

Jailhouse phone calls reveal why domestic violence victims recant

August 15 2011, by Jeff Grabmeier

A new study uses – for the first time - recorded jailhouse telephone conversations between men charged with felony domestic violence and their victims to help reveal why some victims decide not to follow through on the charges.

Researchers listened to telephone conversations between 17 accused male abusers in a Washington state detention facility and their female victims, all of whom decided to withdraw their accusations of abuse. For each of the couples, the researchers analyzed up to about three hours of phone conversations.

The analysis of these conversations may fundamentally change how victim advocates and prosecutors work with [domestic violence](#) victims to prosecute abusers, according to the researchers.

"The existing belief is that victims recant because the perpetrator threatens her with more violence. But our results suggest something very different," said Amy Bonomi, lead author of the study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Perpetrators are not threatening the victim, but are using more sophisticated emotional appeals designed to minimize their actions and gain the sympathy of the victim. That should change how we work with victims."

The study appears online in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* and will appear in a future print edition.

The detention facility in the study routinely records conversations of detainees to increase jail safety. The couples were aware they were being recorded through an automated message at the beginning of each call. Such recordings have been approved by the state Supreme Court, and the researchers gained approval from the county prosecutor's office to use the recordings. All the recordings involved cases that had already been resolved.

The researchers chose to study victims who had decided to recant. They listened to from 30 to 192 minutes of recorded conversations for each couple.

After analyzing the calls, the researchers identified a five-step process that went from the victims vigorously defending themselves in the phone calls to agreeing to a plan to recant their testimony against the accused abuser.

Typically, in the first and second conversations there is a heated argument between the couple, revolving around the event leading to the abuse charge. In these early conversations, the victim is strong, and resists the accused perpetrator's account of what happens.

"The victim starts out with a sense of determination and is eager to advocate for herself, but gradually that erodes as the phone calls continue," said Bonomi, who is also an affiliate with the Group Health Research Institute in Seattle.

In the second stage, the perpetrator minimizes the abuse and tries to convince the victim that what happened wasn't that serious. In one couple, where the victim suffered strangulation and a severe bite to the

face, the accused perpetrator repeatedly reminded the victim that he was being charged with "felony assault," while asking whether she thought he deserved the felony charge.

"Finally, he wore her down and she agreed with him that he didn't deserve a felony charge," Bonomi said.

What happens next in this second stage, though, is the critical step in the process of recantation.

"The tipping point for most victims occurs when the perpetrator appeals to her sympathy, by describing how much he is suffering in jail, how depressed he is, and how much he misses her and their children," Bonomi said.

"The perpetrator casts himself as the victim, and quite often the real victim responds by trying to soothe and comfort the abuser."

In one case, the accused perpetrator threatened suicide and said in a phone call to his victim, "Nobody loves me though, right?"

At that point, the victim's tone changed dramatically, and she sounded concerned that he might actually try to hurt himself, Bonomi said. From then on, the victim promised to help him get out of jail.

In the third stage, after the accused abuser has gained the sympathy of the victim, the couple bonds over their love for each other and positions themselves against others who "don't understand them."

The fourth stage involves the perpetrator asking the victim to recant her accusations against him and the victim complying. Finally, in the fifth stage, the couple constructs the recantation plan and develops their stories.

"They often exchange very specific instructions about what should be done and said in court. They seal their bond as a couple and see themselves as fighting together against the state, which they view as trying to keep them apart," Bonomi said.

While the couples were told that the phone calls were being recorded, Bonomi said she doesn't believe it had a major effect on what they talked about.

"These are couples in crisis and the perpetrator wants above all to get his freedom. He isn't holding back," she said.

Bonomi said she also doesn't believe the fact that the calls were recorded is what kept the accused perpetrators from threatening violence. Instead, she thinks the men calculated they had a better chance of succeeding if they didn't make direct threats.

If the accused abuser threatens his girlfriend or wife, she may hang up the phone or refuse to talk to him. Of course, the threat of future violence is always there for these couples, Bonomi said, but the perpetrators didn't use threats in these calls to achieve their aims.

Bonomi said the results of this study could help prosecutors and other victim advocates as they work with abuse victims in the criminal justice system.

"These results provide a new model for how to work with victims. Advocates can counsel victims up front and let them know the sympathy appeals and minimization techniques that their husband or boyfriend is likely to use on them.

"If the victims are prepared, they may be less likely to fall for these techniques and would be more likely to follow through with the

prosecution."

The results of this study also show how emotion-based techniques of abusers may make it difficult for some victims to disentangle themselves from violent relationships, she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Jailhouse phone calls reveal why domestic violence victims recant (2011, August 15)
retrieved 9 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-08-jailhouse-reveal-domestic-violence-victims.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.