Domestic Violence Context

Nearly half of all fatal edged-weapon encounters arise from domestic or family calls; these encounters are more proximate, more likely to involve a third party before discharge, and twice as likely to involve a hostage.

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Current	**1.0**	**25 October 2026**
Evidence grade	Data snapshot	Reviewed by
Data supported	**S-20261002**	**Under review**

> **Figures in this report** are drawn from snapshot `S-20261002`. All statistics are computed from the suppressed public aggregate; no case-level data are included. Cells with fewer than 5 records are suppressed (shown as —).

Takeaway

In the decade from 2015 to 2024, 43 percent of fatal police encounters involving an edged weapon arose from domestic or family calls. Compared with encounters in all other call categories, domestic encounters occur at closer range, are markedly more likely to involve physical contact with a third party before the first shot, and are twice as likely to involve a hostage situation.

Background

Domestic and family calls represent one of the most hazardous categories in patrol work. Decades of officer-safety literature have identified the domestic-violence response as a context in which unexpected lethal violence can occur rapidly and from unexpected directions. Yet most of that literature addresses assaults on officers; far less is known about how the domestic context shapes fatal edged-weapon encounters specifically — in terms of proximity, timing, and risk to third parties already present at the scene.

The present report uses the Edged-Weapon Response Lab dataset to describe and compare fatal edged-weapon encounters flagged as domestic or family calls against all non-domestic encounters, across four dimensions: engagement distance, encounter duration, third-party contact, and officer injury.

Research context

The domestic call has been identified across decades of patrol research as one of the most structurally unpredictable call categories, in part because the dispatch description rarely captures the full situation on

arrival and in part because the residential environment limits the officer's ability to control approach distance and egress (Myhill & Johnson, 2016). The co-occurrence of mental illness with domestic violence is well documented in the homicide literature: Hanlon et al. (2012) found that psychotic domestic homicides differ neuropsychologically from non-psychotic cases, with impaired frontal regulation and elevated rates of weapon-reaching behavior in the presence of persecutory ideation — a pattern relevant to the high mental illness rates in the EWRL domestic category (Hanlon et al., 2012). Weapon selection in intimate partner violence tends to be opportunistic rather than premeditated: the implement used is typically what was accessible at the scene, with household edged implements — kitchen knives and utility blades — prominent in the weapon profile of IPV-related lethal violence (Szalewski, 2017; Szalewski et al., 2019). This opportunistic selection pattern is consistent with the EWRL finding that the kitchen knife is the weapon most heavily associated with the domestic violence flag (52.5% of kitchen knife cases) and that domestic calls account for 43.1% of all fatal encounters.

What the existing DV literature has not previously documented in a systematic, longitudinal way is the tactical geometry of police encounters at the moment of intervention: the distances at which force is used, the rate at which subjects are already in physical contact with a third-party victim on officers' arrival, and how these parameters compare with non-domestic encounters involving the same weapon class. The EWRL dataset addresses that gap.

Data and methods

Dataset. The analysis draws on the full Edged-Weapon Response Lab dataset (N = 1,970), covering fatal police encounters involving an edged weapon documented in the Washington Post Fatal Force database (Washington Post, 2025) and Mapping Police Violence (Mapping Police Violence, 2026) for January 2015 through December 2024.

Domestic violence flag (E_DV). Cases are flagged as domestic or family encounters when the incident was dispatched as a domestic call, or when narrative coding established that the subject and at least one other person present had a domestic or family relationship. The flag is binary and does not distinguish between intimate-partner violence, other intra-family violence, or disputes involving cohabitants. In total, 850 of 1,970 cases (43.1%) carry the domestic flag.

Engagement distance and encounter duration are defined as in EWRL Report 1 (/reports/engagement-distance-and-duration). Distance was known for 609 domestic cases and 792 non-domestic cases. Duration was known for 702 domestic cases and 938 non-domestic cases.

