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This document is based on the full report of *Policing domestic violence in Queensland: Meeting the challenges*.

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Report summary

Policing domestic violence in Queensland

The report looks at the challenges that confront police and identifies potential strategies to improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

Domestic violence is a serious, complex issue that affects the lives of many families in Queensland. Police often provide the first official response to a domestic violence incident, and consequently have an important role in ensuring the immediate safety of the victim and facilitating access to other services that can help stop the violence.

Since domestic violence legislation was introduced in Queensland in 1989, the number of domestic violence matters that are dealt with by police and the courts has substantially increased (see graph). In 2003, the categories of relationship encompassed by domestic violence legislation were broadened to include family, intimate personal and informal care relationships, as well as traditional spousal-type relationships. The increasing numbers and types of domestic violence incidents may affect the ability of police to provide an effective and efficient response.

The significance of this social problem and the opportunity to contribute to a process of reform prompted the Crime and Misconduct Commission to undertake a comprehensive study of the police response to domestic violence in Queensland. The project examined the challenges that confront police and identified potential strategies to improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

Information from a variety of sources was collected to provide multiple perspectives of the issues, and thereby generate a more complete understanding of the current situation and potential ways forward.

Police officers from across the state participated in interviews, focus groups and surveys, and their experiences with domestic violence provided valuable information. In addition, consultation with domestic violence agencies and legal services, and a survey of victims, provided an alternative perspective of the police response. Administrative data from Queensland Police Service (QPS) databases also provided a useful source of information, making it possible to analyse the nature of domestic violence calls for service and the workload of police officers.

General findings

Domestic violence takes up a considerable amount of police officer time. On average, the time taken to deal with domestic violence incidents is substantially greater than the time taken to deal with offences involving people who are not in a domestic relationship. The majority of officers believe that the inclusion of non-spousal relationships in domestic violence legislation has substantially increased their workload and has been implemented without adequate consultation.

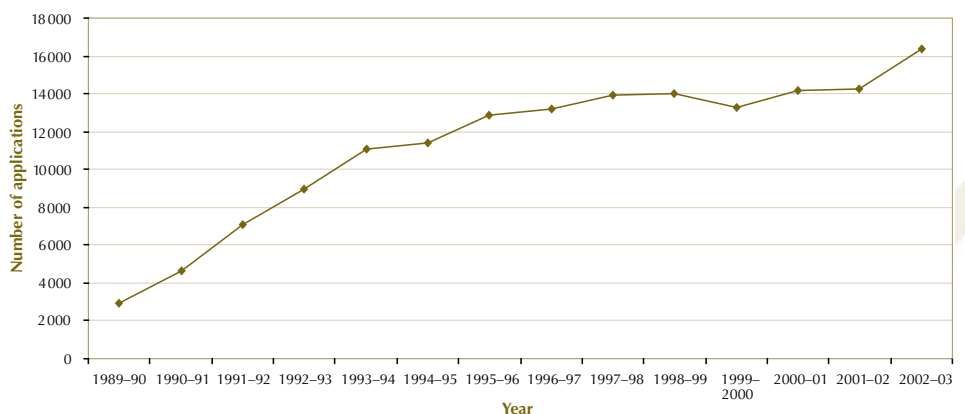
Victims' expectations of police and their actual experience with them seldom corresponded.

However, some police acknowledge that broadening the scope of legislation has provided better options for dealing with family disputes. While spousal relationships continue to make up the majority of domestic violence incidents, the new categories of relationship (family, intimate personal, informal care) have increased the number of domestic violence jobs dealt with by police by about 20 per cent.

Officers' decisions at domestic violence incidents are influenced by situational factors such as the seriousness of injuries to the victim, the use of a weapon and the seriousness of the offence. Another important influence is that officers often believe, on the basis of prior experience, that victims do not want offenders charged or will be likely to drop charges once the situation cools down. In addition, officers indicate that the time-consuming administrative aspects of a domestic violence job are frustrating and tend to make them less willing to take action.

Officers identified a number of specific barriers to an effective police response, including managing repeat victimisation, processes involved in applying for a protection order, excessive administrative requirements, dealing with breaches, and the workload of prosecutors. Further, officers believe that the complex social and health issues involved in domestic violence mean that police can only be effective in conjunction with assistance from other community agencies.

