

Reports reveal more female aggressors in domestic violence cases in Columbia

BY [JARED GRAFMAN](#) Dec 10, 2011 Updated May 8, 2015

COLUMBIA — Statistics in a Nov. 16 Columbia Police Department report on domestic violence show an increasing trend of reported female offenders this year.

Although the overwhelming majority of domestic violence offenders are male, reports from Jan. 1 to Nov. 16 stated that 18.9 percent were women, compared with 13 percent in 2008. Data from 2009 and 2010 indicate a steady increase in the number of reported female aggressors in domestic violence cases.

Determining the reason for the increase of reported female offenses is difficult. Still, officials have offered a few theories.

Barbara Hodges, executive director at True North, a Columbia shelter for victims of domestic violence, said she thinks the bad economy could be causing people to lash out at each other.

"I think the difference we're seeing is that the economic downturn is making individuals frustrated," Hodges said. "They're out of work, and it has an impact on their emotional stability."

In a separate interview, Boone County Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Spencer Bartlett, who prosecutes assaults involving male victims, echoed Hodges' remarks.

"I think it might just be that people are frustrated and unhappy," Bartlett said. "And instead of finding positive outlets, they're turning on each other."

Other stressful situations push people over the edge, like a trip to the emergency room. MU police respond to a significant number of such incidents at University Hospital, said MU Police Capt. Scott Richardson.

"When family members arrive at the hospital emotions are high," Richardson said. "That's when they might push or act out from the stressful situation."

But Randy Nichols, a Columbia Police Department detective and Domestic Violence Enforcement Unit investigator, said he and Detective Bob Dochler – also a D.O.V.E. investigator – aren't seeing enough women arrested to create concern about a social trend. D.O.V.E. investigates and deals with the aftermath of domestic violence incidents after patrol officers have finished responding to the initial call.

"I don't see that there's more women out there beating their boyfriends up," Nichols said. "I'd say there's actually more women defending themselves. Most of the incidents I see when the female is arrested, after investigating the incident we find that it's the case that she defended herself."

Missouri law and the Columbia Police Department's policies require officers to make an arrest if they can determine the [primary physical aggressor](#) in domestic violence incidents, Dochler said. The primary physical aggressor is whoever caused the most significant damage in the dispute and not necessarily the one who started it.

"The officers have a tough job," Dochler said. "If he's got more injuries, or if he has the only injury and she's the one who hit him, she's got to take a trip with us."

Officers use all the information available to them to determine the primary physical aggressor, Dochler said. This could include witness statements, prior knowledge about the parties involved and evidence collected at the scene.

"As far as a clear-cut answer for why we are seeing more reports of women offenders, I have no idea," Dochler said. "And I don't know if we can pull from the statistics why we're seeing a spike."

The law

One difficulty in determining the cause of increasing domestic violence reports comes from being unable to determine from reports what types of offenses women are committing, whether physical or another type of domestic violence.

Stalking, harassing and violating protective orders, which prohibit contacting or visiting a person, are considered crimes of domestic violence. Nichols said this type of domestic violence is common.

"That's more likely to happen for her to go off after his car or call him a hundred times, than for her to actually square off with him and beat him up," Nichols said.

Some domestic assaults have greater consequences than basic assault charges, Bartlett said. [Third-degree domestic assault](#) is a class A misdemeanor, which can result in up to a year in prison. But some third-degree assaults are class C misdemeanors, punishable by up to 15 days in jail.

The difference between domestic assaults and general assaults are the context of the crime, Bartlett said. Assaulting romantic or living partners — roommates — is punished much more severely than getting into a bar fight with a stranger.

Most domestic violence incidents are between intimate partners, Bartlett said. But roommates are also covered under Missouri's domestic violence laws. The statute includes anyone related by blood, married or living together.

And that's a fact many college students don't understand.

"A lot of college students coming to school don't know that if you're 17 years or older and you live with somebody, the laws are different," Dochler said. "Someone is likely to go to jail for domestic assault even if it's not an intimate partner."

Nichols said D.O.V.E. investigators are only called to investigate incidents between intimate partners, not college roommates. But, Dochler said, he and Nichols are occasionally called to first-time incidents between young adults who are adjusting to life with a roommate.

"I think we're seeing a lot more violence between young people," Dochler said. "I don't know if the statistics will say that, but I'm seeing a lot more college kids involved in domestic violence."

System designed for female victims

True North provides shelter and services to victims of domestic violence. An average of seven or eight men, and about 900 women and children, seek its services each year. True North also runs an outreach

program to teach prevention and awareness to high school and college students. It reaches about 3,000 to 4,000 students annually.

"A woman can come and we will provide them with a safe place to stay," Hodges said. "If a man came in seeking shelter, we have limited funding and we could put them up in a motel."

In general, men have options that aren't available for women and that is why domestic violence programs are framed around male offenders and female victims, Nichols said.

"A man can pick up and leave and get another job," Nichols said. "It's easier for him to do a lot of things, and it isn't easy for a woman to take three kids out of a house and start over."

Domestic violence laws were established to protect victims, and the majority of offenders are male, Nichols said. That's why women guilty of domestic violence frequently go to an anger management class, while men are sentenced to batterer prevention programs.

[Men Exploring Non-violent Directions](#) is one such prevention program, designed primarily for men. It combines education and counseling, said director Ted Solomon, who is also a counselor at the Family Counseling Center of Missouri and a member of D.O.V.E.. Participants discuss emotional, sexual and physical violence during weekly sessions. M.E.N.D. works with women if they come in individually.

Ultimately, police statistics don't provide enough context to understand why there's been an increase of reported female domestic violence offenders.

"It's hard to know — when there's a female suspect and she's arrested — how many of those cases are repeated abuse," Dochler said. "Or is it a one-time incident where she's had enough and she strikes first because she knows it's coming and she gets arrested?"