

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

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SPECIALIZED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURTS STRENGTHEN JUDICIAL PROTECTION AND REDUCE VICTIM AND OFFENDER REAPPEARANCE IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE CASES

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Summary

This paper examines the introduction of specialized domestic violence courts (SDVCs) in Puerto Rico. SDVCs are designed to improve judicial protection in intimate partner violence cases and strengthen access to specialized support. Access to SDVCs leads to an 8 percentage point increase in protection orders and a 1.7 percentage point (15%) reduction in victim and offender reappearances within one year. These improvements are especially strong in cases involving shared children and in more remote areas with more limited access to SDVCs.

Objective

To assess whether the introduction of specialized domestic violence courts improves judicial protection and reduces subsequent victim and offender reappearances 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 exploit the staggered introduction of SDVCs across judicial regions. The main empirical strategy is a multi-period difference-in-differences design that compares outcomes in regions before and after these courts were introduced. Authors link case-level records to administrative and survey data on judges to examine how judges' priorities and characteristics help explain 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 reappearances falls by 1.7 percentage points (15.2%), while offender reappearances falls by 2.4 percentage points (18.8%).
- Effects are stronger in cases involving shared children, 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

15%
lower victim and offender reappearances within one year