



**Over 32,000 domestic violence 911 calls, but there's still a lot we don't know:
An Analysis of the Montgomery County, Maryland 911 Database**

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Court Watch Montgomery reduces intimate partner violence by ensuring that victims have access to responsive justice and vital services so the violence can be stopped, quickly and permanently.

A special “thank you” to Court Watch Montgomery’s dedicated volunteers, who spend countless hours collecting data in protective order hearings, sharing insights, and inputting data to make our work possible.

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Introduction

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (n.d.) indicates that there are more than 10 million victims of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner every year. This staggering number means that intimate partner violence (IPV) accounts for fifteen percent of all violent crimes in the United States. Because any individual can become a victim of IPV, this is an issue that spans the scope of age, race, socioeconomic class, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Court Watch Montgomery's (CWM) mission is to reduce intimate partner violence in Maryland by ensuring victims have access to responsive justice and vital services that can stop the abuse quickly and permanently. We work towards the day when all domestic violence victims coming to court for legal protection are safe, treated with respect, and receive comprehensive legal protections that help stop their abuse. We advocate for ongoing systemic change for domestic violence survivors through our court monitoring program. We have approximately 70 volunteers who attend criminal and civil domestic violence hearings. These volunteers fill out a detailed form that covers the specifics of each case, including items such as case dispositions, important dialogue, and ordered reliefs. We compile these details into our database then publish reports on our findings and make recommendations to both the county and state.

It is important for the purposes of this report to detail the types of relationships necessary to be a case in which CWM will collect data. Because CWM provides expertise in IPV, we must distinguish between general domestic relationships under the law and the social definition of domestic violence. Maryland law outlines domestic violence as abuse between family or household members (Family Law §4-501m). This abuse can include the following acts: Assault in any degree; An act that places a person in fear of imminent serious bodily harm; An act that causes serious bodily harm; Rape or sexual offense; Attempted rape or sexual offense; Stalking; or False imprisonment; Revenge porn (Family Law §4-501b).

Legally, individuals filing in civil court for protections (known in domestic violence cases as a petitioner) must have a specific relationship to the alleged abuser (known in domestic violence cases as a respondent) in order to be eligible for a protective order. The crucial distinction here lies between who is legally eligible for a protective order or a peace order since both of these may be ordered within domestic violence court. For the purposes of this report, we will focus on eligibility for a protective order. For protective orders, the court will hear cases of alleged abuse and safety concerns from petitioners that have the following relationships with a respondent: current or former spouses; lived together in an intimate relationship for at least 90 days during the past year; related by blood, marriage, or adoption; in a parent-child, or stepparent-stepchild relationship and have resided together for at least 90 days during the past year; in a caretaker-vulnerable adult relationship; have a child together; had a sexual relationship within 1 year before the filing of the petition; or if the petitioner is filing on behalf of a minor if the above applies to the minor's relationship with a respondent (Maryland Courts, n.d.).

Socially, the term "domestic violence" has a very separate connotation and relationship definition. At CWM, our guidelines follow the social definition of domestic violence: the threat or use of physical, emotional/psychological, economic and/or sexual violence against an intimate partner for purposes of control or intimidation. We clarify this because we define a "court watch case" as a protective order or criminal hearing where there is or was a consensual, romantic relationship between the petitioner and the respondent. For the purposes of this report, we will use

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“domestic violence” (or DV) when meaning the legal definition and we will refer to the social definition as “intimate partner violence” (or IPV).

911 Dataset Findings

Introduction

According to the Maryland Attorney General, residents have the right to access certain government information under the Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA), so long as government interests and individual citizens are protected (Frosh, B., n.d.). CWM performed a public information request to access the 911 call dispatch records from the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD). We were provided with a dataset in the form of an excel spreadsheet that listed a total number of 544,149 call entries from our requested time period of April 2017-September 2019. This spreadsheet listed 32 columns with data such as call length, response time, length of dispatch, dispatch address, and police district. Most importantly for our report, the dispatch spreadsheet included various 911 call codes. Our request also resulted in two more spreadsheets titled “provisioning” that we believe were meant to serve as descriptions of the codes in the dataset. However, these spreadsheets were incomplete. The provisioning spreadsheets did not include all of the codes that are listed in the dispatch dataset we received nor did they provide useful descriptions of the codes. For example, one entry is: “**Code:** Abuse **Name:** Abuse **Description:** Abuse, abandonment, neglect.”

