Private Acts, Public Problems: Domestic Violence as a Policy Case Study

Abstract

This purpose of this study is to understand the factors that influence domestic violence policy decisions including information, available resources, and political culture. It examines four states – an individualistic, resource-rich state; a moralistic, resource-average state; and two traditionalistic, resource-poor states. States were chosen based on their full compliance with the National Incident-Based Reporting System, their categorization as individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic as defined by Daniel J. Elazar (1972), and their categorization as resource-rich, resource-average, and resource-poor based on 2010 Census data. By using each state as a case study, this research aids in understanding the domestic violence policies in each state, the history of those policies, the factors at work in policy decisions (i.e. information, resources, and the political culture), and the role of domestic violence experts/advocates in the larger policy realm. We find that the most important determinant of success is the political culture of each state as well as how salient the issue is to the public. The end result is that each state’s domestic violence advocates operate in unique environments at the state level which can inhibit trust and education.

**Introduction**

This study examines four states – an individualistic, resource-rich state; a moralistic, resource- average state; and two traditionalistic, resource-poor states. States will be chosen based on their full compliance with the National Incident-Based Reporting System (Justice Research and Statistics Association 2012) though their utilization of such data is yet to be determined, their categorization as individualistic, moralistic, or traditionalistic (based on Daniel Elazar’s political culture categorization), and their resources available (based on 2010 Census data; See Appendix 1). Through an in- depth look at these various states, we can better understand the policies in each state, the history of those policies, the factors at work in policy decisions (i.e. information, resources, and the political culture), and the role of experts/advocates in the larger policy realm.

In the first month of the new Trump administration, rumors have circulated among various news sources (Bolton 2017; Caldwell 2017; McNamara 2017) that funding for domestic violence services and prevention programs was going to be significantly cut if not done away with completely. This once non-partisan issue that allowed for members of the legislature to reach across the aisle, has become another partisan linchpin. Time will tell if the cuts come to fruition, but here’s what we know so far about how decisions have been in a few states.

**The Policy Problem: Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence encompasses any “physical, visual, verbal, or sexual acts that are experienced by a woman or girl as a threat, invasion, or assault and that have the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or taking away her ability to control contact (intimate or otherwise) with another individual (Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, and Russo 1999).” When described in this way it is hard to imagine that policymakers would not prioritize an issue that so many individuals, particularly women, (i.e. half of their constituents) face. But do policymakers really understand how rampant the issue is?

In the United States and around the world the issue of domestic violence has become epidemic. It is now one of the “leading causes of injury and death” for women (Wilson and Websdale 2006). The National Violence Against Women Survey estimates that American women experience approximately 4.8 million rapes and physical assaults at the hands of their partners annually (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Wilson and Websdale 2006). To add to this statistic, every year an estimated 1,400 women “die in domestic violence” and it should be noted that these deaths do not include “unidentified domestic violence deaths due to suicide, homelessness, HIV, or substance abuse (Wilson and Websdale 2006).” Organizations like the National Violence Against Women Survey attempt to track the incidence of domestic violence, but even their best efforts and projections do not mirror reality, because much domestic violence goes unreported.

Policymakers are in a powerful position to help address this issue, whether it comes to law enforcement response, victim’s services, and legal consequences for batterers. However, due to the private nature of the problem, policymakers have traditionally ignored it. But because the incidents of domestic violence, the number of related injuries, and the number of fatalities associated with it, policymakers can no longer ignore the problem. This private matter is now becoming very public in the services it requires (police, medical, etc.) and the number of people it affects.

**Theory/ Hypotheses**

This project is interested in understanding the process that leads to policy outcomes (decisions). It is based in social movement organization theory which defines a movement’s success in the following (or a combination of the following ways): gaining access to policy elites who have decision-making power, exerting influence on policy elites (including legislators, the courts, the media, and organizations in the larger government bureaucracy), achieving stated goals (policy reforms), and gaining access to funding and other forms of professional support (Bush 1992). With this theory and these goals in mind, this research seeks to know whether policy decisions are dependent on the political culture of the state, the available resources within the state, and the available information on a given policy issue. More specifically, we test three hypotheses:

1. States that collect and utilize data on domestic violence are more likely to have domestic violence (prevention) policies than states that do not.