An assessment of victims' experiences with police revealed that only half were satisfied with the police response. Many victims felt that officers did not take the matter seriously, and took too long to arrive. Victims' expectations of police and their actual experience with them seldom corresponded. In particular, even though a number of victims wanted police to arrest the offender, this did not occur, leaving them feeling unsafe despite police attendance. While a number of victims experienced physical assault that required medical attention, very few offenders were charged with any criminal offence.



Protection order applications in Queensland, 1989-2003

Operational police consistently referred to their frustration with burdensome administrative procedures and databases.

Challenges for police

Given the complex and often volatile nature of domestic violence, it is not surprising that a number of challenges for police were identified during the review. Four of the most significant challenges, if addressed, could have a substantial impact on the police response to domestic violence.

These were:

- ▶ a reliance on civil processes and limited investigation of potential criminal charges
- ▶ an incident-by-incident response that does not adequately manage repeat calls for service
- ▶ inefficient administrative requirements and processes involved in applying for a protection order
- ▶ the increase in the workload of specialist police dealing with domestic violence.

Reliance on civil processes

Organisational procedures and practices tend to encourage officers to rely principally on the use of protection orders as the primary response to domestic violence incidents. Less emphasis is placed on conducting thorough investigations and collecting evidence, with a view to proceeding with criminal charges where appropriate. This is reinforced by officers' beliefs that victims will not support charges against the offender nor be willing to testify in court.

Incident-by-incident response

Domestic violence frequently involves an ongoing pattern of abuse rather than a single isolated incident. A family experiencing domestic violence may be dealt with by many different officers over time. While each officer might deal appropriately with each incident, an incident-by-incident response could fall short of a complete understanding of the nature, extent and context of the events.

Inefficient administrative procedures and processes

Operational police consistently referred to their frustration with burdensome administrative procedures and databases. In addition, procedural requirements can make applying to the courts for protection orders time-consuming. Unnecessary or redundant practices can delay the provision of protection to victims, and, for the police officers, contribute to a lack of job satisfaction and frustration with domestic violence calls.

Increased police workload

Specialist domestic violence positions exist at district, regional and state levels in the QPS. Increases in the number of domestic violence calls being dealt with by police, and an extra emphasis on accountability mechanisms, have substantially increased the workload for the district and state positions. Consequently, these officers are limited in their ability to engage in the proactive and preventive aspects of their work.

Recommendations

In considering these key challenges, the Commission makes five recommendations that will help the QPS, in cooperation with other agencies and the Queensland community, to move towards a more effective response to domestic violence.

Recommendation 1

That the Queensland Police Service develop policies and procedures that specifically direct officers responding to domestic violence incidents to investigate and collect evidence with a view to proceeding with criminal charges where sufficient evidence exists.

Recommendation 2

That the Queensland Police Service implement a case management approach that incorporates strategies to address chronic repeat calls for service for domestic violence.

Recommendation 3

That the Queensland Police Service undertake a comprehensive review to fully consider the merits of police-issued protection orders. The review should have particular regard to ensuring that legal mechanisms allowing a protection order to be contested, amended or revoked are in place.

Recommendation 4

That the Queensland Police Service review the role and function of the State Domestic Violence Coordinator. The review should also consider the level of the position to ensure that the rank of the State Coordinator is commensurate with the position's responsibilities.

Recommendation 5

That the Queensland Police Service review the role and function of Regional Domestic Violence Coordinators.

Closing thoughts

Domestic violence is a significant social problem that has serious consequences for individuals, their families and their communities. Despite a range of challenges, police organisations are uniquely placed to respond to domestic violence incidents. Police are often the first line of response for victims, and their actions can affect future victimisation risks.

This report provides a comprehensive picture of the police response to domestic violence in Queensland. The aim of the recommendations is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the police response. While the overall aim of this project was to understand the response of police to domestic violence, and to identify areas for reform, an ongoing commitment by the QPS, government and non-government agencies and the public of Queensland will ultimately result in improvements for victims of domestic violence.

Police are often the first line of response for victims, and their actions can affect future victimisation risks.

