

## Improving Judicial Protection in Intimate Partner Violence Cases: The Role of Specialized Courts and Judges

### AUTHORS

Carolina Arteaga\*  
Gustavo J. Bobonis\*  
Paola Salardi\*  
Dario Toman\*

### AFFILIATION

\* University of Toronto



# SPECIALIZED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURTS INCREASE VICTIMS' JUDICIAL PROTECTION AND REDUCE OFFENDER RECIDIVISM IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE CASES

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## Summary

This project studies the large-scale implementation of a system of specialized domestic violence courts (SDVCs), an innovation in access to justice programs for potential victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) and offenders. Access to SDVCs leads to a considerable 8 percentage point increase in the probability that judges issue a protection order and a 2.4 percentage point (18.8%) decrease in offender recidivism rates within 1 year. Effects are more pronounced for cases in which parties have children in common and access to courts is more limited.

## Objective

To assess whether the introduction of specialized domestic violence courts improves judicial protection and reduces subsequent victim and offender reappearance in intimate partner violence cases.

## Methodology

The authors use administrative records covering all civil domestic violence cases handled by the Puerto Rico Judicial Branch from 2014 to 2020 and leverage the staggered introduction of SDVCs across judicial regions. The research design involves comparing outcomes in regions before and after these courts were introduced relative to those without access to a specialized court. The authors link case-level records to administrative and survey data on judges to examine how judges' priorities and characteristics help explain the observed effects.

## Results

- Access to SDVCs increases the likelihood of protection order issuance by ~8 percentage points, substantially improving judicial protection for victims of intimate partner violence.
- Within one year, petitioner reappearance falls by 1.7 percentage points (15.2%), while offender reappearance falls by 2.4 percentage points (18.8%).
- Effects are more pronounced for cases in which parties have children in common, with larger gains in protection-order issuance and larger reductions in repeat court involvement.
- Effects are also stronger where access to judicial services is more limited, with larger gains in more remote areas.

**8**  
percentage  
point increase  
in protection  
orders

**19%**  
decrease in  
offender  
recidivism  
within one year