

Recently, I reviewed statistical data for our office's work by examining the five crimes most reported to our office in 2023. Remarkably, the most reported crime in 2023 was domestic assault. For the last ten years, domestic assault has always occupied a spot in the five most reported crimes list. However, 2023 marked the first time it has occupied the number one spot. In an ideal world, domestic violence would be a thing of the past. For our continued journey through this broken world, we aim to topple this crime from its position atop this list.

The first step to solving a problem is to understand the problem. From an outside perspective, a domestic violence relationship may be a mystery. The simple solution appears obvious, the victim should leave the abuser. When that solution isn't implemented, it feels natural to question why the victim would return to the abuser in so many instances. The insidious part of domestic violence relationships is that none of them begin with physical violence. The abuser's goal in these relationships is obtaining power and control over the victim. The emotional or physical abuse are a tool to capture or maintain that power and control. The abuser works over time, preying upon the victim's emotions, to create an environment where the power in the relationship rests in the abuser's hand. Part of that work may include periods of time where the abuser plays the part of a caring and attentive partner. Routinely, abusers apologize for their actions, rationalize their abuse, and promise to stop the abuse or repair the relationship. In doing so, abusers aim to give their victims an emotional reason to remain under their control.

Aside from the emotional control exerted over the victim, the abuser commonly maintains control of the finances and assets in the relationship. The ability to provide for basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter are typically outside the control of the victim in domestic violence relationships. Choosing to leave the relationship might mean the victim will have no way to provide for themselves or their children. For victims who have been in an abusive relationship, the steps required to obtain the independent financial resources to care for themselves and their children can seem overwhelming, especially for victims who lack support.

Domestic violence victims must consider their personal safety in all their relationship choices. Abusers use violence and threats of violence to obtain compliance from their victims. Non-compliance by the victim is frequently met with increased violence by the abuser to secure their power and control. Any step toward leaving the relationship threatens the power and control abusers have built. Most abusers react to this threat to their position with a marked increase in violence and brutality. Studies have demonstrated the most dangerous time for domestic violence victims is when they make the decision to leave the relationship. From a personal safety standpoint, choosing to stay in the relationship provides many victims with a greater sense of safety due to the belief the victim's compliance will result in a reduction in violence from the abuser. Former victims who have talked about their experience state they felt they had a greater ability to influence the abuser's level of violence while in the relationship through their compliance with the abuser's demands. For those victims who make the decision to leave the relationship, there remains the fear the abuser will find them or their children to carry out violent retribution. Imagine the steps you would need to undertake in today's hyper-connected world to move to a new location that was kept secret from an abuser, while simultaneously trying to build a new life and find employment.

For the same reasons, victims are reluctant to call or cooperate with law enforcement. Our justice system in Minnesota is designed to stop domestic violence through increasingly severe

consequences for the abuser. The law provides the courts the authority to establish no contact orders and the ability to sentence abusers to jail or prison for their actions. These processes take time and, due to the constitutional presumption of innocence, abusers are frequently able to obtain release from jail while the criminal matter is pending. Escalated threats and acts of violence are common from abusers who are arrested. Particularly for those victims who weren't prepared to break from the relationship, this is a dangerous moment where they must prove their loyalty to the abuser or face violent consequences of their own. For these victims, reuniting with the abuser and protecting the abuser from legal consequences is the path that appears to offer them the surest relief from abuse in the short term.

Often, the most effective strategy employed by people wishing to help someone trapped in a domestic violence relationship is remaining patient, employing perseverance, and offering assistance. A victim will remain in their abusive relationship until they recognize a plan that offers reasonable assurances of safety and a path to a better life. This will be a personal decision each victim must reach on their own. It can be terribly frustrating to see a friend or loved one continue to suffer even after receiving counsel to seek a solution. Victims of domestic violence need their friends or loved ones to be patient in offering help and persistent in having that difficult conversation. Locally, assistance for victims is found with local law enforcement and advocacy services from Anna Marie's Alliance. Law enforcement can leverage the resources of the criminal justice system to help stop domestic violence. Anna Marie's Alliance offers comprehensive advocacy services to victims of domestic violence. Anna Marie's Alliance may be contacted by phone at 320-253-6900 or on the internet at <https://annamaries.org/>.

Working together, the community, victims, law enforcement, and advocacy will make a difference one victim at a time. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.