

THE SILENT VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAM: DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF A SCHOOL- BASED VIOLENCE INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAM

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Abstract

An initiative started in 2001 with the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) that was intended to raise the awareness of educators to problems related to domestic violence and child abuse has grown into a comprehensive program about the multiple forms of violence that can impact children and their families. Since the launch of the program in 2003, approximately 15,000 faculty and staff of Dallas ISD have been trained; referrals and inquiries related to the abuse have increased (~70 percent); and the city has witnessed a drop in the number of domestic violence and child abuse offenses. This presentation will discuss the planning, development, implementation and adaptations of the “Silent Victims of Domestic Violence” program, its successes and the future of the recently updated program.

Background

Youth violence in America’s school systems has been a significant concern of parents, educators, law enforcement professionals and students for many years. Violent incidents that cover a broad spectrum ranging from name calling to murder occur every day in our educational systems. The City of Dallas is no exception.

Student enrollment figures for the school year 2005-2006 indicated that 161,972 predominantly minority (93.5 percent) persons attended classes in the Dallas Independent School District ((Dallas ISD). Many of these children live in high risk situations where they are exposed to violent and abusive environments characterized by child abuse, neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, and community violence. These conditions are further exacerbated by socioeconomic factors that include poverty, unemployment and crime, with many of these students living in areas of the city where the median family income is below the county average of \$49,062.00 (US Bureau of the Census, 2000).

An examination of the socioeconomic factors and rates of family violence has revealed that the areas with the lowest per capita income and lowest median family income correspond to the areas of the City of Dallas with the highest rates of domestic violence and confirmed child abuse. While this analysis does not confirm a link between violence and poverty, the co-localization does raise concerns about the link between socioeconomic issues and the exposure of children to multiple risk factors.

Estimates derived from statistics compiled for the City of Dallas indicate that approximately 22,000 (~6

percent) of the youth in the City of Dallas are living in environments where they are at significant risk for victimization by abuse or neglect (Appel and Holden, 1998) or harmed by the violence between their adult caregivers. Still, because of the diverse behaviors associated with the multiple risk environments, as well as the co-morbid development of these conditions in each situation, establishing the true rates of exposure for children that fall into these categories proves difficult.

The Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS) 2004 records of Child Protective Services (CPS) indicate that 3,581 (29.6 percent) of 12,106 child abuse and neglect investigations were confirmed, finding that 5,518 children were living in abusive situations in Dallas County (TDPRS, 2005). However, underreporting of child abuse (Newton, 2001) complicates the efforts to assess, reliably, rates of child abuse / neglect in Dallas.

Domestic violence between the adult caregivers also poses a serious risk to the children living in these violent environments. In the City of Dallas, 14,371 family violence offenses (1,147.1 DV offenses/100,000 population) were reported during 2004, a figure that many agree may be under-reported by 50 percent or more (Bachman et al. 1995). Dallas Police Department records documenting the presence of young children at the scene of domestic violence incidents have indicated the presence of children at approximately 31 percent of the 14,371 domestic violence offenses for 2004. Additional data from the Dallas Police Department indicates that an average 1.2 children were present at each domestic violence incident (Dallas Police Department, personal communication, 2003). Accepting the national estimates of 50 percent underreporting of domestic violence offenses, an estimated 10,700 children could potentially be at risk for exposure to domestic violence in the City of Dallas alone.

A sizable body of evidence demonstrating a link between domestic violence and child abuse suggests that as many as 40 percent of all children who may be living with adults who are involved in abusive relationships are also targets of abuse and neglect (Appel and Holden, 1998). Based on this data, it is reasonable to expect that thousands of children enrolled in the Dallas Independent School District are exposed to domestic violence while they are simultaneously victims of child abuse and neglect.