Third-party contact is recorded as physical contact between the subject and a person other than a responding officer — a bystander, cohabitant, or hostage — at any point during the hostile sequence. Pre-discharge contact (ICPre) and post-discharge contact (ICPost) are coded separately. The hostage flag identifies encounters in which the subject held or restrained a person as a negotiating tool or shield.

Officer injury (E_IP) records whether any responding officer sustained a physical injury during the encounter, irrespective of severity.

Suppression. All counts are drawn from the suppressed public aggregate. Cells with fewer than five records are not displayed. For more information see EWRL Methods — Suppression and privacy (/methods/suppression-and-privacy).

Findings

Engagement distance

Domestic encounters are substantially more proximate than non-domestic encounters. Among cases with a known engagement distance, contact-range events — where the subject made physical contact with another person before the first shot — account for 47.1 percent of domestic cases (287 of 609) compared with 36.0 percent of non-domestic cases (285 of 792). Fully 64.0 percent of domestic cases with a known distance (390 of 609) resolved within five feet, against 51.1 percent of non-domestic cases (405 of 792). The mean engagement distance was 5.2 feet in domestic encounters and 6.6 feet in non-domestic encounters.

Figure 1. Engagement distance in fatal edged-weapon encounters by domestic flag, 2015–2024 (domestic: n = 609; non-domestic: n = 792; cases with unknown distance excluded).

Encounter duration

Domestic encounters are somewhat less likely to resolve in the short band and modestly more likely to extend to ninety minutes or longer. Among encounters with a known duration, the S band (under 90 seconds) accounts for 66.4 percent of domestic cases (466 of 702) compared with 72.4 percent of non-domestic cases (679 of 938). The H band (90 minutes or more) accounts for 7.1 percent of domestic cases (50 of 702) and 4.7 percent of non-domestic cases (44 of 938). The longer tail in domestic encounters is consistent with the higher rate of standoff and hostage situations in that group (see below).

Figure 2. Encounter duration in fatal edged-weapon encounters by domestic flag, 2015–2024 (domestic: n = 702; non-domestic: n = 938; cases with unknown duration excluded).

Third-party contact and hostage situations

The most pronounced difference between domestic and non-domestic encounters involves third-party risk. In domestic encounters, the subject had physical contact with a person other than a responding officer before the first shot in 34.1 percent of cases (290 of 850). In non-domestic encounters, the corresponding figure is 14.0 percent (157 of 1,120) — less than half the domestic rate.

Hostage situations are similarly concentrated in the domestic category. Of 143 hostage cases in the full dataset, 85 (59.4%) are domestic encounters, yielding a hostage rate of 10.0 percent in domestic cases versus 5.2 percent in non-domestic cases.

Figure 3. Third-party risk profile in fatal edged-weapon encounters by domestic flag, 2015–2024.

Officer injury

Despite the greater proximity characterising domestic encounters, officer injury rates are lower in the domestic category. Officers sustained documented injuries in 7.4 percent of domestic encounters (63 of 850) and 10.8 percent of non-domestic encounters (121 of 1,120). This pattern may reflect the operational dynamics of many domestic calls: the subject's immediate attention is often directed toward a co-present victim rather than toward responding officers, reducing the frequency of direct officer–subject contact at the moment of force.

Crisis and suicidal state

Domestic encounters have a higher rate of suicidal crisis coding than non-domestic encounters. The suicidal flag is present in 37.8 percent of domestic cases (321 of 850) compared with 31.7 percent of non-domestic cases (355 of 1,120). Mental illness coding is similar across groups: 62.0 percent of domestic cases and 60.4 percent of non-domestic cases carry the illness flag.

Interpretation

What the findings show. Fatal edged-weapon encounters in domestic contexts are structurally different from non-domestic encounters in ways relevant to training and response planning. The domestic encounter is, on average, more proximate, more likely to have produced harm to a third party before officers used force, and substantially more likely to involve a hostage component. These features compound the tactical challenge: officers arriving at a domestic call involving an edged weapon may face a situation in which a subject is already in physical contact with a victim.