2. Resource rich states are more likely to have domestic violence (prevention) policies than states that are resource poor.

3. States that have a moralistic political culture are more likely to have domestic violence (prevention) policies than states that have a more traditionalistic political culture.

This information was gathered using a semi-structured interview process with professional advocates working in the field of domestic violence. Individuals interviewed included policy analysts/researchers, lobbyists, and policymakers.

The female researcher conducted interviews via phone or traveled to the subject’s office where an interview was conducted. On average, interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded for the purposes of transcription and coding. During the interview, subjects were asked to describe the work they do, the political culture of their state, the information available regarding the issue of domestic violence, how policymakers use that information, and whether the financial resources in the state met the needs of the policy problem.

Delaware, Michigan, South Carolina, and Tennessee are on the list of the fifteen states that are fully compliant with the National Incident Based Reporting System. It should be noted that when I began this project there were only seven states that were fully compliant with the NIBRS system – meaning that 100 percent of the population is served by NIBRS and 100 percent of the crime within the state is being reported to the NIBRS system (Justice Research and Statistics Association 2013). Each of the chosen case study states were among the original seven having been certified prior to Spring 2013 (Justice Research and Statistics Association 2013).

For the purposes of this project, Delaware will provide an example of an individualistic, resource-rich state. Daniel J. Elazar created a system of categorizing states based on political culture – “the particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is imbedded (Elazar 1972, 84-85).” The individualistic political culture is one that places particular emphasis on “democratic order as a marketplace Elazar 1972, 94).” This means that politics is like any other business and must be maintained for “strictly utilitarian purposes” – to facilitate the demands made by the people it serves (Elazar 1972, 94).” This political culture is not known for dealing with private concerns and, in fact, tends to place a “premium on limiting community intervention (Elazar 1972, 95).” This exclusivity among the political elite tends to cause the public to view this kind of political culture as being “dirty” or “corrupt” – a system that works on the “favor system” or patronage. Public officials are often not willing to initiate new programs or increase government activity under this political culture unless publicly demanded; otherwise the status quo is generally favored. In terms of resources, Delaware is the sixth most resource rich state in the country and the second most resource-rich state in the sample of fifteen NIBRS compliant states (based on the average of taxes collected/state population from 2010 Census data).

Michigan will act as the example of a moralistic, resource-average state. Based on Elazar’s categorization, the moralistic political culture “emphasizes the commonwealth” as the “basis for democratic government (1972, 96).” This means that the function of politics is to create a good society. “[P]olitics is a public activity centered on some notion of the public good and properly devoted to the advancement of the public interest (Elazar 1972, 96).” Therefore, the effectiveness and goodness of government is determined by its “honesty, selflessness, and commitment to the public welfare (Elazar 1972, 97).” The moralistic culture views government as a force for good in which every citizen participates and issues are dealt with in order to increase public welfare, health, and safety. In terms of resources Michigan is the seventeenth most resource-rich state in the country and the fourth most resource rich state in the sample of fifteen NIBRS compliant states. However, of the seven original NIBRS compliant states, Michigan is second in available resources (Delaware is the first). Due to Michigan’s placement within the index, it was important to differentiate it as neither rich or poor but resource-average (with the majority of states falling somewhere between $2,000 and $1,500).

South Carolina and Tennessee will provide the traditionalistic, resource-poor case study states. According to Elazar, the traditionalistic political culture is “rooted in an ambivalent attitude toward the marketplace coupled with a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth (1972, 99).” Under this system a hierarchy is established based on a relatively small and self-perpetuating group based familial ties and social standing (Elazar 1972). This is not to say that government is not viewed as an instrument of good, it is just one that is limited by the existing social order. In this culture, “good government” involves “maintaining and encouraging traditional patterns and, if necessary, their adjustment to changing conditions with the least possible upset (Elazar 1972, 99 and 102).” Political elites play a custodial role rather than an initiatory one under this system (Elazar 1972). South Carolina is the forty-first in terms of state resources and the second most resource poor state in the sample of fifteen NIBRS compliant states. Tennessee is the fourth most resource-poor state in the country and is the most resource-poor state in the sample.

