

NEWS DESK

CAN DOMESTIC ABUSERS KEEP THEMSELVES ACCOUNTABLE WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING?

Photograph from Shutterstock

One morning in early April, Brian Heiman and Melissa York, employees of the Kansas Department of Corrections, had just begun a weekly Zoom class with the half-dozen men in their batterer-intervention program. It was the group's second week of meeting remotely, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. They started by discussing a recent murder, in Wichita, of a woman and her eight-year-old daughter; police suspected the woman's boyfriend of the crime. Heiman and York planned to use the case in class to illustrate how domestic abusers isolate their victims: the mother and child had been dead for three days before their bodies were found.

A regular member of the class joined the call a few minutes late. John (the name is a pseudonym) is hard to miss in any context: he is enormous, with a linebacker's build and a deep bass voice. Before quarantine, he kept his hair carefully styled, but today it was wild, unkempt. He was in the car when he dialled in, with his phone mounted on the dashboard; as he drove, the other participants on the call could see trees and buildings passing behind him. His phone was muted, so he could hear everyone else, but they couldn't hear him. At one point, he pulled into what looked like the parking lot of an apartment complex and got out of the car, leaving his phone behind. A minute or two later, he got back into the car and started driving again. Heiman and York asked him to unmute himself, but he didn't respond. Again and again, throughout the call, John parked his car in a new spot, got out, and then returned, a few minutes later.

In batterer-intervention programs, a facilitator—sometimes a reformed batterer—leads a discussion aimed at helping abusers recognize the causes of domestic violence, develop empathy for themselves and for others, and identify negative thought patterns that can precipitate acts of abuse. All of the men in Heiman and York's class were attending it by court order, as a condition of probation or of parole for a domestic-violence-related conviction. Partway through the call, York asked the other men on the line what they thought John was doing. None of them answered.

York told me that, during the call, John had appeared focussed, self-contained. "He seemed mission-oriented," she said. Heiman remembered his demeanor as being somewhat different. "He was very activated—it looked like he was in a rage," he said. "He was out of control, in a controlled way." Heiman grew up in an abusive home, and, through his computer screen, he recognized in John the anger he used to witness in his father.

Suddenly, John unmuted himself and began ranting. "He was saying that men get in trouble for being manipulated, and for having their hearts broken," York said. John intimated that, if the murdered woman in Wichita had not manipulated her boyfriend, she would still be alive. Then he began talking about his own relationship: how his girlfriend had broken up with him the night before and moved out of the home that they shared together; how she wasn't responding to his calls and texts; how he knew that she'd been cheating on him. He had taken care of her, he said, given her a place to live, showered her with gifts—now he knew that she'd been using him all along. It was then that Heiman and York realized that John was not aimlessly driving around—he was hunting for his ex-girlfriend. Later, they discovered that John had logged into his girlfriend's account on a dating app; with the help of the app's geolocation feature, he was stalking her.

Heiman and York ended the class, but they had John stay on the line. "I kept trying to bring him back to the present," by asking him to identify his immediate feelings, York said. She wanted John to see that his rage toward his ex was a kind of shadow, or deflection, of what he was really feeling: sadness. York hoped that, if she could get him to dig beyond his anger, and access his grief about the end of the relationship, she could calm him down. As she talked to John, Heiman quietly called a victim's advocate, who in turn tried to contact John's ex-girlfriend to let her know that she was in danger.

Eventually, John, seeming to run out of places to look for his ex-girlfriend, returned home and planted himself on his couch. The phone call continued for three more hours. York and Heiman asked him more questions from their class curriculum: What was behind his anger? What might his ex be feeling in this moment? John continued to talk about all he had done for her. He threatened to dump everything outside that she had left behind. Eventually, he promised that he would not hurt himself or her, though he refused to say that he would not harm the man whom he suspected she was seeing. He didn't care if he went back to prison, he said. That night, Heiman stayed awake until dawn, listening to a police scanner.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, advocates for victims of domestic violence have been warning, with terrible accuracy, that the forced intimacy resulting from quarantine, and also the crisis's economic and psychological stresses, would lead to a worldwide surge in abuse. Meanwhile, the pandemic has also badly hobbled systems for accountability. "In a normal time," Heiman said, of the episode with John, "we would have given him a jail sanction"—holding him pending an investigation—"until we could figure everything out." Typically, John's stalking and verbal threats may have been enough to revoke his parole, "but, with COVID, if there's not an act of violence, it's been tough" to do that, Heiman said. He knew of at least two other cases in his jurisdiction in which arrests ordinarily would have been made, but weren't.

In mid-March, domestic-violence calls to police started to increase sharply across the country, while arrests decreased. Jails became hot spots of coronavirus transmission. Criminal courts shut down, and civil courts operated on a severely limited basis—judges were hearing cases over Skype or granting orders of protection via phone or e-mail. Thousands of cases were continued, and then continued again. Chicago saw a four-hundred-per-cent increase in G.P.S.-monitoring violations—broken restraining orders stemming from domestic violence. An officer in a Texas sheriff's office, who asked not to be named, told me that COVID-19 has had dramatic effects on evidence collection and on-scene investigations: officers are hampered by onerous protocols when entering homes, and on-scene arrests and immediate warrants were delayed until restrictions were lifted. David Thomas, a program manager at the International Association of the Chiefs of Police, in Alexandria, Virginia, told me that some accused abusers have been claiming to have COVID-19 in order to keep police away.

