

**The author(s) shown below used Federal funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice and prepared the following final report:**

**Document Title: Cook County Target Abuser Call (TAC): An Evaluation of a Specialized Domestic Violence Court, Revised Executive Summary**

**Author(s): Carolyn C. Hartley ; Lisa Frohmann**

**Document No.: 202944**

**Date Received: 11/19/2003**

**Award Number: 2000-WT-VX-0003**

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**The Cook County Target Abuser Call (TAC):  
An Evaluation of a Specialized Domestic Violence Court**

**Revised Executive Summary**

March, 2003  
Revised August, 2003

A project conducted by:

Carolyn Copps Hartley, Ph.D.  
University of Iowa, School of Social Work

Lisa Frohmann, Ph.D.  
University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Criminal Justice

for the:

National Institute of Justice

of the

Office of Justice Programs

U.S. Department of Justice

**FINAL REPORT**

Approved By: M Battle

Date: 10/3/03

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This project was funded under Grant Number 2000-WT-VX-0003 from the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. All chapters of the final report except one were primarily authored by Carolyn Copps Hartley. Lisa Frohmann was the primary author of Chapter 6.

## ABSTRACT

The project evaluated a specialized prosecution program, the Cook County Target Abuser Call (TAC) located in Chicago, IL. TAC combines a dedicated domestic violence court, specially trained prosecutors, vertical prosecution, specialized investigators, independent domestic violence advocates, victim witness specialists, and civil attorney services in an effort to increase women's engagement in the prosecution process. The TAC program focuses on high-risk, misdemeanor, intimate partner using the following screening criteria to identify cases: 1) prior history of domestic violence evidenced by convictions, dismissals, arrests and unreported history; 2) injury to the woman; 3) use of weapons with threats; 4) domestic battery accompanied by threats, such as threats to kill, to inflict bodily harm, and/or to harm the woman's family.

This project compared randomly selected TAC screened and prosecuted cases (N=103) with randomly selected cases from the General court call (N=219). We examined both traditional prosecution outcomes (e.g., conviction and arrest/re-arrest rates), as well as differences in offender and victim characteristics, prior abuse characteristics, women's experiences prior to and while at court, women's sense of empowerment with the criminal justices system, women's satisfaction with the court outcome, and advocacy/service delivery outcomes.

Some of the key findings include:

- the victim appearance rate for TAC was 73% compared to an appearance rate of only 40% for the General court call;
- the severity of the current assault event did not differ between TAC and General women, however TAC women described more serious prior abuse histories;
- TAC offenders had more prior history of domestic violence related charges and other violent crimes, and overall a more extensive criminal history than General defendants;
- General women were more likely to want charges dropped than TAC women;
- all the women interviewed came to court with very high expectations of being treated fairly by the court;
- women in TAC had substantially more contact with court personnel and were fairly satisfied with these contacts;
- women in both groups were very satisfied with their contact with domestic violence advocates;
- 71% of TAC defendants were convicted compared to only 50% of General defendants;
- TAC and General did not differ on how many defendants were re-arrested for a domestic violence offense within six months after the target arrest. About one third of the defendants in both of these groups were arrested for some offense within six months.

Limitations and implications for practice and future research are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to evaluate a specialized prosecution program called the Cook County Target Abuser Call (TAC) located in Chicago, IL. TAC combines a dedicated domestic violence court, specially trained prosecutors, vertical prosecution, specialized investigators, independent domestic violence advocates, victim witness specialists, and civil attorney services in an effort to increase women's engagement in the criminal justice system, specifically the prosecution process, to produce successful prosecution outcomes, and increase women's safety.

## FOCUS OF THE TAC PROGRAM

The TAC program focuses on high-risk, misdemeanor, intimate partner cases with the goal of stemming the escalating violence used by many abusers. TAC prosecutors screen all misdemeanor domestic violence cases to identify and intervene with high-risk offenders using the following screening criteria: 1) prior history of domestic violence evidenced by convictions, dismissals, arrests and unreported history; 2) injury to the woman; 3) use of weapons with threats; 4) domestic battery accompanied by threats, such as threats to kill, to inflict bodily harm, and/or to harm the woman's family.

This project compared outcomes of TAC screened and prosecuted cases with cases from the General court call. In addition to a focus on traditional prosecution outcomes (e.g., conviction and arrest/re-arrest rates), group comparisons evaluated differences in offender and victim characteristics, prior abuse characteristics, women's experiences prior to and while at court, women's sense of empowerment with the criminal justices system, women's satisfaction with the court outcome, and advocacy/service delivery outcomes.

## OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

This study compared two different prosecution systems in the Cook County's State's Attorney's Office for responding to misdemeanor domestic violence cases: 1) the TAC team program and a General domestic violence court call. The two systems differ in the amount of coordination, contact, and outreach given to domestic abuse victims.

### Research Methodology

The research design combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including courthouse interviews with domestic violence victims, data extraction from court records (police reports and criminal history sheets) and court services files, and case tracking for defendant re-arrest and compliance with sentencing conditions.

The study involved a case comparison of randomly selected TAC screened and prosecuted cases (N=103) with a randomly selected sample domestic violence cases from the General court call (N=219). Within the TAC and General prosecution groups we were also able to maintain a sample of cases of women who came to court (show cases) along with a set of cases in which the women did not attend the court hearing (no-show cases). The comparison of show and no-show cases allowed us to look at circumstances that might predict which women are more likely to attend the court hearing.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

### Summary of TAC and General Comparisons

Many of the study findings can be characterized in three categories: findings that were expected based on the TAC screening process; findings that confirm the TAC screening process; and findings that were contrary to what we expected to find.