This sample of states, though limited based on selection bias, does allow the research to paint a more complete picture of factors that influence policy decisions based on the variables of interest. More importantly, the states allow for the testing of academically accepted labels and norms against the reality of domestic violence policy in the field.

Delaware

The state of Delaware first began publicly recognizing the needs of domestic violence victims in 1946 when the Community Legal Aid Society (CLASI) was established and began to aid victims with legal services (Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2013). Since that time, the state has been considered a model for the movement and on the forefront of domestic violence policy and advocacy efforts.

In terms of political culture, Delaware is considered individualistic. This categorization is based on economics. Policymakers are not concerned with private needs but with the marketplace unless the public demands new programs or policies to deal with a specific issue. Interestingly, when asked about the political culture in Delaware, advocates had very positive things to say. They described the environment as “very respectful” and “very receptive.” And some went onto explain that the state’s policymakers are regular people who are very approachable and (typically) want to work collaboratively. Furthermore, because of how positive the environment is and how much it embraces the movement, it is different from other states. In fact, when policymakers (or “certain individuals”) tried to circumvent the advocates in the attempt to pass harmful legislation (legislation having to do with custody rights), their actions backfired. They faced harsh scrutiny from other policy elites and the public. Ultimately, the policy failed.

As a state, Delaware embraces the domestic violence/women’s movement. But the key to the movement’s success in the policy realm and with policymakers is in staying visible and vocal, “As long as we continue to put ourselves [at the table], we will have a seat. But that’s also the problem. You can’t ever back off on this work. If you aren’t seen, then you won’t be heard.”

After discovering just how supportive the state and the policymakers in Delaware are to the domestic violence movement, it was important to find out about the kind of information the advocates use when lobbying for the cause. The consensus is that domestic violence research is really important for the job they are doing because policymakers like numbers. They like to know how an issue affects the people they are representing. So advocates certainly use statistical research but they also rely on anecdotal evidence that comes in the form of victims’ stories. One advocate makes her case saying, “I’ve learned through the years that it’s important to share the facts for those who are into research. They want to know about numbers and experiences. But I also believe that sharing victims’ stories is what captures people’s interest and passion.”

Although Delaware takes part in and is fully compliant with the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), the advocates interviewed tend to turn to national level statistics. When asked why this is the case when state-level stats are available, they cite the lack of strong research programs (i.e. research universities) in Delaware. The movement and advocates working within it have made it a point to build a strong relationship with the Women’s Studies program at the University of Delaware over the last several years, but the program is limited in its ability to do state-level evaluation. Therefore, advocates tend to borrow statistical information from other sources.

One source that does provide state-level statistics is the Delaware Domestic Violence Coordinating Council. The Coordinating Council uses NIBRS data when compiling its Annual Report. However, advocates caution about the use and reliability of domestic violence statistics. What one must always remember is “the numbers aren’t real” – this was a phrase repeated over and over. Advocates would go on to explain there are a number of reasons for this, including the lack of reporting, the interpretation of the event by responding police officers, and the way in which the event is reported (more specifically the relationship between victim and perpetrator).

The general population and many policymakers feel that the reported statistics represent the entire population of victims and therefore the population that must be targeted for help and intervention. However, those working within the movement are often more concerned about the population that doesn’t report. During the interviews one advocate explained, “Four percent of the individuals who have died as a result of intimate partner violence had reached out for services prior. So if the majority of people dying in Delaware [at the hands of their partners] have never reached out for services, then that’s a problem.” This problem became evident through the state’s Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team -- a team dedicated to reviewing domestic violence fatalities to see where the system could be better and more effective in dealing with victim’s, batterers, and the needs of the family involved.

Delaware is considered a resource-rich state based on the Resource Index compiled for this project. However, based on the interviews, it became obvious that even with the (financial) resources available in the state, the needs of the movement and the needs of victims are not being met. One of the places where the funding issues are most readily recognized is in the ability to provide services (including shelter) to victims with disabilities, elderly victims, and those being abused by same-sex partners. Anytime victims have special needs it becomes increasingly difficult to treat them and/or provide them with services. However, this issue does not extend to therapy -- victims are not being turned away from therapy. Yet, the resources are not meeting the needs of the population affected by domestic violence.