John Chisholm is the district attorney for Milwaukee, where homicides were double the normal rate during the first five months of 2020; Chisholm estimates that a quarter of these were related to domestic violence, including an incident on April 30th in which a man with a history of domestic abuse killed five members of his family, four of them teen-agers. Chisholm told me that there's no set date for when courts will be fully operational again. "The backlog concerns me the most," he said. "It's going to stretch our protective services, and we will have more people with unresolved cases still circulating in close proximity to the victims."

The time between the arraignment of an alleged abuser and disposition—usually about ninety days—is a notoriously dangerous period for victims. This is why some states, such as Massachusetts, have bail statutes that allow offenders to be held pre-trial. "You're trying to disrupt that escalation of violence," Kelly Dunne, the chief of operations at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, in Amesbury, Massachusetts, told me.

I spoke with a woman in Texas whose ex-boyfriend punched her in the stomach, strangled her, and pushed her down the stairs when she was eight months pregnant; she went into early labor and her child was stillborn. She obtained a fifty-year restraining order against the ex-boyfriend, though a date for his trial has not been set. In April, she learned that he had successfully petitioned to have his G.P.S. monitor removed. (The ex-boyfriend's attorney declined to comment.) She is particularly afraid of his access to guns—he has sold them in the past—and believes that if she were white, and not a woman of color, "this wouldn't be happening the way it's happening." Since then, she has installed security cameras in her home and asked the police for patrols on her street. But she lives in fear that he'll just show up one day.

There are some fifteen hundred batterer-intervention programs across the U.S., but no one organization that oversees and codifies all of them. As a result, no two have the same standards—not in terms of training, curriculum, program length, or required court order. This variability also means that there is relatively little research on how effective these programs are in reducing violence. (Studies of programs modelled on one of the oldest batterer-intervention-program models, which was developed in the early nineteen-eighties, in Duluth, Minnesota, have shown that they have, "at best, a minimal effect on whether participants continue to abuse their partners," as Matthew Wolfe wrote in *The Atlantic*, in January.)

In many parts of the country, however, batterer-intervention programs are the only sources of accountability for abusers which have remained relatively intact during the pandemic. While programs that convened inside jails and prisons did shut down entirely, those for men on probation and parole have moved online. Some of these Zoom groups, such as that run by Heiman and York, are mandatory, but many others, including those in Milwaukee and Massachusetts, have been made voluntary: probation and parole officers have been working out of their homes, with limited capacity for oversight, and many participants lack smartphones,

reliable Internet access, or unlimited cell-phone minutes. Yet, facilitators consistently told me that, even in jurisdictions where participation is optional, attendance hovers around eighty per cent.

The Alma Center, in Milwaukee, which convenes a Men Ending Violence class and other programming aimed at helping men with a history of domestic violence, gets most of its clients, and some of its funding, through Wisconsin's Department of Corrections. But the D.O.C. stopped making referrals once the state's safer-at-home orders went into effect, which has resulted in a substantial reduction in the Alma Center's operating budget. "It's been more of a struggle for us to be identified as essential services, because the traditional approach is to fund victim services," Terri Strodthoff, the founder and executive director of the Alma Center, told me. "But, during the pandemic, people are recognizing that victim services are only one aspect. We also need to support people in their process of change."

In Strodthoff's groups, men call in from cars, back porches, laundry rooms—anywhere they can find some privacy. They tend to be men living at the economic margins, who might scramble to find bus fare to arrive on time to meetings with parole officers or support services. For many, being able to join their support group from home is a stress reliever. "There's a comfort level in the home, and a quicker movement to a level of depth," Strodthoff told me.

Juan Carlos Areán, the program director for Futures Without Violence, a domestic-violence-prevention organization that provides training for batterer-intervention programs, said that the persistence of intervention classes during the pandemic "is breaking a fundamental paradigm in this country—that men will not ask for help voluntarily." With the criminal and court systems in disarray, Areán said, it's become clearer that "we have underused other ways to work with people who use violence. This is an opportunity to expand accountability outside of a punitive approach."

The week after the incident with John, Heiman and York convened their class as scheduled. John called in, staying on mute for the entire hour. The following week, he left the meeting early, saying that his car was about to be towed; the week after that, he joined late, and blew up at York when she asked why. "Man, fuck this group," he said, and hung up. He didn't call back. In early June, York learned that John had been arrested again, after attempting to strangle his ex-girlfriend. His parole has since been revoked.

The question of whether a violent man can ever really change is always a doubtful one; any hope embedded in the question dims further in the middle of a global pandemic, a lockdown, a national crisis of racism and police brutality, and an incipient depression, with some forty million Americans out of work. After I spoke with York, Strodthoff e-mailed me. One of her participants had called in to class that week to let the group know that he couldn't take part in that day's session, because he had lost his cousin. Then he panned his phone around: his cousin had only just died, evidently of natural causes; paramedics could be seen in the frame. He told the group that he felt full of rage. His classmates began to talk to him about compassion and grief. Soon, they were all crying together, sharing stories, one by one.

The meeting went on for two hours. The grieving man said that, if he hadn't been able to talk to his friends in the group, he might have acted on his anger, "by tearing some shit up or tearing some people up." "He recognized that his rage wasn't really rage," Strodthoff said. "It was a sadness he'd never been able to express."

Rachel Louise Snyder is the author of the books "No Visible Bruises," "What We've Lost Is Nothing" and "Fugitive Denim." She first contributed to the magazine in 2013.