A victimized child in a school setting may exhibit a broad range of signs/symptoms indicative of the abuse (reviewed in Cole et al., 2005). The research of Dr. Bruce Perry in Houston suggests that many of the problems manifested by a child who has been traumatized by violence at home are linked to neurological complications effecting one or more regions of the brain (Perry, 2001). Maladaptive stress responses which, under healthy conditions, serve to protect the body, instead wreak havoc upon the autonomic nervous system, immune function, and brain development and function. Brain dysfunction that is manifest as emotional and behavioral problems, ineffective executive functioning, dysregulation of basic physiological functions, and uncontrolled impulsivity are coupled with physical injuries, health concerns, eating disorders, truancy, inconsistent or poor academic performance or thoughts of suicide to name but a few of the signs suggestive of an at-risk child (Appel and Holden, 1998).

The effects of these problems are not limited to just the victimized child. A child living in a violent home may manifest these problems in a classroom, effectively disrupting a teacher's ability to present lessons. A child who is showing signs of poor academic performance could be mislabeled as ADD/ADHD or in need of Special Education services (Famularo et al., 1996). A child exhibiting behavioral problems could be redirected, unnecessarily, to an alternative school setting (Thomas, 1995).

School system performance can also be impacted by students exposed to the violence or to a troubled youth in the classroom. Standardized testing scores may reflect an inability on the part of a child to effectively focus on the subject matter. Ultimately, each of these scenarios places a strain on an educational system that is

already struggling to provide basic services to its student population and meet established standards of performance.

The Silent Victims of Domestic Violence (SVDV) program is an effort of considerable magnitude that was created as a community response to the concerns of school administrators to problems faced by children living in violent homes. Despite its complexity, this program meets the basic recommendations for effective violence intervention and prevention efforts identified in a publication produced in April 2000 jointly by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice entitled *Safeguarding our Children: an Action Guide* (U.S. Dept of Education, 1998). The report, a follow-up to the 1998 report entitled *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998) defines the fundamental criteria for the establishment of a school safety program.

The criteria, which included: 1) education, 2) early intervention and 3) intensive intervention, were established in response to the events similar to the violence of Jonesboro, AR (March 24, 1998), Springfield, OR (May 21, 1998), and Littleton, CO (April 20, 1999). During these incidents, multiple students and faculty were seriously wounded or killed by a student(s) during a shooting spree on a school campus. Each report details strategies aimed at preventing these types of incidents and many of the recommendations are applicable to the population of students who, on a daily basis, deal with recurring abusive experiences in the home. In many cases, the violent student responsible for the spate of school shootings may, in fact, be a long time victim of abuse.

Other evidence supports the direction of this program. An Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) publication entitled *Safe from the Start: Taking Action on Children Exposed to Violence* (U.S. Dept of Justice, 2000) describes a series of key components needed for development of a successful intervention program. The OJJDP report recommends eight principles for organization and stimulation of efforts to address children's exposure to violence that include working together, beginning early, addressing child development needs, safety, making resources available and working from a sound knowledge base. Together, these principles were the foundation of the collaborative process in Dallas County that began in 2000 with the formation of the Children and Domestic Violence Subcommittee of the Child Abuse Prevention Coalition (CAPCO) and ultimately led to the development of the Silent Victims of Domestic Violence program with the Dallas Independent School District. This report examines the development of the training and intervention components of this comprehensive program which is designed to meet the needs of all student populations.

Methodology of Program Development

This program was established to help children of all ages who are exposed to violence at home and, ultimately, afford each child the opportunity for healthy development and successful academic performance. Supported by the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Dept of Education), the "Silent Victims of Domestic Violence" program meets the guidelines of the legislation established under the U.S. Department of Education to support standards for optimal student achievement. Through increased awareness of professional educators and health care providers, these students are identified and directed to services within the school district and the community to address concerns triggered by the violence at home.