Methodology

Because CWM collects data on intimate partner relationships, we focused our attention on calls that were coded as domestic violence. There are two points at which a 911 call may be coded as being related to domestic violence. The first is by the dispatcher on the phone and is represented in the database as “Initial Type” or “Close Type,” which we will refer to generally as “dispatcher codes.” The second point is by the officer(s) at the scene, represented in the database as “Disposition Desc.” Without having useful codebooks, policies, or descriptions, we are making the assumption that the initial/close types are related to the actual 911 call and the disposition descriptions are coded by the police officer(s) on the scene. Given this methodology, there were a total of 32,907 incidents coded as domestic violence by 911 operators; this is 6% of our total 544,149 calls. It is from these 32,907 domestic violence calls that we draw the following findings.

Finding #1, Coding: *From the data we were provided, the current 911 call coding system in Montgomery County, Maryland does not track the total number of emergency calls related to intimate partner violence. Without 911 codes that are specific to IPV, the call coding system creates inconsistencies. Because MCPD does not always specify the relationships of the parties from a call that is coded as “domestic violence,” they cannot accurately and consistently identify trends, provide oversight, or effectively target prevention efforts for calls that are related to IPV.*

Methodology

Because the nature of an MPIA request grants access to information an agency might not necessarily want to offer freely, we were not provided a codebook to definitively identify which relationships fall into these coding categories. For the purpose of this analysis, we have relied only on the data with which we were provided.

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Explanation of Dispatcher Codes

Understandably, the dispatcher codes from 911 calls are much more general than the disposition descriptions used by the police officer(s) on scene. All of these dispatcher codes are very similar to one another (two of the codes are identical except for a hyphen). This dataset has five dispatcher codes that could be relevant to CWM's work:

- 1) DOMESTIC DISPUTE
- 2) DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE/VIOLENCE
- 3) DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE/VIOLENCE - OCCURRED EARLIER
- 4) DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE/VIOLENCE OCCURRED EARLIER
- 5) DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

To reiterate, of the 544,149 calls provided during the time of our study, a total of 32,907 calls (or 6% of the total number of calls) were coded with one of the DV identifiers above. Unfortunately, none of these dispatcher codes are specific enough to indicate if the domestic violence occurred between intimate partners.

Explanation of Disposition Descriptions

In contrast to the 911 dispatcher codes, the disposition descriptions police use at the scene do sometimes specify relationships. Within the 32,907 DV-related calls, there were 164 disposition descriptions; five of these indicate a relationship between intimate partners. The disposition descriptions that do specify IPV are:

- 1) AGGASLTBEAT/INJSPS/PT (beat)
- 2) AGGASLTCUT/STBSPS/PTR (cut/stab)
- 3) AGGASLTFRARMSPS/PTNR (firearm)
- 4) AGGASLTOTRWPNSPS/PTR (other weapon)
- 5) SIMPLEASSAULTSPS/PRTNR (simple assault)

Explanation of “Family Trouble” within Disposition Descriptions. Because the disposition descriptions are incongruent with the dispatcher codes, there is no disposition description that specifically indicates domestic violence. The code that is closest to indicating a possible domestic relationship is the disposition description labeled “family trouble.” Without any documentation to outline what an officer on scene would consider to be “family trouble,” it is impossible to know for sure what these calls encompass. One could speculate that a family trouble call could be DV or IPV related, however, we can conclusively say that this coding option adds to the confusion over relationships of the parties and context of crimes.

Considering that the dispatcher codes that indicate domestic violence incidents are only 6% of the total 544,149 calls we were provided, it is worth noting how many of those 911 calls ultimately end up with a disposition description related to IPV or “family trouble.” The majority of the 911 calls that were identified with DV dispatcher codes (18,307 calls or 56%) were listed as “family trouble” in the disposition description. This likely means that a 911 operator initially felt the call was related to DV or the caller clearly stated there was a domestic relationship and, for unknown reasons, the officer(s) on scene identified the most suitable code to be family trouble. The IPV assault disposition descriptions (listed above with the identifiers PT/PTR/PTNR/PRTNR) comprise only 2%, or 750 calls, of the 32,907 DV-related 911 calls.

