

Deterrence or Backlash?

Arrest and the Dynamics of Domestic Violence

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*The views expressed are solely our own
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Motivation

- **Domestic violence** (DV) is a serious and pervasive threat to the well-being of women worldwide
 - ▶ One third of women report some form of physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime (WHO Report, 2021)
- A key aspect of DV is its **repeat nature**: women typically experience multiple offenses by the same partner
 - ▶ In our setting: 49 % of victims have a repeat call within 12 months

Our study:

- How should police officers respond to domestic violence incidents in order to stop the cycle of DV?
- Is **arresting** suspects on the spot effective in reducing repeat offenses?

Deterrence or Backlash?

Proponents argue that arrest:

- ① induces a short-term incapacitation effect
- ② signals a high cost of repeat offenses in the future (deterrence)
- ③ empowers women since they know something is being done

Opponents argue that arrest:

- ① comes with a weak dosage of punishment
- ② may cause an escalation of DV (backlash)
- ③ disproportionately impacts marginalized individuals, harming both them and their communities

For an overview of the arguments, see Goodmark (2017) "Should Domestic Violence Be Decriminalized?" Harvard Journal of Law and Gender

Research Question and Challenges

Does arrest increase or decrease repeat domestic violence?

Challenge #1:

- **Data limitations:** Measures of repeat victimization are largely not available in the context of DV
 - i DV is usually not even a crime category, but must be inferred
 - ii Researchers typically only observe victimization conditional on a criminal charge
 - iii Hard to identify & follow victims over time

Solution #1:

- **Unique administrative data:** Universe of all 999 emergency calls recorded by a major police force in the UK over 10 years
 - i We observe the initial classification of DV by the call handler
 - ii We can match all DV calls to the arrest decisions made by officers
 - iii We observe the geolocation of the dispatch for each call

Research Question and Challenges

Does arrest increase or decrease repeat domestic violence?

Challenge #2:

- **Selection bias:** Arrest is endogeneous
 - ▶ Cases which result in arrest are more serious, and hence likely to be positively related to the underlying risk of repeat violence

Solution #2:

- **Identification:**
 - i Conditionally random assignment of police officers to 999 DV calls
 - ii Heterogeneity in officers' propensity to arrest

What We Find

Arrest is effective at breaking the cycle of repeat DV

- Arrest **reduces repeat DV calls** within the next 12 months **by 51%**
- This drop in repeat DV is a **reduction in incidence**, not a drop in reporting
- Mechanisms
 - ▶ **Short-term “cooling off”**: large spike in repeat DV within 48 hours; arrest prevents almost all of this revictimization
 - ▶ **Longer-term deterrence**: Additional reductions over the following year: $\approx 50\%$ reduction
 - ▶ **Criminal sanctions**: Rise in formal criminal charges