At the start of the development of this program, the need for aggressive prevention and intervention efforts was well documented by the annual Dallas County Community Plan (Dallas County Office of Budget and Evaluation, 2001). Prepared by a multidisciplinary panel of professionals from the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, the report identified specific needs and resources for the Dallas County community that were relevant to a variety of criminal justice issues including child abuse, children living in multiple risk

environments, domestic violence, juvenile crime, law enforcement, mental health, mental retardation, substance abuse and victims of crime.

In September 2001, an initiative in the Vickery Meadows area of Dallas was organized by Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas in collaboration with a local elementary school. The early efforts were intended to raise the awareness of teachers and support staff to key issues related to domestic violence, child abuse and exposure to violence in the home, a significant concern for this region of the city.

In late September, a coalition of professionals from law enforcement, health care, education and social service agencies convened to begin development of educational materials for the teachers, counselors and staff of the entire Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD). The coalition consisted of representatives from the Dallas ISD, Generations Center (a Dallas-based, not-for-profit agency), New Beginning Center (a local domestic violence program), Dallas ISD's Youth and Family Centers, the Dallas Police Department and the United States Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Region VI). These key contributors were additionally supported by the Parkland Foundation, Texas Health Resources and Genesis Women's Shelter in Dallas. Each partner committed their expertise, time, and dedication to children and families in the development of this comprehensive, multifaceted program.

The Scope of the Program

This program has been developed in multiple stages and has successfully: 1) raised the awareness of the targeted professionals to the signs of abuse and violence, 2) enhanced opportunities for referrals within the school district, and 3) offered counseling services within the school district and the community for those children and their families affected by violence. This program has undergone adaptations and modifications periodically to meet the evolving needs of the children, their families and the professionals who serve these students.

Video Production

Initially, the scope of the project was limited to the production of a brief informational video for educators that described the effects of exposure to domestic violence upon children. With input from the members of the development committee and under the guidance of a professional script writer a video script was developed. The video was produced by the Media Production Unit of the Dallas ISD with the support of the General Superintendent, the Chief of Police for the Dallas Police Department and members of the development team. The 28-minute video began airing in February 2003 at the first training session for Dallas ISD and has been viewed by well over 15,000 Dallas ISD educators, administrators and staff members.

In June 2005, production of an updated video began. The updated version once again stressed the significance of childhood exposure to violence in the home, potentially related problems that may appear in the classrooms and on the campuses of the districts, safety concerns and appropriate interventions. The second video, also produced by the Dallas ISD media production unit began airing to the Dallas ISD during the summer of 2006 and continues to air daily over DSTV, the school district television network.

Reference Manual Preparation

Accompanying the first video was a reference manual that provided support materials to the staff of the Dallas ISD. The manual contained general information about violence in the home, recognition of abuse, safe and appropriate intervention strategies, and resources within the district and the community. In early 2006, to enhance the scope of the material that was available, revisions of the original manual were undertaken. The

updated manual includes sections on sexual violence and substance abuse as well as an updated resource section with the most current information about available assistance for the children and their families. The updated manual will eventually be distributed in an electronic format, either in a CD format or accessible via an internet based format.

Training Program

In February of 2003, after 18 months of preparation and development, the video and resource manual were unveiled. Each of the 218 schools within Dallas ISD received a single copy of the video and manual for use by the staff and counselors. The program developers also launched the first workshops on the issues related to family violence and abuse. The initial two-hour training was presented to approximately 200 counselors, administrators and law enforcement personnel. Subsequent trainings were expanded to a full day based upon recommendations of the Dallas ISD staff members.

During the ongoing evaluation processes, the program content was also examined for the effectiveness and thoroughness of the presentation and its relevance to the issues associated with the violence experienced by the children and their families. As the program evolved, it became more comprehensive and inclusive of the recommended topics. The training agenda for a typical one-day workshop devotes 3-4 hours on general information and the dynamics of violence experienced by students while at home. The remainder of the training is devoted to practical applications of the information and includes recognition of the warning signs indicative of abuse/violence and neglect; safe and effective intervention techniques; and, available resources for the children and their families.