Overall, the political environment, the willingness of service providers to collaborate, and the amount of information available all aid in furthering the mission of the domestic violence movement in Delaware. But one advocate is quick to point out that the geographical size of the state plays a major role in promoting collaboration – the state is only made up of three counties. A person can drive across the entire state in two hours. Close proximity helps to foster a sense of community, promote collaboration, and allows for more fundraising opportunities. Even with these positive factors at play, she cautions, “We need to know what [the victim’s] needs are and we need to understand how our actions affect them... those unintended consequences, what is positive, what is negative. When we don’t include their voices in the process, we begin to function as systems that are looking out for our own interests and what’s best for us not them.”

Michigan

Although domestic violence was not considered a public health issue until the 1970s, Michigan had a bit of a head start in recognizing the issue. As early as 1846, an advocate for women’s rights named Ernestine Rose spoke to the Michigan General Assembly on the lack of protection of women under the law (The Michigan Women’s Historical Center & Hall of Fame 2013).

The debate about acts of violence against women did not officially begin until 1971. It was then that one of the first rape crisis centers (in the country) was founded in Ann Arbor --The Women’s Crisis Center (The Michigan Women’s Historical Center & Hall of Fame 2013). By 1974, rape and sexual assault were labeled as violent crime under The Michigan Criminal Sexual Conduct Act (The Michigan Women’s Historical Center & Hall of Fame 2013). During this time, special attention was also being paid to the issue of domestic violence. The National Organization of Women’s Wife Abuse Task Force established a network of private homes in Michigan to be used to shelter victims of domestic violence (The Michigan Women’s Historical Center & Hall of Fame 2013). It was also during this time that concerned individuals (the foundation of what would eventually become the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic Violence) were able to help in lobbying for and establishing the Michigan Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. Over the years the board has been made up of experts associated with the issue, including attorneys, judges, physicians, law enforcement officials, advocates. These board members are appointed by the Governor and approved by the Senate (Michigan Department of Human Services 2014).

The political culture in Michigan can best be described as a moralistic political culture –one that values political/governmental action as a way to improve the community (Elazar 1972). Policymakers are not only concerned about the economy but with social issues. But when asked to describe the political climate in the state, advocates tended to describe the current financial crisis in Michigan, which was very bad during the Great Recession due to problems in the auto industry. This economic down cycle was particularly difficult for those representing social issues. Funding became increasingly difficult, whether discussing money available through government programs, grants, and/or donations from individuals. Unfortunately, this siege mentality over finances permeated every legislative issue not just the issue of domestic violence (and/or sexual assault). Simply put, it makes the job of the advocates even more difficult, especially when more resources are needed to accomplish previously stated goals – whether that be in creation or in implementation. To compound the problem are the short term limits in Michigan. Elected officials have six years in the House and eight years in the Senate. Therefore, advocates have to continuously build relationships with and educate legislators on their issue (Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004). It is not only hurts education efforts, but term limits often lead to inexperienced legislative leadership.

Although Michigan is considered a resource-average state in this sample, the financial crisis the state has faced over the last several years has taken its toll. This was evident in my interviews, especially when discussing recent setbacks for the movement. Advocates described the reduction in services funded by the government – citing Medicaid reductions and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) cutbacks. Some also pointed to the demand for residential, non-residential, and intervention services, which have all increased, and the current budget cuts (including cuts to related programs like food banks) have not helped but hindered them. One advocate commented, “There have been places we have gotten small increases nationally but when there are cuts to ancillary services and other things that survivors need to be able to be safe and whole and autonomous, we have been cut too.” Furthermore, when services are cut it is difficult to work at the survivor’s direction. Instead of being able to refer them by name to an advocate or other expert, they become a number in a very large and complicated bureaucratic system. In other words, budget cuts have ripple effects.

As in other states, most domestic violence funding comes through the Violence Against Women Act and FVPSA (Family Violence Prevention and Services Act) money. Although this is federal-level funding, much of it is dispersed via block grants through state-level agencies. This makes funding more complicated and, although it may look like state dollars, most, if not all of the money received is federal money. This is not to say that those who provide direct services are not receiving money directly from the state. Other sources of income (money to help with legislative and policy efforts) come from dues, donations, and specific fundraising efforts. Regardless of the way the money is cobbled together every year, it is a complex matter.

