Domestic Violence Cases On The Increase

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Domestic squabbles often go beyond the household and into police work. This first part of a three-part series looks at the significance of family disturbance calls in Lafayette and what unique problems they pose for law enforcement officers.)

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"The next time you get a call from here, just remember I told you I was going to hurt him. If he gets killed out here, it’s going to be me who did it.”

It was about 5 a.m. The woman, clad in her robe and slippers, took a long draw on a cigarette while she spoke to a sheriff’s deputy. She was standing just inside her house trailer. Her common-law husband, obviously intoxicated, was in the driveway talking to another deputy. Once the officers were certain

the woman no longer had a gun

and a knife she mentioned earlier, they left. Her brother-in-law told one of the deputies he took the weapons away from her.

No arrests were made.

It was another family disturbance call.

Dangerous Task

To someone unfamiliar with police work, a family disturbance situation might seem run-of-the-mill, without much call for police action.

But statistics show two things.

For one, the number of domestic violence cases being reported to authorities is on the increase and accounts for a large part of police work every day. To make matters worse, statistics show every time an officer responds to such a call, he steps into one of the most potentially violent situations he is likely to encounter.

"When you go on an armed robbery call, you go prepared,”

says Sgt. Ralph Peters of the City Police Department. "You know the suspect has a weapon there and friends to do something wrong or illegal, which isn’t the same with a family disturbance call.

"The whole house may be in turmoil, or it may not. A person may not have a gun – though increasingly more of them do – but all of them have kitchen knives. Many of them turn on you, even if they themselves called for help. Quite frankly, I could give you war stories about those cases ‘til the cows come home.

Among the Worst

Disturbance calls were at the top of the list nationwide among those instances in which law officers were assaulted in 1981 and 1982. They accounted for the third highest number of police deaths in 1980 and 1981 – right behind robberies in progress and vehicle stops.

Such calls ranked somewhat lower for 1983 and 1984, but are still considered among the most dangerous.

According to Lafayette Parish Sheriff’s Department records, 1,095 domestic disturbance calls were recorded in 1982, averaging three calls a day. The number increased in 1983, to about 1,125, an average of five calls a day.

As of late August this year, 1,105 such calls were recorded at the Sheriff’s Department – again about five a day.

City Police logged 318 “probable” family disturbance calls in 1983. Peters said. He termed them "probable" because a larger number came across police scanners as sheer "disturbances," or Code 163.

Excluding those occurring at businesses places where people get rowdy from fighting (Code 163P)

or drinking (Code 1031), the purely domestic disturbances (Code 133D) numbered about 581.

But Peters said the number may actually be larger, considering the number of simple battery, assault and drunken driver cases that may have been prompted by domestic squabbles.

City Police averaged four to seven domestic disturbance cases daily on weekends, he said.

"That’s not a number that has decreased over the last several years. I won’t say it’s the bulk of our work, but it is a large part of it," Peters added.

He and Sheriff’s Department Lts. Gus Boulanger and George Armbruster agree the figures may be skewed to read less than they actually are because cases recorded as “minor persons” or batteries can often be linked to home problems.

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In a series of interviews with The Advertiser, local sheriff’s deputies and police officers explained the unique circumstances that set family disturbance calls apart from other police work.

One of those things is the prevalence of volatile emotions.

A man and wife involved in a disagreement are likely to be arguing over sensitive issues, police say. One or both are likely to have been drinking. One or both may seem irrational.

Civil Matters

Family disturbances are civil matters, however. That means arrests cannot be made unless an officer has evidence of a crime, or one of the persons involved wants to file charges.

An officer can make an arrest if he has a warrant, if he sees a crime committed or has evidence that one has occurred, or if the complaint will give a written statement.

But Peters, Boulanger and Armbruster say the vast majority of people will shy away from filing charges.

Arrests are not generally considered deterrents for that reason and are therefore not often used, at least not with first offenders.

“We give the people in those cases the vehicle of filing a report with the District Attorney’s Office,” Peters explains. “We tell them they can file such a report and let them take it from there.”

District Attorney Nathan Stansbury says when his office receives charges stemming from domestic violence, they are usually cases of battery.

“Most of the time it’s when a husband has hit his wife,” Stansbury says, and usually the complainant later wishes to withdraw the charge.

Unless a crime is committed and charges are followed through, Stansbury’s office has no jurisdiction.

“If a battered person is not willing to prosecute, we dismiss it,” he says. “My worry is that the person may be seriously injured later.”

(TOMORROW: What authorities deal with, and how.)