Crisis Counseling

In 2005, the Dallas ISD and Generations Center partnered to establish a program that provides crisis counseling services for at risk youth who are dealing with trauma related to abuse and domestic violence. The intervention strategy combines well established protocols from a variety of disciplines that address the very dynamic needs of a highly vulnerable population. The professional response is enhanced by the services of a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), a professional familiar with the complex dynamics of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and an understanding of the care that must be exercised to avoid further harm to the victim, other students and faculty members. Supported by a Safe and Drug Free Schools grant from the Office of the Governor for the state of Texas, the LPC provides counseling services for the children and their families.

Counseling services are provided in response to referrals made through established protocols of the district. The referral process is set in motion when a faculty or staff member recognizes signs suggestive of an at-risk youth. Such signs may include behavior problems, academic performance concerns, physical evidence of exposure to violence, emotional disorder(s), persistent health concerns or any combination of these indicators. Referrals are made from each of the 218 Dallas ISD school campuses to the Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Prevention Office. The at-risk children and their families that are referred for services through the established protocols within the school district are evaluated and matched with resources based upon the individual needs of the child and non-abusive parent.

Currently, the program's LPC offers crisis intervention services for the students and families at one elementary school location selected because of the needs of the community and student population. Plans for an expansion of the crisis intervention services into other Dallas ISD campuses are currently being explored.

Parent Training

Beginning in September 2005, the Dallas ISD and Generations Center collaborated to present a series of workshops at the Dallas ISD parent training academies. The parent training academies are annual events that focus upon the most important family issues facing parents. The materials focus upon issues such as discipline and abuse, family violence and media violence, child safety, and internet threats. These topics were identified by parents as the most relevant topics about child safety, violence and abuse that they face each day. Having completed its second year, the awareness program has been presented to the parents of hundreds of Dallas ISD students with plans for additional opportunities already identified.

Program Results and Discussion

Training

A key function of the Silent Victims of Domestic Violence program is the training program that has been conducted since February 2003. The initial offering of the training agenda was presented to approximately 200 counselors, nurses and law enforcement officers within Dallas ISD. Since that initial offering, there have been approximately 500 counselors, administrators, nurses and teachers trained to recognize potential signs indicating that a child is at risk for exposure to violence at home and the appropriate responses to the revelations. After having received the in-depth training, many of these counselors and educators have returned to their campuses and assisted in presenting the basic program information to their colleagues. This approach to the training has been instrumental in raising the awareness of approximately 15,000 Dallas ISD teachers and staff to the issues related to exposure to violence in the home and the signs indicative of that exposure.

Training Evaluation

Since the first training exercise, data have been collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the training program. At each training exercise, data are collected to examine the existing levels of understanding of issues related to domestic violence, child abuse, dating violence, sexual assaults and childhood development. In addition, pre and post training testing is conducted in order that the program administrators may effectively measure the impact of the training upon the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) of the audience.

Survey results detailed in Table 1 (next page) indicate that the responses were mixed about the participants' initial levels of understanding about youth violence and childhood development. The results indicate that a majority of the respondents considered themselves to be knowledgeable or very knowledgeable about domestic violence, child abuse or domestic violence effects upon child development respectively. However, the majority of the respondents rated themselves as possessing limited or no knowledge of dating violence and sexual assault.

The pre- and post-training evaluation instruments are brief survey instruments of 253 statements each that were adapted from a survey developed by Lynn Short, Ph.D. while at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, GA. The original survey, designed for health care workers, is an inventory of the knowledge, skills and attitudes about domestic violence. Participant responses to each statement are measured using a seven point Lickert scale with responses ranging from 1: absolutely disagree to 7: absolutely agree.

The adapted survey examines the knowledge, skills and attitudes about interpersonal violence against children and adults. The evaluation of the KSAs of the program audience was categorized into five broad topics that include:

- Witnessing Domestic Violence
- Domestic Violence
- Child Abuse

- Recognition
- Intervention

Table 1: Results of the pre-training survey regarding prior knowledge/skills/attitudes about interpersonal violence and its effects upon children.

