Reflection

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I had already been doing applied research on law enforcement responses to domestic violence (Berk et al., 1980; 1982) when I was contacted by Lawrence Sherman. Larry had proposed to do a randomized experiment on police interventions in domestic violence incidents in part because there was little good research at the time on what law enforcement strategies might work best. The agency approached for funding suggested that he might benefit from some technical assistance. I had been involved in large-scale randomized experiments before (Rossi et al., 1980) and more generally had experience with the kinds of statistical tools that might be necessary. I was also on record arguing that randomized trials were by far the best way to advance public policy when "what works" was a key question. In short, the project seemed potentially useful and consistent with my existing interests. I readily agreed to help. A useful division of labor followed capitalizing on our different comparative advantages. Basically, Larry was to administer the experiment and I was to analyze the data that resulted.

I was quite excited when I first saw that arrest looked to be the most effective intervention. I was also well aware of the experiment's limitations. Larry shared many of the same concerns, which we expressed perhaps most forcefully in the second publication coming out of the research (Berk & Sherman, 1988). A key issue was how well the findings would generalize to new settings. In other cities, the nature of *each* intervention could be different. All arrests are not the same and can depend on training and policies that can differ across police departments. Equally important, and too often unappreciated, is that the nature of the interventions to which arrest is compared can also differ. Both the "separation" intervention and the "restore-order-and-leave" intervention were even more vaguely defined than arrest. Did either include, for example, referrals to social service agencies or threats about what might happen if the police were called back to the same address in the near future? It is critical to appreciate that the estimated impact of the arrest treatment was necessarily relative to the other interventions. If those differed across cities, even if the impact of arrest was the same, the estimated impact of arrest would differ. An additional complication was that the impact of arrest could depend on what happened to the offender subsequently. Would the offender be held awaiting a bail hearing or simply released? Would there be a serious effort to prosecute the case? Would support services be available for the victim if the case went forward? Should these factors vary across cities, the estimated impact of arrest would likely vary as well.

In retrospect, I think it is fair to say that caveats we offered were soon lost in the excitement surrounding the findings. It was a time when law-and-order sentiments were on the rise. So, getting tough on crime—any crime—was popular. Moreover, there were strong statements from feminist spokespersons that domestic assault should be treated the same as any other form of assault. For these and other reasons, many police departments across the country soon implemented mandatory arrest policies that went beyond the findings of the Minneapolis experiment.

Follow-up experiments in several new cities then failed to replicate in a convincing fashion the earlier results (Berk et al., 1992). Some studies seemed to suggest that a failure to replicate was the result of two opposing effects that could cancel each other out; arrest would deter offenders who had a "stake in conformity," but would make more violent those who did not. However, measures of this "stake in conformity" were at best indirect and "stake in conformity" was not randomly assigned. So, any conclusions necessarily rested on statistical models whose credibility was easily and quite properly challenged.

Where are we today? To my knowledge, there have been no new randomized experiments in the United States on police interventions in domestic violence incidents. What this means is that to date, no police interventions have been shown to work better than arrest. Therefore, if arresting offenders in domestic violence incidents is a desirable intervention on *other* grounds, there is no scientific reason to oppose it. For example, one might favor a policy of presumptory (not mandatory) arrest on the grounds that all assaults should be treated alike regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. But like with any kind of intervention, one must be prepared for it to work better for some individuals than others and perhaps for it even to be harmful at times. That is just a painful fact of public policy. There are rarely any risk-free interventions.

As for my own activities, I have continued working on a wide variety of policy-related research in criminal justice and a number of other areas. I also have continued to mount randomized experiments whenever possible. But I have also become far more circumspect about what can be learned in the short run about the effectiveness of various public policy interventions. One-shot studies are not likely to be sufficient. What is needed is a long-term research initiative of the sort more commonly found in the biomedical sciences. Various interventions for preventing and treating heart disease, for instance, have been subjected over several decades to a large number of randomized experiments. The same should hold for important matters of public policy.

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