#### Demographic Differences

- TAC women and defendants were older and had more children than General women, possibly indicating “older” relationships between TAC women and their abusers than between General women and their partners. These “older” relationships could mean that TAC defendants are ultimately not that different from General defendants, but rather are just further along on their abuse trajectories, as indicated by the greater history of prior domestic violence assaults.
- TAC women were receiving more government assistance than General women, but otherwise did not differ on their overall income or access to that income.

#### Case Characteristics and Prior Abuse History

Given the TAC prosecutor’s screening criteria of prior history of domestic violence, injury to the woman, use of weapons with threats, and domestic battery accompanied by threats such as threats to kill, to inflict bodily harm, and/or to harm the woman's family, we expected to find that the description of the seriousness of the current assault event would differ between the TAC and General groups. This was not the case.

- TAC women were not significantly more likely to be injured during the current assault or need medical treatment for any injuries.
- The severity of the women’s injuries did not differ, nor did the use of threats or weapons.

Other findings in the comparison of TAC and General cases confirm, to an extent, the effectiveness of the TAC screening process in identifying more serious domestic abuse cases.

- In the women’s descriptions of prior abuse, we found more use of protection orders and more defendants violating those orders.
- TAC women were significantly more likely to report prior defendant threats to kill and use of knife and gun in assaults than General women, however these two groups did not differ on very many other reports of the defendant’s prior abuse tactics.
- TAC offenders had more prior history of domestic violence charges and violations of no contact orders, a greater number of other violent crimes, and overall a more extensive criminal history than General defendants. However, we should note that all the defendants in this study had significant and varied prior criminal histories.

#### Women’s Expectations Regarding Police Involvement

- TAC women were more likely to want the police called than General women, but it does not appear that these women wanted greater police involvement due to the seriousness of the assault.
- More women interviewed wanted the defendant arrested than prior research suggests.

### **Women's Expectations and Experiences Before Court**

- As expected, women in TAC got more outreach from TAC personnel before court, in particular from the TAC investigators.
- Women who had before-court-contact reported being at least somewhat satisfied with these contacts, however women did not indicate that it was the court personnel that most influenced their decisions to come to court.
- General women were more likely to want charges dropped than TAC women.
- When asked about their reasons for wanting the charges dropped, the only difference between the groups was that the General women had more concerns about the defendant having a criminal record than TAC women.

### **Women's Sense of Empowerment**

- Much to our surprise, all the women we interviewed came to court with very high perceptions of "justice." They expected to be treated fairly by the court and prosecutors, felt they would be allowed to tell their story, and did not feel they would have to compromise on the outcome of the case.
- While some women had concerns about the defendant "getting back at her" after court, most felt they could express their concerns and speak for themselves in court.

### **Women's Decisions to Come to Court**

- Almost half the women in both groups reported that the defendant tried to talk them out of testifying, however these women did still come to court.
- Few women in either group reported being threatened by the defendant prior to court.
- The most frequently cited reasons for coming to court were: *they felt they should be there, they wanted him to stop hurting her, and they thought they would be protected.*

### **Women's Experiences in Court**

- Our findings confirmed that TAC women have substantially more contact with TAC team members (advocate, victim witness specialist, prosecutor, civil attorney) than General women and TAC women report that these contacts are generally positive.
- When women have contact with a domestic violence advocate, whether in TAC or General, they are very satisfied with experience. Court advocates do a consistently good job in their encounters with women regardless of the prosecution program they work in.
- TAC women were more satisfied with their contacts with prosecutors and victim witness specialists than General women, and this higher level of satisfaction is no doubt due to the greater amount of time that TAC personnel spend with women.

- TAC women state that they are getting substantially more information when they come to court than General women as a result of having the opportunity to talk to more people when they are there.
- Regardless of prosecution group, most reported feeling safer after participating in the court process. Overall satisfaction with the court process, however, was somewhat polarized; women were either pretty satisfied or pretty dissatisfied.

### **Summary of Show and No Show Comparisons**

The examination of show and no show cases was done to determine whether any of the case characteristics available to prosecutors before court would predict which women would come to court.

- The findings indicate there is very little in the information typically available to prosecutors at the time of case screening to predict which domestic abuse victims will attend the court hearing and which will not.
- The only substantial differences we found in the General group were that for women who show, the charges against the defendant are more likely to involve a violation of a no contact order and more charges overall. This finding may support the conclusion that women who have prior contact with the court system (as indicated by the presence of a no contact order) are more likely to subsequently engage the court system.
- The show/no show findings also confirm the TAC goal of increasing the number of women who attend the court hearing. In our study, the victim appearance rate for TAC was 73% compared to an appearance rate of only 40% for the General court call.

### **Outcomes of Prosecution**

#### **Conviction Rates and Sentencing**

- Seventy-one percent of defendants in the TAC prosecution group were convicted compared to only 50% of General defendants.
- TAC defendants also received more jail time than General defendants, although we cannot determine if the higher percentage of jail time is due to TAC prosecutors seeking more aggressive sentences or whether TAC defendants are more likely to receive jail time because of their longer history of repeat domestic violence offenses.
- Defendants whose victims showed up for court are more likely to be convicted than defendant's whose victims do not show to court.
- For defendant's who were convicted and sentenced to conditional discharge or court supervision, there is no difference on their compliance with these court conditions at six months post-target arrest.
- There were no differences between the TAC and General defendant's on whether they are re-arrested for a domestic violence or other offense within six months after the target arrest. About one third of the defendants in both of these groups were arrested for some offense within six months.