patterns. Since we conducted our study in Detroit, it yields new information about African American battered women. In addition to outcome evaluation, we also conducted process evaluation, which documented who was involved, what processes were established to deliver the intervention, what problems or issues arose during implementation, how problems were resolved or interventions were adjusted, and how implementers assessed the process.

The domestic violence teams we studied included specially trained police officers, police department advocates, legal advocates, and in one precinct, an on-site prosecutor. The three types of advocates we studied assisted victims by offering information about the legal system, referrals, and safety planning. Police precinct advocates, employed by the Detroit Police Department, worked with victims who walked into the precincts, and they did outreach by calling domestic violence victims for whom police reports were filed. The precinct legal advocates, employed by local domestic violence programs, worked in two precincts and focused primarily on helping women obtain protective orders (PPOs). They did not do telephone outreach. The county prosecutor's office employed advocates to work with victims coming in

for warrant interviews with prosecutors and provided support to victims at court during prosecution.

We gathered a random sample of police incident reports (PCRs) from three precincts with domestic violence teams. We selected two comparison precincts that were not served by domestic violence teams but closely resembled the precincts with teams. We gathered 563 incident reports from precincts with on-site advocates and 494 from precincts without on-site advocates for a total of 1,057.

A team of trained, experienced, female African American interviewers administered three questionnaires that we developed. We completed 242 initial interviews from the PCR sample, which yields a response rate of 22.8%. Six months later, we completed 63 follow-up interviews of women who were interviewed initially. The survey instruments inquired in detail about the police, advocates, and prosecution services that victims received related to the focal incident, previous incidents of violence between the respondent and the man who abused her during the focal incident, and why victims felt services were helpful or not.

As a measure of recidivism, we continued to collect PCRs from the intervention and comparison precincts for six months after the intake of our last focal PCR. We were unable to gain access to advocates' records about contacts they had with victims, so we devised a "contact form" for advocates to fill out after contact with a victim. However, advocates did not consistently fill out these forms in spite of our active efforts to facilitate collaboration. We conducted a computer search about the outcomes of the cases stemming from the focal PCRs.

Findings

African Americans were by far the largest percent of the victims (96%) named on the focal incident police reports. Only a small proportion of the sample was currently or formerly

married. We coded the majority of initial and subsequent police reports as severe physical or sexual violence. There were 120 (11.3% of the sample) women involved as victims on one or more subsequent PCRs.

There were 242 initial telephone interviews, 23% of the victims identified in the police report sample. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents were African American. The majority of the respondents were employed, but their annual household income was low, with only 14.1% having an income of more than \$30,000 per year. Only 24% of the respondents were married.

Women who were interviewed were significantly less likely than non-interviewed women to report experiencing severe physical violence during the focal incident or to be living with partners. Interviewees were significantly more likely to be African American and to have a child in common relationship with the perpetrator than non-interviewees were.

Because advocates substantially underreported their services on the contact sheets, we combined interviewees' and advocates' reports of advocacy services to develop the best proximal count. Twenty four percent of the women received some type of advocacy, and 4% had contact with at least two types of advocates. Women who received any advocacy were more likely to have focal police reports that reported severe physical abuse, and African American women were more likely to receive advocacy than European American women were. Women who were currently married were significantly less likely to see an advocate.

All three types of advocates gave women information about PPOs, but follow-up rates were low. The initial interviews suggest that precinct and prosecutor's advocates did not help all women plan for their safety even when they experienced severe physical violence during the focal incident. Advocates made referrals for other services to 29 women, and 8 women (27.5%), followed up on referrals.

According to the police reports, arrests occurred in 313 cases (29%), and a warrant was issued in 148 cases. The rate of issuing warrants and the proportion of arrests resulting in warrants did not differ significantly between precincts with and without domestic violence teams. Receiving advocacy, especially prosecutor's office advocacy, was associated with issuing a warrant

One hundred and thirty-five of the initial interviewees (64.9%) said they thought it was a good idea for the prosecutor to press charges against their partner. The most common reasons for favoring prosecution were that his behavior was illegal and not acceptable and that abusers should not violate or touch women. The most common reasons for opposing prosecution were that she believed the incident was not serious or that this was the first time he was violent.

There were 102 perpetrators charged with misdemeanors (9.6% of total sample) and 46 charged with felonies (4.4%). Forty six percent of the total resolved prosecutions resulted in a guilty plea or finding. There were no associations between a guilty verdict or plea and cases coming from precincts with domestic violence teams or victims having received advocacy.

Forty-nine cases, 41% of the total completed cases, were dismissed. Thirty five of the dismissed cases (29% of the resolved cases) were noted as "witness failed to appear". There was no association between receiving advocacy and the reasons why cases were dismissed. There were no significant associations between guilty findings, reasons for dismissal, and a woman's positive response towards prosecution in the first interview.

Since almost all of the subsequent incidents were severe physical violence or sexual assault, we used whether there were any subsequent police reports as the outcome variable in analyses of recidivism. There was no relationship between whether victims came from precincts

with or without domestic violence teams or received advocacy and whether there was a subsequent police report.

Between 60% and 100% of interviewees rated all types of advocates as very helpful or somewhat helpful. The most common reasons why women rated advocates as helpful were that they received information, were emotionally supported, and believed advocates actively did something to help. Women who gave advocates low helpfulness ratings described them as not doing enough, unavailable, unsympathetic, or not giving enough information.