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Conclusions for Finding #1***Coding Conclusions***

The entire dataset we were provided includes 456 disposition descriptions. We narrowed these disposition descriptions down to our sub-set of DV-related cases. Based on the cases we analyzed (32,907 calls), there were a total of 164 disposition descriptions. Of those 164 disposition descriptions, 122 of them (74%) were used less 10 times or less. Nearly 80% (26,280 calls) of the 32,907 DV calls used one of the five following disposition descriptions:

1. “Family trouble” at 18,307 calls
2. “Other/misc” at 2,686 calls
3. “Disorderly conduct” at 1,991 calls
4. “Suspicious sit/prs/veh” at 1,930 calls
5. “Follow up” at 1,366 calls

When there are so many coding options to reflect one presenting issue on a 911 call, we are left with misleading statistics that make a clean and succinct data analysis process nearly impossible. It is apparent from our analysis that these codes are *capable* of providing insight into a larger picture of the crimes (example of code: burglary; burglary - just occurred; burglary occurred earlier), yet the majority of the codes do not. This has been a consistent pattern throughout our analysis. Given these findings and having a wealth of coding options, it makes us question what type of incident would even warrant the need for a miscellaneous category; these types of vague categorizations complicate the data collection process. As an example, 20 of the 164 disposition descriptions are related to aggravated assault and do indicate specific relationships. Therefore, the generalized “ASSLT” category misses the opportunity to provide more useful data.

The second major area of concern with the current coding system lies with the fact that a lot of these criminal acts could apply to IPV situations but there is no way to know for sure without more specificity. To elaborate, abusive partners follow a pattern of power and control (Breiding, M. J. et al, 2015). Even though the disposition descriptions above only indicate physical assaults, abusers attempt to gain and maintain control over their partners in many ways in addition to physical violence (Breiding, M. J. et al, 2015). Common mechanisms for scaring and controlling intimate partners include threats on a victim’s life, threats on the life of a loved one or pet, stealing money or belongings, destroying or burning a victim’s property, or identity theft that tarnishes a victim’s credit or ability to be financially independent from the abuser. All of these actions threaten the safety of a victim and they are also crimes (Maryland Criminal Code, n.d.). Because of this, many different 911 calls captured in the dataset could fall within an IPV relationship. However, the information provided only shows us how many calls were made regarding crimes like theft, burglary, arson, or malicious destruction of property. These records do not indicate how many of those calls were the intimate partner of the victim(s). An accurate measure of 911 calls related to IPV is necessary to better understand and enhance the role that MCPD plays in addressing IPV and would provide a useful baseline to measure change over time. It would not be too far of a leap for MCPD to add codes to address this such as “Burglary - IPV, just occurred.” Another suggestion would be for MCPD to add a dropdown option to the database that indicates the relationship of the parties. Given the dangerous nature of these calls, a code that is specific to IPV may also serve as a useful warning for responding officers.

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Family Trouble Conclusions

From the family trouble numbers, we noticed that there was a very important discrepancy: 42% of the 911 calls that were initially marked with DV dispatcher codes are **not** coded as family trouble **or** IPV in the disposition descriptions. This means that 13,850 calls have a disposition description that is completely unrelated to DV or IPV despite the 911 operators originally identifying them as such. The most common disposition descriptions for these 13,850 calls were:

1. "OTHERMISCELLANEOUS" (other/miscellaneous) at 19% or 2,632 calls
2. "DISORDERLYCONDUCT" (disorderly conduct) at 14% or 1,939 calls
3. "SUSPICIOUSSIT/PRSON/VEH" (suspicious situation/person/vehicle) at 14% or 1,939 calls
4. "ASSLT" (assault) at 10% or 1,385 calls

This creates a disjointed narrative. When thinking critically about reporting alleged DV or IPV to 911, one might hypothesize that officers are either consistently finding new facts and evidence on the scene that warrant adjustments to the original assessment of the reported crimes or, more likely, that officers on scene are indicating a disposition description that is a vague "other" catchall category due to the lack of IPV-specific coding for anything other than a physical assault. It is also possible that officers are missing the nuances of IPV when faced with these dynamics in person. However, it would be inaccurate to offer a definitive conclusion for this disconnect given that officers on scene for family trouble calls very rarely write reports to document their justifications.