What the findings do not show. This dataset is conditioned on fatal outcomes. It cannot describe the far larger population of domestic calls that do not end in a fatal encounter, nor can it establish that the domestic context caused any of the observed differences. The DV flag identifies a contextual relationship between parties but does not capture the full complexity of individual incidents.

What would change the conclusion. A systematic comparison with non-fatal edged-weapon encounters in domestic contexts — including calls resolved through de-escalation or subject compliance — would be needed to assess whether the distributions here are representative of domestic edged-weapon calls generally, or reflect selection into fatal outcomes.

Limitations

The domestic flag was assigned from dispatch category or narrative review. In some cases, a domestic relationship between parties may not have been apparent or recorded; the flag likely undercounts encounters with a domestic dimension. Body-worn camera footage was present in only 29.6 percent of domestic cases (252

of 850) and 34.6 percent of non-domestic cases (388 of 1,120), limiting the availability of direct evidence for distance and duration coding in both groups.

The third-party contact variable records physical contact between the subject and a third party; it does not record proximity of third parties who were present but not physically contacted. Encounters in which a bystander was nearby but not reached are not captured.

How to cite

Machacynski, B. (2026). *Domestic Violence Context* (EWRL-26-002). In *Fatal Edged-Weapon Encounters, 2015–2024* (Version 1.0). Edged-Weapon Response Lab. https://droptheknife.org/reports/domestic-violence-context

Data snapshot. S-20261002, deposited at Zenodo https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22650264 (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22650264).

References

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Figures

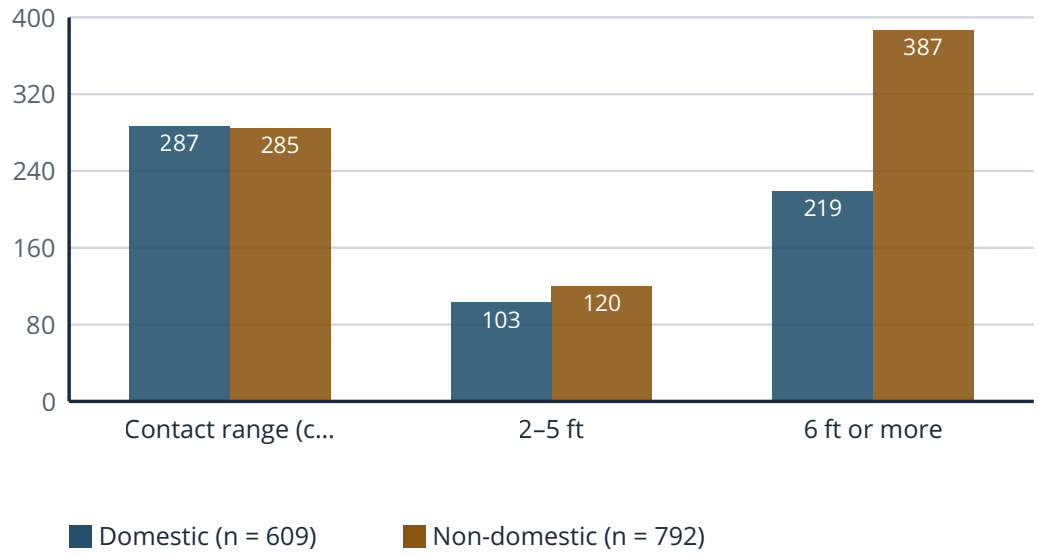

Figure 1. n = 1401. 569 records excluded because not coded. Cases with unknown distance excluded. Distance bands collapsed from full distribution. Contact range = subject made physical contact before first shot.

