

Police have long had a haphazard, lax response to domestic violence within the ranks

A commissioner under fire and a trooper in jail underscore departments' struggles with domestic abuse

By [Dugan Arnett](#) and [Andrew Ryan](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 19, 2021, 2:26 p.m.



TYLER O'NEILL/ADOBE STOCK

The woman wanted help.

In a call late one night in September 2016, she told a 911 dispatcher that her husband — a

Boston Police Department captain — was “extremely emotionally and verbally abusive”

and refused to leave their West Roxbury home. What’s more, she said, her husband had abused her in the past, according to police dispatch records obtained by the Globe.

The officers who arrived that night — all of whom worked under her husband’s command — took his gun and removed him from the home without arrest. The department’s spokesman recently called it a verbal dispute, not a crime. Despite a Boston police policy requiring a domestic violence unit supervisor be on-scene, no one from that unit ever showed up.

A week after the incident, the veteran police captain was quietly reassigned, tasked with leading another major BPD district. The domestic violence unit would find no fault or no issues, and no internal affairs investigation would take place.

As for the allegation that the captain had previously been abusive? Internal affairs never launched an investigation.

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This case, just one of many reviewed by the Globe, highlights what many criminal justice experts and domestic violence advocates say is the haphazard — and historically lax —

response by law enforcement to the longstanding issue of domestic violence within the

policing ranks, where abuse is vastly underreported, experts say, and often overlooked by those in power.

“Most departments,” said Lou Reiter, a policing consultant and former deputy police chief with the Los Angeles Police Department, “want to just shut their eyes and cover their ears.”



Newly appointed Boston Police Commissioner Dennis White was abruptly placed on leave after details surfaced of a 1999 allegation that he'd pushed and threatened to shoot his then-wife. White denied the allegations at the time. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Even as Massachusetts' largest law enforcement agencies tout [“zero-tolerance”](#) for domestic abuse among their own, a Globe review raises questions about how officers here are investigated and how diligently policies are enforced.

Of the dozens of state police and Boston police officers who have been investigated over the past decade for domestic-abuse-related offenses, more than half have gone entirely undisciplined, records show — while some have remained on the job despite multiple allegations against them.

At least twice, women officers with the Boston police have complained that the department didn't take seriously their allegations of abuse against their husbands — also BPD officers. And while the department and Mayor Martin J. Walsh have praised recent proposed reforms, a department spokesman now says it's unclear if one of those key initiatives will be implemented — reclassifying domestic violence claims against officers so they are treated as possible cases of excessive force.

The issue has taken on added urgency in the wake of a pair of high-profile, domestic violence controversies that have engulfed the two of the state's largest departments.

Last month, newly appointed Boston Police Commissioner Dennis White [was abruptly placed on paid](#) leave after details surfaced of a 1999 allegation that he had pushed and threatened to shoot his then-wife, who is also an officer. Just four days earlier, a veteran State Police supervisor, Sergeant Bryan Erickson, was jailed in New Hampshire, [accused of choking and headbutting a woman](#) — as well as leading police on a high-speed chase from the scene.

Those cases stand out because of the prominence of the officers involved, but there are many more allegations of similar kind.

Since 2010, the BPD's internal affairs unit has investigated at least 68 cases of alleged domestic violence against officers, according to figures provided by the department. Of those, just 22 — or less than a third — have been sustained by internal investigators, with nine cases currently pending.