According to the interviewees, police officers from domestic violence team precincts and comparison precincts did not differ significantly in their responses to the focal incidents, and interviewees reported high levels of satisfaction with police from all precincts. The most common reasons for satisfaction were that the police “did their job”, stopped the violence, or removed the abuser. Women who were not very satisfied with the police most commonly believed that the officers did not do enough to help them or did not come fast enough.

A substantial number of respondents reported that the criminal justice system did not decrease abuse, help the respondent leave her partner, keep the abuser away from her, or give her information or referrals. The most common ways the criminal justice system did help were to decrease abuse and help the respondent leave her partner. Satisfaction with the criminal justice system at the second interview was not associated with whether the victim received advocacy, but it was associated with issuance of a warrant.

Discussion

Because we focused on women named as victims in police reports, the sample differed from many studies of women in shelters or of partners of men charged with domestic violence.

The sample also differs from many others because the vast majority of the victims were African American, and most of the couples were never married and did not live together.

Our somewhat low interview response rate may have occurred because many women in Detroit do not have telephones, move often, and sometimes give police false telephone numbers. We could not pay victims for interviews, because our prosecutor was concerned that abusers' attorneys might use payments to undermine prosecution. However, our sample's demographics suggest that telephone interviews, if carefully and sensitively done, represent a promising method of gaining the views of battered women who are underrepresented in research.

One view of our finding that a number of women had contact with more than one type of advocate is that it represents overlap and lack of coordination of services. Another view is that it may be a good outcome when victims see more than one kind of advocate, because some advocates have specialized knowledge, and a woman in crisis might not absorb information the first time she hears it.

Since women who received advocacy were more likely to experience severe violence during the focal incident than women who did not, advocates might have been effective in their outreach to women who needed their services the most. It also might mean that women who experienced the most severe violence were more anxious for help. A possible reason why African American women were more likely to receive advocacy than European American women is that European American battered women in Detroit have more resources and do not have to rely on advocacy for help. Women who were currently married were less likely to receive advocacy than unmarried women, possibly because they were afraid to talk to advocates or had a stronger investment in maintaining the marriage without seeking help from the criminal justice system.

Safety planning is supposed to be a large portion of advocates' jobs, but many interviewees did not remember advocates helping them with it. Only a few women said that they did not need help with safety planning. This is a serious gap in services, since advocates might possess effective safety planning ideas that were new to many of the victims.

Interviewees reported low rates of follow-up on advocates' referrals for PPOs, and other services. Women might not have believed that advocates' referrals would meet their needs, or they might have been afraid to contact the resources provided. Practical burdens, like childcare and financial difficulties, might lead to a lack of follow-up on referrals. It is important to educate advocates to provide more than a telephone number if they expect women who are not experienced in using social services to follow-up on referrals.

Our research suggests that further training of officers or increased advocacy for victims is needed if domestic violence units want to increase the number of prosecutions. Officers might be trained to increase their rapport with victims or to discuss more thoroughly the importance of appearing for a warrant interview. If advocates are able to successfully engage victims very soon after the incident and provide meaningful safety options, they might encourage victims to appear for warrant interviews.

Interpreting the lack of association between advocacy and recidivism is a complex task. Women who receive advocacy may call the police more, because advocacy increases their trust in the legal system. Since there was no association between arrests, warrants, or PPOs and whether there were any subsequent police reports, the social class and usually unmarried status of the abusers might have contributed to a sense that they had little to lose if the legal system intervened.

Victims in all three interviews groups reported a high level of satisfaction with advocacy, which suggests that victims may interpret the provision of advocacy as a sign that the legal system is concerned about them. After a history of being overlooked or mistreated by the criminal justice system, African American women may be grateful for any legal advocacy that is both accessible and culturally sensitive.

The process evaluation yielded several recommendations. One idea is to establish a common information system to pass records about victims from one advocate to the other. Program administrators articulated the need to expand police advocacy services to cover the entire city so that all victims can have access to advocacy at the point of entry into the system. Another approach would be to increase funding to domestic violence programs so that they could hire advocates who would do outreach to victims. Advocates pointed out that their services would benefit from having private counseling space, childcare, and child supplies (e.g., diapers), as well as clerical support.

Limitations and Lessons Learned

Because they were based partly on advocates' underreporting, our findings that advocacy did not affect victims' participation in prosecution or safety may be erroneous. We were only able to interview women whom we could reach by telephone, and we were only able to interview about 23% of the victims from the police report sample. While we learned that many interviewees experienced the interview as rewarding in itself, financial incentives are probably necessary to encourage interviewees to keep researchers informed about correct contact information. We were not able to investigate whether advocacy provided by domestic violence programs is more victim-centered and effective than advocacy sponsored by police or prosecutors. Another weakness was our lack of knowledge of the prior criminal histories of the

offenders, since the criminal justice system, victims, and abusers all respond differently when there is a prior criminal history. We did not ask interviewees directly about the role of culture or the role of their concerns about their children in their assessment of their situations and of advocacy. We also did not ask women why they did or did not follow-up on advocates' referrals.

Implications and Directions for Further Research

This study points to the need for research to clarify how advocates and police officers are trained to respond to domestic violence. For women with multiple needs, like many women in Detroit, services clearly must be very intensive and sensitive to cultural and economic issues. Training should focus on increasing the service providers' awareness about these multiple needs.

Our findings suggest that special domestic violence teams and advocacy as they are now enacted in Detroit are not enough to overcome the multiple vulnerabilities of battered women when they lack economic resources and have had a history of painful interactions with the police and social service agencies. Instituting new programs is not a panacea if the programs do not have the resources to make a difference. First, researchers and practitioners must learn from battered women what would make a difference. Then realistic program planning and coordination must take place.

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