When talking to policymakers about domestic violence and sexual assault, advocates find it is important to present both statistical data and anecdotal information. However, during meetings that are often brief, advocates must make a decision about what will serve their needs the best – how much time is available, what is the policymaker asking for, and what is the goal. When providing statistical information, advocates try to tailor the information to the lawmaker’s district, including how many calls programs have received, how many people have been sheltered, and how many children have been helped. In general, domestic violence experts feel it is very important that policymakers understand that people in their districts are being helped by the dollars being voting on.

In other situations, advocates feel that survivor stories are the most compelling evidence they can provide. However, it is important to understand that one survivor’s story does not provide a template for every survivor. This fact makes statistics appealing. Although Michigan has state-level crime statistics available through the NIBRS system, most advocates prefer to use direct service request numbers. As found in other states and with other advocates, those working in Michigan are skeptical of the crime statistics. This is due to several factors, the most predominant of which is the prevalence of underreporting by victims and the lack of accuracy in reporting by law enforcement departments and databases.

Regardless of the undeniable financial issues and the preoccupation of policymakers with their next election (due to short term limits), domestic violence is still considered a major issue. Over the past two decades, advocates have witnessed a positive shift in the way domestic violence (and sexual assault) are treated as political issues. It has shifted from being a private, familial matter to a major, public health issue. This is not to say that there still aren’t problems with understanding of the issue. According to a lobbyist, one of the biggest challenges advocates run into are well-intentioned legislators who introduce legislation that isn’t necessarily well informed, thus having to contend with unintended consequences. He/She explains that these are tricky issues and hard conversations to have and goes on to say, “How do you write policy to protect victims, not allow perpetrators to use it against victims, and doesn’t allow perpetrators to get away with their actions? It’s about crafting laws but also creating flexibility.” Like other states in this sample, Michigan and its advocates tend to prefer state level domestic violence policies to national policies. One advocate described it as not only a point of pride for the state but also an issue of implementation.

South Carolina

South Carolina has been “actively involved” in combating domestic violence for the last two decades (South Carolina Department of Social Services 2013). Since 1996, the legislature has approved and funded prevention and treatment programs to assist victims of spousal abuse; “gradually expanding” the budget for the programs provided (SCDSS 2013).

Up until the late 1980s, the South Carolina Department of Social Services was responsible for the state’s “eight emergency shelters, one crisis intervention program, and two intervention services programs.” These services were located in larger cities within the state and run on a combined state and federal budget of $800,000 (SCDSS 2013). Due to the lack of adequate funding, rural residents and victims of domestic violence were often left with little to no intervention or prevention services. But even in areas where services were available, SCDSS was very much aware of the growing need for services – almost 50 percent of those seeking emergency shelter were denied access due to lack of resources (SCDSS 2013).

Since 1996 and the implementation of the Violence Against Women Act, South Carolina has been able to expand its services and promotion of the issue. Furthermore, the Department of Social Services has expanded its services to not just meet the needs of victims but to provide treatment of batterers through the Batterers Intervention Treatment Program (SCDDS 2012). Today, South Carolina recognizes domestic violence as a crime.

According to Elazar, South Carolina can be categorized as a traditionalistic political culture where one would expect to find a paternalistic culture concerned with maintaining the existing order. In this culture, policymakers are interested in the continuation of traditional patterns or the status quo.

Generally, social issue advocates describe South Carolina’s historically negative views of women. Many advocates would argue that women still have a very low status in the state. This is illustrated in the annual report that is released detailing women’s wages, women’s healthcare, and access to women’s services; South Carolina consistently has a below average or near failing grade.

In general, South Carolina tends to have a very paternalistic mindset. Many people have this idea that women need to be rescued, that if “we” (as a community) just “knock the bad guy out” then the issue has been addressed. This isn’t the case. Advocates are not just concerned with addressing the issue of the batterer, but with empowering victims and survivors.

This kind of empowerment and prevention becomes further complicated in a state that prefers to not talk about sex and, in turn, not talk about sexual violence. As an advocate stated, “We aren’t teaching women how to protect themselves. So when there is a problem, we tend to blame the victim.” This isn’t specific to South Carolina, but it does seem to be more extreme than in other states. Therefore, the movement and those affiliated with it, are not always welcome.