Only two Boston police officers have been fired for domestic-violence-related offenses in the last decade, and one of those was later reinstated through the Civil Service

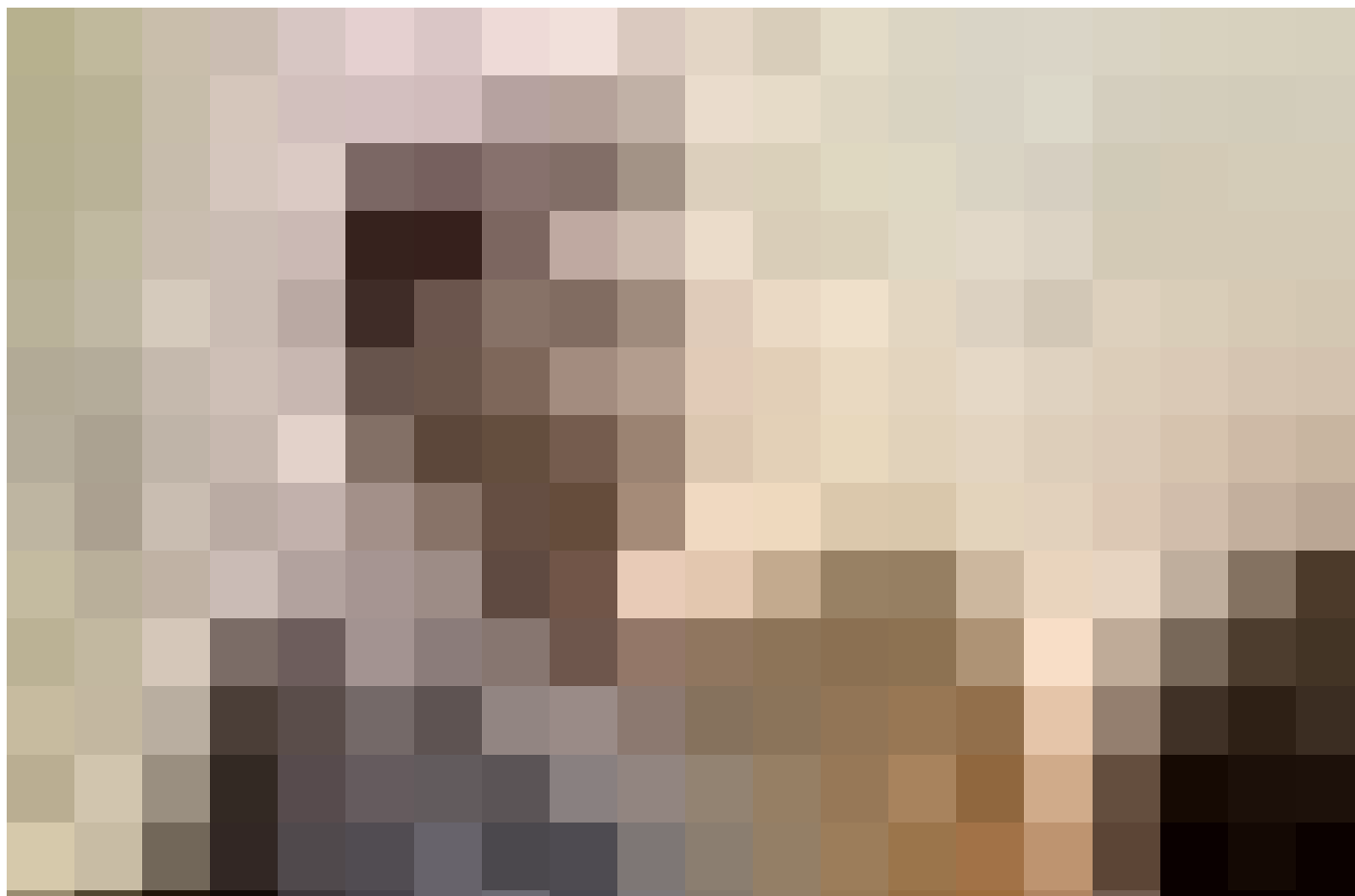
Commission.


Sergeant Detective John Boyle, a department spokesman, declined to provide the names of officers investigated — or disciplined — as alleged perpetrators of domestic violence. Boyle cited a state law that protects the privacy of domestic violence victims.

Boyle was responding to a Globe review of internal affairs records, court filings, and past media reports that found that a variety of officers who have faced serious accusations remain on the force today.