	Domestic violence	Child abuse	Dating violence	Sexual assault	DV and child development
A no knowledge	4	1	2	2	2
B very limited knowledge	13	12	20	13	15
C limited knowledge	65	49	105	101	78
Total A+B+C	82	62	127	116	95
D Knowledgeable	133	145	92	100	114
E very knowledgeable	10	18	7	10	17
Total D+E	143	163	99	110	131
Total (A, B, C, D, + E)	225	225	226	226	226
n = 226					

The data that was collected from the multiple training exercises (n = 226) was coded to one of the five broad categories listed above. Descriptive statistics were prepared for each statement (pre and post) and for the total of all answers in each category. Subsequently, t-test analysis (2 sample assuming unequal variances) was performed on each statement and category to identify significant measurable changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The results indicate a statistically significant change in the KSAs among professional educators, counselors and nursing staff as measured by the pre and post training test scores (mean pre-test score = 107.8; mean post-test score = 118.75) (P (one tail), $p < 0.0001$). Among the broad categories, four of the five categories revealed statistically significant changes (detailed in Figure 1, Appendix) in KSAs with only the child witnessing of domestic violence category showing no significant changes between pre and post training scores.

Referrals within Dallas ISD

The launch of this program in 2003 saw an immediate increase in the number of inquiries and referrals regarding child abuse and domestic violence from within the district. The Child Abuse/Domestic Violence Office had averaged approximately 10,000 calls per year prior to the debut of the program in February 2003, mostly inquiries about abuse and reporting. However, with the establishment of the program, this office has witnessed a sustained increase in referrals and inquiries. Data from the Dallas ISD showed that the numbers of referrals from the Child Abuse/Domestic Violence Prevention Office have increased each year since the 2002 – 2003 school year with the only exception occurring during the 2005-2006 school year. The 05-06 drop

in the number of referrals is an artifact of an incomplete data set for the school year and not a decrease in the numbers of referrals for the school year. Figure 2 (Appendix) details the increases in referrals that have been made beginning with the 2001-2002 school year.¹ Figure 2 shows the five-year trend of Dallas ISD referrals for child abuse and domestic violence related issues. Referrals were made through the Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Office of the Dallas ISD.

Domestic Violence Reporting

In the years since the program development began, the city of Dallas has experienced a reduction in the number of domestic violence offenses reported to law enforcement. Records from the Texas Department of Public Safety have shown that the city of Dallas has experienced a 26.98 percent drop in rates of reported offenses, a change that has outpaced the remainder of the municipalities in Dallas County with populations of 100,000 or more (Figure 3, Appendix). For these cities, the rates of domestic violence have been constant or slightly lower over the same time period with the exception of the city of Mesquite, Texas which witnessed a 14.81 percent drop in the rate of domestic violence, nearly half of the percentage drop for the city of Dallas. However, the correlation between the drop in domestic violence for the city and the Dallas ISD program has not been confirmed and will require additional studies to demonstrate the link between the Dallas ISD program and offense reports.

Counseling Services

This component of the program has been operational for one year. Services have been provided at a single elementary school in an area of Dallas that has been identified to have rates of domestic violence and child abuse above the mean rates of abuse for the city of Dallas. During the year, with a limited schedule of counseling services, 33 children and their families have received services that include individual and group counseling services and limited play therapy services. These services have been offered for behavioral and emotional problems related to exposure to violence and abuse at home. Many of the children and their parents have received services at multiple counseling sessions that are offered on campus at the school for the convenience of the children and their parents.

Documented effectiveness of this component of the program is not yet available. Evidence of the success of the counseling services is limited to anecdotal reports of improved behavior and academic performance of the children receiving counseling services. Teachers and counseling staff at the school have reported that the program participants have exhibited demonstrable changes in their behavior since beginning the program. Formalized evaluation is currently planned to document the effectiveness of the counseling component of this program.