Another example that advocates provided as a way to illuminate the bittersweet nature of the domestic violence policy battle comes in the form of reporting standards. South Carolina is no different from any other state in terms of lack of reporting of domestic violence by victims. However, advocates are concerned about how domestic violence misdemeanors are cited and reported by responding law enforcement. Advocates reported that it has become commonplace to have criminal domestic violence written up as traffic tickets – more specifically as parking tickets. This creates a whole host of problems for victims needing services, for crime reports being accurate, and for advocates needing to make policymakers and the public, understand the rampant nature of such violence (Williams-Agee 2013).

The current lack of reporting by victims and the responding practices by police have been problematic for advocates and policy professionals. However, even with the current numbers, advocates cite statistics released by the Violence Policy Center to further her point, “As of two years ago, South Caroline is number two in the nation for the number of women killed by men. The numbers have been worse over the last two years, so who knows? Perhaps we will take the number one spot from Nevada. We always seem to be going back and forth with them. It’s terrible (Williams-Agee 2013).”

Advocates across the state have been attempting to put a fatality review team in place but have run into a lot of opposition to the idea and bureaucratic roadblocks. Those roadblocks have a lot to do with the territorial mentality among the various systems that would be associated with a fatality review team (i.e. medical, legal, law enforcement, etc). But advocates in the state are committed to pushing for collaboration among these groups through the formation of a fatality review team.

When discussing the issue with policymakers the information available to advocates is very important – both statistical and anecdotal. Williams-Agee says that both are very important when talking about policy but that anecdotal has more of an impact – “it really puts a face on the issue (Williams-Agee 2013).” She also feels that state-level statistical data is important and most of the time more effective than national level statistics, but due to the issues surrounding collection and reporting advocates don’t find crime statistics to be all that compelling (Williams-Agee 2013). Therefore, statistics reported by the state’s direct service providers are favored due to their link to victims.

The current resource allocation in South Carolina (as in all my case study states) is not meeting the needs of domestic violence victims. There are currently several underserved populations in South Carolina, and therefore many victims are unable to access resources or being turned away when they do. These groups include those in dating relationships, those with disabilities, and those in homosexual relationships. Funding for direct service providers has not increased since 1989, and continues to be a huge issue (Williams-Agee 2013). Overall, most advocates would argue that domestic violence is not considered a priority in South Carolina.

Advocates feel that this mind-set is perhaps the biggest challenge faced in attempting to affect policy. From one advocate’s perspective, direct services are receiving adequate funding for emergency situations. However, victims’ and survivors’ needs are not being met in the long term. The allocated resources are not enough to deal with long-term care and daily living needs (i.e. food, clothing, and shelter) (Barton 2013). But again, this as an economic mobility issue. An issue that is directly tied to the educational and employment opportunities available to women in South Carolina. As one advocate stated when asked about the climate in South Carolina, “We like our traditions in South Carolina and we don’t like to get involved in traditional matters like what happens within the home or family (Feeney 2013).”

Tennessee

Tennessee is another example of a traditionalistic political culture. Elazar would describe the culture as being paternalistic and elitist. Involvement in politics is considered a privilege reserved for only those who have a “legitimate claim to office (Elazar 1972, 100-101).” Recently, the state legislature has turned over from Democratic to Republican. This turnover and conservative ideological shift has created some challenges in terms of philosophy (Kimbrough 2013). But more than anything, advocates feel that the nature of domestic violence and the sheer number of people it affects speaks for itself and trumps party affiliation. This goes for elected officials and individuals in the community. Public awareness is growing and therefore it’s becoming a larger part of the political agenda. Due to new information that is becoming available at the community level through threat assessments and state-level murder rates, elected officials are starting to view domestic violence as a public health and safety issue rather than (strictly) a women’s issue. This is changing the perspective, challenging the traditional mentality surrounding domestic violence, and educating lawmakers.