Among them:

◆ Captain Timothy Connolly, who in 2019 was arrested and charged with two counts of assault and battery of a household member after his wife, an attorney, [said he'd repeatedly pushed her and hit her once](#) across the back of the head as she packed to leave their Milton home.





Boston Police Captain Timothy Connolly waited to be called at his arraignment in Quincy District Court on Feb. 8, 2019. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Charges were dropped last year when she declined to appear in court. Connolly is currently on full duty; an internal investigation is pending.

◆ Officer Ramon Kelly-Chalas, the focus of a June 2010 call from a woman who was found “crying and hysterical” outside her West Roxbury home, according to a police report. She told officers that when she’d declined Kelly-Chalas’s repeated sexual advances, he “pulled out a large kitchen knife above his head and stated she would be bloody if she didn’t sleep with him.”

Kelly-Chalas denied threatening her, telling police he was “just fooling around.” He later admitted to some of the facts in the case, though criminal charges were eventually dismissed. He remains on the force.

◆ Detective Windell Josey, who while working in the BPD’s domestic violence unit in 2008, was arrested and charged with assaulting his girlfriend at his Randolph home. Though criminal charges were eventually dismissed, an internal charge of unreasonable judgment was sustained, a department spokesman said. Josey received a one-day suspension. In 2019, he was among the city’s highest-paid employees, taking home \$325,187.

Through Boyle, the department spokesman, all three officers declined to comment.

In a statement, Boyle said the department takes seriously any instance of domestic violence, and that its first priority is ensuring victim safety.

“Our rules and regulations make clear that no person is exempt, whatever his or her occupation, from the consequences of their actions that result in a violation of our code of conduct,” he said.

That commitment to victim safety, however, has been called into question by two women officers.

In 1999, the then-wife of BPD Commissioner White — also an officer with the BPD — said in an interview with a department investigator that she felt “the department was not taking her seriously,” according to an internal report.

White denied the woman’s claims and was not charged criminally. He is currently on leave as an independent investigation, spurred by Globe questions about his past, plays out. His former wife, who is still on the force, has declined to comment.

Those concerns were echoed a decade later, when a former BPD officer who’d left the department two years earlier alleged that then-BPD officer Leonard Brown, had been allowed to repeatedly violate a restraining order she’d taken out against him.



Boston police officer Leonard Brown left Quincy District Court after being charged with violating a restraining order, assault with a deadly weapon, and threatening to commit a crime on Jan. 9, 2008. The charges were later dismissed. ERIK JACOBS/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

When she sought assistance from a department captain, she recalled in court filings, she was told to be sure she always carried her gun. She said the department showed little concern for her situation.

State Police, too, have routinely found themselves investigating allegations of abuse among their own.

At least 35 State Police employees — ranging in rank from trooper to lieutenant — were investigated for domestic-abuse-related offenses between 2010 and the spring of 2020, according to records obtained by the Globe through public records requests. Roughly half of those troopers had findings sustained, meaning investigators found sufficient evidence to prove at least one of the allegations against them.

At least two current troopers — George Driscoll and John Hanna — have faced multiple domestic-violence-related investigations in the past decade. Supervisors found fault in at least one case for each man; Driscoll's discipline is pending, according to the agency, while Hanna was suspended 45 days without pay. Details on their cases remain unclear and are not outlined in the records obtained by the Globe.

State Police spokesman David Procopio responded to only some Globe questions, and declined a request for an interview with someone in State Police leadership.

“We have no tolerance for domestic violence and thoroughly investigate any allegation of such conduct by Department personnel,” Procopio said in a statement. “Protecting and serving victims and survivors of domestic violence is a priority and an integral part of our mission, and our policies reflect this steadfast commitment.”



At least 35 State Police employees were investigated for domestic abuse-related offenses between 2010 and the spring of 2020. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

The true scope of domestic violence within the larger world of policing remains difficult to gauge, experts say, muddled by vague police policies, inconsistent record-keeping, and a lack of transparency within agencies. What few studies do exist suggest those in law enforcement are [as much as four times more likely](#) than members of the general public to become violent with an intimate partner.