Category	Domestic (n = 609)	Non-domestic (n = 792)
Contact range (coded 1 ft)	287	285
2–5 ft	103	120
6 ft or more	219	387

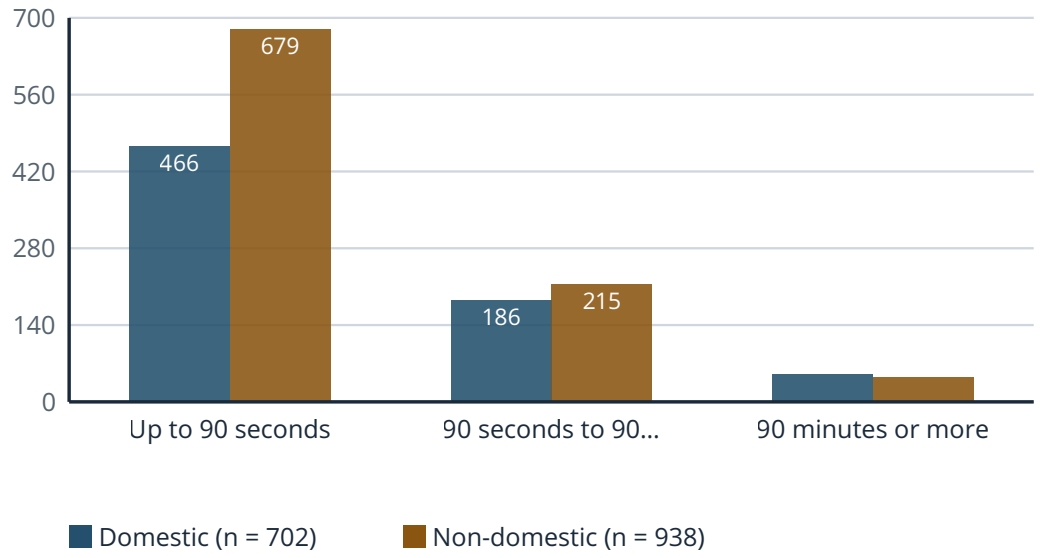

Figure 2. n = 1640. 330 records excluded because not coded. Cases with unknown duration excluded.

Category	Domestic (n = 702)	Non-domestic (n = 938)
Up to 90 seconds	466	679
90 seconds to 90 minutes	186	215
90 minutes or more	50	44

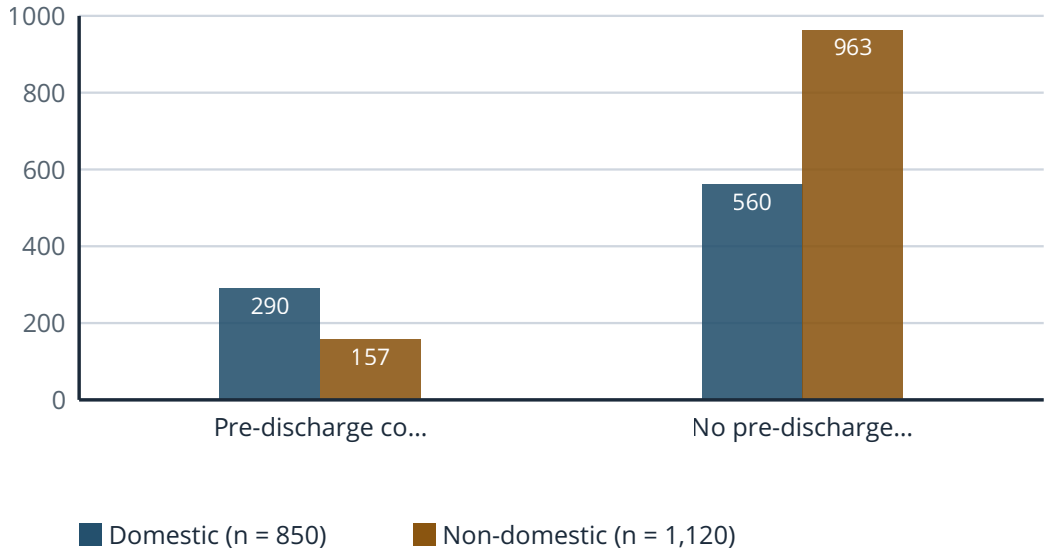

Figure 3. n = 1970. Third-party contact = physical contact between subject and a person other than a responding officer before the first shot.

Category	Domestic (n = 850)	Non-domestic (n = 1,120)
Pre-discharge contact with third party	290	157
No pre-discharge contact	560	963