Like most states, Tennessee did not see a surge in concern for domestic violence until the 1960s and 1970s. It was then that the battered women’s movement (part of the women’s rights movement) made the issue part of the political agenda and drew attention to it as a public health problem. Today, Tennessee’s domestic violence law states that domestic assault can occur between current or former spouses, roommates, relatives, or those in a dating relationship (Kimbrough 2009; Kimbrough 2013). Individuals can be charged for assault (misdemeanor or aggravated), sexual offenses, stalking, and harassment (Kimbrough 2009; Kimbrough 2013). At this point, most of these are considered misdemeanors unless there is a history of violence or the violence is considered aggravated in nature and at that point becomes a felony resulting in harsher penalties (Kimbrough 2009; Kimbrough 2013).

Currently, Tennessee has 65 local programs that address the needs of domestic violence and sexual assault victims (Kimbrough 2013). These programs include shelter services, individual and group counseling services, legal services, and referral services. “It is important that we take a holistic approach to eradicating the cycle of violence (Kimbrough 2013).” During the interviews, experts felt that the resources available in the state were meeting the needs of victims. However, they also feel that the movement, as a whole, needs more money. Kimbrough provided an example with the immigrant legal clinic: “We are meeting the needs of victims but at one point we had 200 people on a wait list. I had to keep telling my staff that this wasn’t their fault. We just cannot accept all these cases. It’s the fact that we don’t have the resources to help everyone with a viable claim. So yes, we are meeting the needs of victims but we need more money in order to meet the needs of *all* victims (2013).”

One part of the population that was discussed during the interviews was those individuals living in rural parts of Tennessee. As in most states, there are large rural areas in Tennessee that makes access to victims’ services difficult. In order to combat this, advocates have implemented a rural-areas grant to help victims of sexual assault. The state has been divided into regions, and each region has board members that sit on the Coalition’s Board of Directors. These individuals provide information about and access to the regions they are a part of. This is invaluable to understanding the needs in the area, how policy could help or hurt victims, what implementation would involve, and how much and what kind of technical assistance each region needs. These relationships not only give advocates an inside look at each area of the state, but also access to other professionals working for justice.

Tennessee has made strides in the kind and amount of information on domestic violence it has available. The community crime assessments, the direct service statistics, and NIBRS data really help to round out the statistical information the state and its advocates have access to. Based on my interviews, it is this state-level data that policymakers find most compelling because it allows for them to talk directly about how the issue is affecting the communities they represent. The numbers, although not perfect and perhaps not even “real,” are compelling. What often proves even more compelling is the anecdotal data. Advocates argue that even though the statistical data show the extent of the problem, it is the anecdotal information that really pulls at the heartstrings. When advocates or victims testify and provide actual stories -- the atrocities that victims live through and the aftermath of dealing with such horrors – it puts a face on the issue, it makes it personal, and it creates urgency in addressing the issue. Therefore, it is important that advocates have access to and understanding of both statistical and anecdotal data when lobbying policymakers and the public. Both types of information are important to painting an accurate picture of the extent of the problem and those that it affects.

**Results**

Each of the four case study states faces its own set of challenges. For the advocates (across the board), money was often a factor in their ability to do their job to the best of their abilities. For others, a contentious political environment placed hurdles in front of them. Yet no one interviewed felt that they lacked information about domestic violence. The researchers found this interesting, especially since very few of them put faith in criminal justice numbers and most did not feel comfortable using them to educate and inform policymakers.

Over the course of nine months, interviews were collected and hundreds of pages of transcripts and notes were distilled down. Based on observations (what was said and what went unsaid), domestic violence decisions are most affected by the political culture in the state. This includes whether or not the domestic violence advocates feel they have a voice, how accessible policymakers are, whether or not there is a strong champion for the issue (either in the legislature or in the executive branch), and how informed the public is on the issue. Although there were exceptions to the labels Elazar created, this seemed to be not only the driving force behind the progressiveness of the state’s policy and its implementation but also in the comfort and confidence the advocates had in speaking with me.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

This research is based in social movement organization theory which defines a movement’s success in the following (or a combination of the following ways): gaining access to policy elites who have decision-making power, exerting influence on policy elites (including legislators, the courts, the media, and organizations in the larger government bureaucracy), achieving stated goals (policy reforms), and gaining access to funding and other forms of professional support (Bush 1992). In these ways, domestic violence prevention and the advocates who represent the issue are being successful.

