A new report from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund documents what police forces have known for decades: Domestic violence calls are the most dangerous for responding officers. The finding was no surprise to Officer Michael LaRiviere, a 27-year veteran of the Salem, Massachusetts, police department who has responded to thousands of such calls during his career. In addition to serving on his local Patrol Division, LaRiviere has trained officers all over the country to handle domestic violence disputes. Here is LaRiviere in his own words, as told to Kerry Shaw.

When the radio goes off and you’re being sent to a domestic, you automatically brace yourself. If you get called for a shoplifter, it’s pretty straightforward: You go there, you get a description of the person, and that’s about it. But every time you get a domestic, you know you’re going into something with so many moving parts.

You want to know: Are there weapons? If guns are present, it’s going to be much more dangerous. Have there been previous calls? You want to know if the incident is in progress, or if it’s passed, if the parties are still there, and if the abuser’s going to be on scene.
We teach our call takers to stay on the line. So many things can go right or wrong based on how they handle that call. If they don’t do their job, I could wind up dead, or I could arrest the wrong person. But no matter what information I’m given, in the minute it takes to get there, the situation could have changed. The perpetrator could have left and come back — the perpetrator can go from zero to 100 miles an hour in the flick of a switch.

The most dangerous time, the time when we’re getting killed the most often, is in the approach. It’s the ambush. Often they know we’re coming, so we don’t park right out front.

The nature of the crime adds another complication. Domestic violence is about one person’s desire to control another. The police officer who arrives at the scene is taking away some of that control.

Say I’m knocking on this person’s door, telling him he has minutes to grab a couple of personal belongings. I’m telling him: “You have to leave, there’s a hearing in three days. I don’t want to hear about your toolbox, or your big screen TV. You can’t contact this person or your kids. Oh, and you still have to pay your rent and the telephone bill.” Imagine what that does to a person who’s all about control.

The majority of calls we get could be categorized as “he said/she said.” You get there and one person’s saying this person hit them; the other person’s saying, no, this person hit me.

You’re not assuming that just because there’s a female, she’s the victim, although an overwhelming majority of victims are women. You’re trying to see: Do the dots connect? Do the stories line up? The goal is to protect the victim and hold the right person accountable. It’s a tough thing to weave your way through, and it’s something I emphasize when I teach other officers.

Here’s a question: What would you do if someone were sitting on your chest, trying to strangle you to death?

Think about it. You’d probably bite, kick, and scratch whatever you could, right? That person is going to have bite marks on their chest, maybe their arm.
So I go to the scene and I see a woman who has no injuries. No blood or bruises. With over half of strangulation cases, there’s no visible injury. Meanwhile, I have a perpetrator with scratches and bite marks.

If you’re not trained to understand the dynamics and pay attention to the information in front of you, it’s very easy to look and say, Mrs. Scissorhands sliced this guy up! It’s easy to get tricked into thinking this guy came home late, she was mad he had a couple of drinks, and she attacked him.

![Breakdown of 91 Line of Duty Deaths by Dispatched Call Types](image)

Courtesy of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund study. That’s why training is so important – both to understand the dynamics of domestic violence and also the safety piece. If you don’t get through it safely, you’re not going to help anybody.

And if you’re a police officer, you need to understand why victims stay, why they may not tell the same story later on that they initially told you. If you don’t understand why that happens, you could get a little bit jaded.

Victims may lie, they may go back to the person, but it doesn’t mean they’re liars. It doesn’t mean they don’t appreciate what you did. It just means they’re doing what they think is best for them in that moment.
For some reason, in my profession we think it’s easy to leave. *Why am I going back to this house?* Well, what would you do if you were in their situation?

I’m glad people are starting to talk about domestic violence. I want everyone to recognize how dangerous it is to the community. I would never want to take away from the impact domestic violence has on the family unit — it’s awful. But even if outsiders are sympathetic, they think it won’t affect them. The reality is, you could be buying groceries tomorrow and get shot because some estranged husband comes in to kill his girlfriend, who is the cashier.