Summary and Conclusions

The Silent Victims of Domestic Violence Program is a progressive, proactive idea with modest beginnings, that developed into a multi-phased program with potential for recognition as a best practices model. Based upon sound principles for intervention, this program provides multiple levels of service that benefits the student population, families of these students, teaching staff, the Dallas ISD and the community. Evidence of its success is seen in the numbers of referrals to the Child Abuse/Domestic Violence Prevention Office of the Dallas ISD; the measurable changes in staff knowledge about this significant social issue; and reported improvement in behavior and academic performance of the children receiving counseling services. In

¹ The Silent Victims of Domestic Violence Program was introduced during the 2002-2003 school year. The dataset was incomplete for the 2005-2006 school year.

addition, decreases in the rates of domestic violence offenses reported to the Dallas Police Department have outpaced changes in the rates of abuse for other cities in Dallas County.

The Silent Victims of Domestic Violence program has undergone a number of significant changes in the four years since its inception. A number of milestones have passed with many more still on the horizon. In January 2006, Generations Center convened an advisory group to assess the content and effectiveness of the educator program in anticipation of the release of the second iteration. Professionals representing a broad range of disciplines from across the state, parents, and students from Dallas ISD have committed their valuable time and expertise to serving on one or more subcommittees that focused upon specific aspects of the program. In September 2006, the updated program was debuted to educators and counselors in the Dallas area. Eventually, this program will be converted into an electronic format with broad availability to professionals from many disciplines.

The program also began the second year of parent trainings to address issues of violence and abuse in the family. The information presented is used to raise awareness among parent and community groups. With increased awareness has come the need for increased demand for crisis counseling services. A second school site has been identified and is now preparing to offer these specialized services. In particular, the second site will target the Hispanic population for which there exists a strong need for these services.

Finally, as this program has developed, it became increasingly apparent that it has been successful in its mission. Staff and parents are becoming increasingly aware of the potential benefits of this program. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the children are showing signs of positive changes after receiving the services. Testing indicates that staff members are receiving useful tools for practical application. All of this evidence suggests that this program has the potential to be highly successful in helping children and families recover from violent incidents, to adapt through counseling services, and, ultimately, reduce the impact of violence against children and promote healthy physical, emotional and intellectual growth and development.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Detail of category scores from pre- and post training evaluation