However, we cannot say that any of the case study states are necessarily better in terms of having prevention policies. Most are similar in that domestic violence is covered under assault and battery laws. It does not seem to be the information or the resources that make a difference in the way the issue is viewed and handled. Instead, it is the political culture, or perhaps even more importantly the politics, within the state that seems to have a direct effect on domestic violence public policy decisions.

When we began this project, we believed that states that had access to more monetary resources, felt it had a moral obligation to create a better society, and was able to provide state-level domestic violence statistics to policymakers, would have more progressive public policies and be better able to protect and aid victims of domestic violence. Although these were the expectations, the end result was not nearly as straight-forward as we had predicted. Based on the interviews, the original hypotheses do not hold up but this is not to say that nothing has been gained by this research.

The most interesting and unfortunate finding was the lack of trust. Trust was an issue in different ways. First, when attempting to set up interviews and, sometimes, even during the interviews themselves, the researchers found that advocates did not necessarily trust us as outsiders. Often times, those working for social justice need to make sure that they don’t reveal too much or confide in the wrong person. This is especially true if that person has ulterior motives that differ from the movement’s goals and values.

There was also a palpable lack of trust between professionals working in the various systems that aid domestic violence victims. Advocates did not necessarily trust policymakers to create policy void of unintended consequences for victims. In turn, policymakers did not necessarily trust advocates to give them accurate data about domestic violence, its victims, and individuals who perpetrate the violence. Advocates, responding police officers, and the court system were similarly distrustful of one another. Each system has its own needs, goals, and ways of accomplishing things. Unfortunately, because there is not a coordinated and consistent response to domestic violence and its victims, mistrust runs rampant.

The issue of trust will continue to taint interactions between the responding systems until a coordinated response is created and agreed upon. This coordinated response will not only provide a template for dealing with emergency situations but for dealing with long-term care, public education, the creation and implementation of public policy, and the collection of data.

Future research should be concerned with this lack of trust and how to remedy it. It should provide understanding of the ways in which political culture as understood in the literature differs from political culture or the political environment in the field. Elazar provided a baseline of political culture labels to test. At times these labels worked and in other situations they did not. What caused this? Was it the policy issue? Is Elazar outdated? Or is it simply a function of politics in theory differs from politics in the field?

Furthermore, there is a question of decision-making versus implementation. Future research should consider the implementation of existing domestic violence policy and how the variables of interest (i.e. information, resources, and political culture) directly affect the next step in the policy process.

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**Appendix 1: Resources Index**

Table 1

*Resources Based on 2010 Census Data*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State | 2010 Total Tax | 2010 Population | TAX/POP Average |
| Delaware | $2,769,731,000 | 897,934 | $3,084.56 |
| Michigan | $22,205,870,000 | 9,883,640 | $2,246.73 |
| Tennessee | $10,513,788,000 | 6,346,105 | $1,656.73 |
| South Carolina | $7,312,534,000 | 4,625,364 | $1,580.96 |

Table 2

*Resources Based on State Coalition Annual Reports*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **State Coalition** | **Total Revenue** | **Total Expenses** |
| Delaware | $888,593 | $885,287 |
| Michigan | $2,149,771 | $2,122,766 |
| Tennessee | $2,204,855 | $2,226,730 |
| South Carolina | $706,720 | $700,216 |

**Appendix 2**

Table 3

*State Political Cultures: The National Configuration by Daniel J. Elazar*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Moralistic** | **Individualistic** | **Traditionalistic** |
| Vermont | Connecticut | Texas |
| Minnesota | Nebraska | Oklahoma |
| Utah | Wyoming | West Virginia |
| Maine | Massachusetts | Kentucky |
| Michigan | Rhode Island | Florida |
| Wisconsin | New York | New Mexico |
| North Dakota | Ohio | Alabama |
| Colorado | Illinois | Georgia |
| Oregon | Pennsylvania | Arkansas |
| New Hampshire | New Jersey | Louisiana |
| Iowa | Indiana | Virginia |
| Kansas | Nevada | South Carolina |
| California | Alaska | Mississippi |
| Washington | Delaware | Tennessee |
| Montana | Maryland | Arizona |
| South Dakota | Missouri | North Carolina |
| Idaho | Hawaii |  |