Criminal Charges, Risk Assessment, and Violent Recidivism in Cases of Domestic Abuse

Based on BFI Working Paper 2023-11, “Criminal Charges, Risk Assessment, and Violent Recidivism in Cases of Domestic Abuse,” by Dan A. Black, University of Chicago; Jeffrey Grogger, University of Chicago; Tom Kirchmaier, Copenhagen Business School; and Koen Sanders, London School of Economics

Pressing charges in cases of domestic abuse, vs. protective services for the victim, substantially reduces the likelihood of violent recidivism.

Roughly one-third of women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence by a partner at some point during their lives. In the United States, one-third of female murder victims are killed by intimate partners, and data from other countries reflect similar patterns. Among its many negative effects, domestic abuse (DA) has far-reaching economic consequences: It adversely affects the employment, earnings, and welfare dependency of victims; it harms the health of babies in utero at the time of abuse takes place; and it lowers the educational performance of affected children and their peers.

How effective are policies or programs aimed at reducing domestic violence? This work addresses that question by focusing on two interventions initiated by the police: pressing criminal charges against the perpetrator, or providing protective services on the basis of a systematic risk assessment made at the scene of the incident. The authors estimate how these

Figure 1 • Timeline Showing Availability of Data and Sample Period

Note: This figure illustrates when call-for-service and crime data are available. (DASH refers to Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment, and Honor-Based.) The authors’ sample only includes those dyads whose first call for service took place after April 2014. This is to avoid truncating the two-year criminal and DA history measures that they use as predictors. To ensure that they have a full year to measure violent recidivism for all DA calls, they only include calls that occurred before July 2018. Please see working paper for more details.
two different interventions affect reported violent recidivism in domestic abuse cases.

The setting for the authors’ study is England; specifically, the authors analyze data provided by Greater Manchester Police (GMP), which serves a population roughly the size of Chicago. The data include information on the date, time, and location of incidents, other characteristics of the incident, whether it was classified as a crime, whether the police pursued charges against the perpetrator, and if so, the referred charge. Criminal charges may arise from an investigation in response to a DA-related call for service. However, officers exercise discretion in determining whether a crime has occurred and, if so, whether it warrants prosecution. Officers may also arrest the perpetrator, but the perpetrator need not be arrested to be charged.

Please see the working paper for details, but the authors’ methodology statistically equates perpetrators who were charged with those who were not on the basis of several dozen characteristics of the incident, the participants, their domestic-abuse and criminal histories, the police officer who responded to the call, and their risk assessment scores. The authors stress that although many of these characteristics are highly predictive of treatment, they cannot equate charged vs. noncharged perpetrators based on unobservable characteristics. Methodological limitations aside, the authors find the following:

- Charges reduce the likelihood of violent recidivism by about 5 percentage points. Relative to the violent recidivism rate in the authors’ sample, which amounts to a reduction of almost 40 percent.
- In contrast, the authors found no evidence that alternatives to charges, like providing protective services for victims, reduced violent recidivism.
- Regarding the effects of criminal charges, the authors find that one group with a fairly serious criminal history had an ATT (the average effect of treatment on the treated, that is, the causal effect of the intervention on the probability of violent recidivism among the treated incidents) that was nearly 10 times larger than another group with a much less serious record. Importantly, this suggests that it may be possible to target investigative resources in ways that protect a greater number of victims from repeat domestic violence.

READ THE WORKING PAPER

NO. 2023-11 - JANUARY 2023
Criminal Charges, Risk Assessment, and Violent Recidivism in Cases of Domestic Abuse
bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2023-11

ABOUT OUR SCHOLARS

Dan A. Black
Professor, Harris School of Public Policy
harris.uchicago.edu/directory/dan-black

Jeffrey Grogger
Irving Harris Professor in Urban Policy,
Harris School of Public Policy
harris.uchicago.edu/directory/jeffrey-grogger