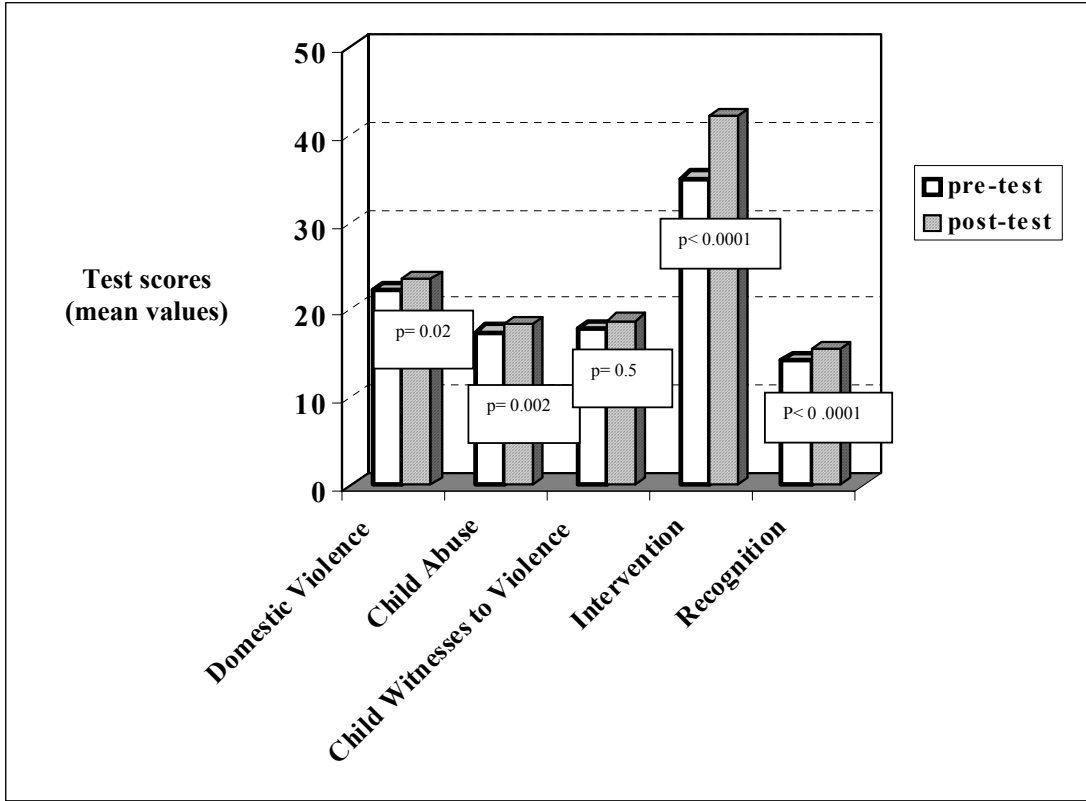


Figure 2. Child abuse / domestic violence office referrals

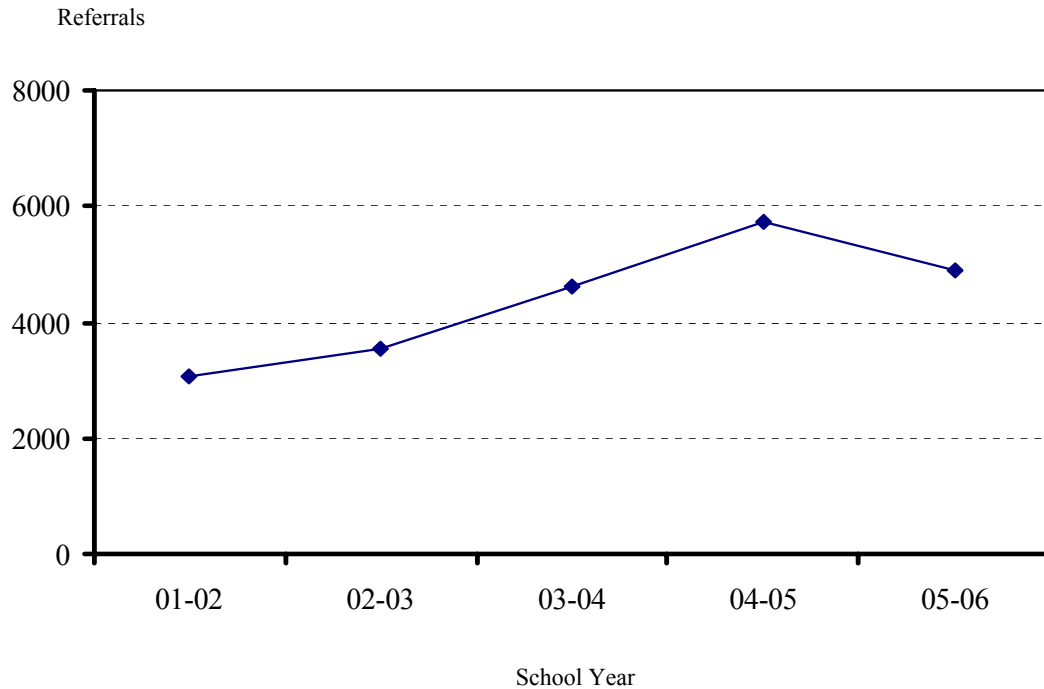


Figure 3. Rates of domestic violence for Dallas County cities with populations exceeding 100,000 residents were compared against the rates for the City of Dallas (solid line, square symbol)