Police possess a skill set that can make them “particularly good abusers,” said Leigh Goodmark, director of the Gender Violence Clinic at Maryland Carey School of Law.

Officers are taught how to command, control, restrain, and track people. Their badge grants them credibility and unique access to the criminal justice system, where they have [relationships with prosecutors, judges, and social workers — as well as their fellow](#)

officers. That stature and implicit power can frighten victims into silence.

“They’re terrified” of calling the police, said Philip Stinson, a former officer and current criminal justice professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. “Because it’ll be his buddies that come out.”

As national views on domestic violence have evolved, some departments have taken steps to address the issue within their ranks.

Boston Police, for instance, adopted a nine-page policy in 2006 requiring any officer accused of domestic violence or facing a restraining order to immediately turn over his or her department-issued firearm, as well as any personal firearms as required by law. The officer’s district or unit commander is charged with ensuring those weapons are collected.

Asked to review the policy, Reiter, whose work includes helping agencies craft their own domestic violence policies, described it as, on paper, stronger than most.

How diligently it is enforced, however, remains unclear.

In 2016, a woman obtained a restraining order against Cesar Abreu, a Boston officer with a lengthy record of misconduct, after she said he hit her in the face during an argument and drove past her workplace, violating previous verbal orders from two judges to stay away from her.

“He carries a gun with him at all times, even when he is off duty,” the woman wrote in a petition for the protective order. “I am afraid he will get into one of his angry moods [and use] it against me.”

In April of 2017 — long after department policy dictated that Abreu’s personal and professional firearms should have been confiscated — department officials conducting a scheduled audit of station lockers discovered a Ruger 9mm handgun, 29 rounds of ammunition, and two magazines inside Abreu’s locker, according to court documents.

Police officials resealed the locker and continued with the audit, Abreu's attorney noted in court records, before a lieutenant assisting with the search "suddenly remembered" that Abreu was the subject of an active restraining order.

Abreu's attorney, Peter Pasciucco, said that before the restraining order was issued, Abreu's father had asked his son to remove the gun — which belonged to the father — from the father's home. Abreu then put it in his department locker.

Internal charges tied to several misconduct allegations, including this one, were brought and sustained, and he served a five-day suspension. Abreu was also charged criminally with violating a restraining order, though charges were later dropped after his attorney successfully argued that the search of his locker was unlawful because there was no warrant obtained. Abreu, who has faced at least nine internal investigations since 2010, remains an officer in the department today.

Reforms sparked by last summer's nationwide protests over police brutality have aimed to bring greater scrutiny to police misconduct.

A state police accountability bill signed by Governor Charlie Baker in December, for instance, gave a civilian-led panel the power to investigate alleged misconduct and revoke officer certification for certain violations. And in Boston, Mayor Walsh announced late last year that he was accepting all of the recommendations put forth by an 11-member task force that had examined the culture and policies of the Boston Police Department.

Among those recommendations: that acts of domestic violence by BPD employees be classified as the use of excessive force.

Task force member Jamarhl Crawford, who pushed for the recommendation, said it would ensure instances of domestic violence go on an officer's personnel record, better allowing the department to track problem officers. The task force called for the reform to be in place within 90 days, or by mid-January.

But in an interview recently, Boyle, the department spokesman, said that change hadn't been implemented — and couldn't say whether it would be. Boyle said the department was currently reviewing both the task force recommendations and state police reform legislation to determine if that change, and others, are feasible.

Regardless, some experts said, even the most stringent policies mean little without a culture in which cases of domestic abuse by police are taken seriously.

“From the highest levels, people have to think that these cases are important, they have to be intolerant of abuse,” said former prosecutor Jennifer Long, chief executive officer of AEquitas, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit working to improve the handling of cases of sexual and domestic violence, stalking, and human trafficking.

“When reports are made of abuse they have to commit to investigations to ensure the truth is uncovered and abuse isn't tolerated.”

Matt Rocheleau and Evan Allen of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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