The modern law enforcement approach to domestic violence has saved the lives of countless women, and it has also raised new concerns about how survivors are perceived and what communities can do to empower them.

Dana Cuomo, a graduate student in the Department of Geography, spoke about her research on domestic violence in front of the American Association of University Women’s State College chapter at Schlow Library on November 3, 2014. The talk included analysis of research from her dissertation project, supported by a 2014-2015 AAUW American Fellowship.
Cuomo studies intimate partner violence in Centre County, which she noted has more programs to help survivors of domestic abuse than most other areas.

“Centre County is in many ways thought to be a leader in the response to domestic violence,” she said.

One reason for this is the relatively low volume of other types of violent crime, allowing law enforcement to focus more funding on preventing and responding to domestic violence, but Cuomo noted that there’s still room for improvement.

Cuomo explained that historically, domestic abuse was seen as a private affair, to be kept quiet and handled within the home. Until the 1980s, the state response to domestic violence was limited, and in some cases there were even laws allowing it. Police were slow to respond to reports of domestic violence, if they responded at all.

One of the tipping points that changed how the police responded to these types of cases was the horrific case of Connecticut resident Tracy Thurman, Cuomo said. In 1983, Thurman called the police for help after her ex-husband arrived at her house threatening to hurt her. The police responded slowly, and by the time they arrived, her ex-husband had stabbed and nearly beaten her to death. Although she had sought legal protection in the form of restraining orders, she had been ignored by law enforcement because she was married to the perpetrator. Thurman sued the town and police department for violating her civil rights, and was awarded $2.3 million.

Cuomo pointed to the Thurman vs. City of Turrington case, and the fear of liability that finally prompted state action. Soon after, several states had established domestic violence laws and updated policing strategies to prevent domestic violence.

Initial research showed that arrest in domestic violence cases often deters the offender from continued abuse, Cuomo said. As such, preferred arrest policies and evidence based prosecution models became more prominent.

“This was a complete reversal of the response seen until this point,” Cuomo said. Preferred arrest--referring to police prerogative to arrest an offender regardless of the victim’s willingness to press charges-- as well as evidence-based prosecution both ensure that action will be taken against an offender.

But victims are not always cooperative, Cuomo said, because they do not always view a criminal justice system response as the most helpful or safe. This reluctance to assist authorities can often frustrate law enforcement and prosecutors. Referring to her field and interview notes, Cuomo shared the local District Attorney’s perspective: “Often, right after they have been abused, they are scared, realizing how serious their situation is, but after about a week, the abuser has ‘done the honeymoon thing,’ and the woman may reevaluate her situation.

Cuomo pointed out that there are many reasons why women choose to stay with their abuser, including financial worries, issues of child support and custody, and the possibility that the woman being victimized is still in love with her abuser.

Cuomo has seen these scenarios play out first-hand, through her work as a victim advocate in the domestic violence unit of the State College Police Department, and later through her research on intimate partner violence in Centre County.

Among those who attended her speech were the Ferguson Township Police Chief Diane Conrad, State College Borough Police Chief Thomas King, and members of several women’s groups, including Anne Ard, the Executive Director of the Centre County Women’s Resource Center.

“Once the easy questions are answered, we need to start looking at the hard questions,” Ard said. “Dana’s research helps us look at the hard questions.” The ‘easy questions’ like the law enforcement response, are habitual now, but the hard questions, like
determining unintended consequences and responding to survivors and their needs, are what Cuomo’s work is addressing.

Of the AAUW members in attendance, Christine Bishop said that she was impressed by Cuomo’s work. “She is giving us the ability to put research behind issues that are important to raise awareness for,” said Bishop.

“The more talk about domestic violence, the better,” added AAUW member Pat Kephart. “The more open we are about it, the less we’re going to see it being a problem.”

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