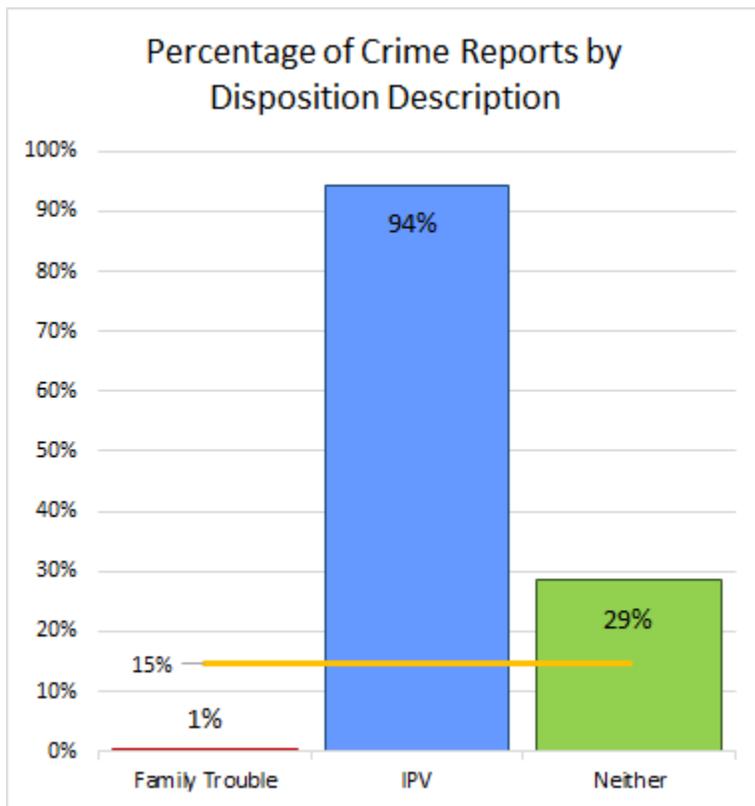
Finding #2, Writing Reports: *During our reporting period, the police officer(s) on scene wrote a report in approximately 15% of DV-coded 911 calls. Officers wrote reports in 94% of physical assault cases that were specified as intimate partner-related (with one of the above assault disposition descriptions with PT/PTR/PTNR). In 99.5% of cases marked with the family trouble disposition description, there was no report written.*

Methodology

The dataset we were provided includes a column headed "Crime Reports" that contains an actual crime report number. The next column is headed "Crime Report Y/N." Only 78,079 incidents of our total 544,149 calls were filled in with a Y or N (for yes or no); the rest of the cells in this column were blank. This means that these blank cells did not indicate whether or not a crime report was written. During our analysis, we observed a number of cells in the Crime Report column that listed actual crime report numbers but did not indicate yes in the "Crime Report Y/N" column. Because of this inconsistency with the dataset, we created a new column to indicate yes for all of the incidents that had a crime report number listed. Any incidents without a crime report number were filled in with "no." Percentages of crime reports represented in this analysis are taken from our column that was created to ensure consistency between the crime report number columns and Y/N column. Within the column we created, 32,907 calls we deemed as DV cases based on the codes we were provided in the dataset. Of the 32,907 DV cases, only 14.5% of DV incidents (or 4,773 calls) that were reported to 911 had a report written by officers on the scene.

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*The chart below graphically represents the results of our analysis rounded to the nearest percentage.



As mentioned earlier, the top disposition descriptions that fall into the “neither” category, which indicates that in the calls were not coded as IPV-related or family trouble, graph are “other/misc” (2,686 calls), “disorderly conduct” (1,991 calls), “suspicious sit/prs/veh” (1,930 calls) and “follow up” (1,366 calls).

Conclusion for Finding #2

Written police reports are critical for efforts to address these crimes. When incidents of intimate partner violence are not documented in police reports, we lose potentially valuable information. This means that we have fewer details for police, prosecutors, and victim advocates who could follow up with assistance in the future. Oftentimes, prosecutors rely on police reports and other types of documentation to bolster their efforts in court. Additionally, police reports can serve as evidence that establishes that there has been a pattern of abusive behavior while victims obtain protective orders, custody agreements for children in common, and/or divorce settlements. Finally, writing a report underscores that our community and law enforcement take all allegations of intimate partner violence seriously. We urge our county’s police department to look deeper into these matters as we all work together to keep our community safe.

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