Early seminal contributions to police intervention in domestic disputes were designed to improve police officers’ decision-making and communication abilities with both the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence in an effort to diminish iatrogenic violence (Bard 1971b), that is, violence precipitated by the police themselves (Bard 1971a; Bard, Zacker & Rutter 1972). Bard’s (1971a) experimental design which was aimed at training New York police officers in employing crisis-intervention techniques of arbitration, mediation and negotiation to handle domestic conflicts, and the later study of Wilt & Breedlove (1977) for the US Police Foundation in 1977, are significant in drawing attention to the preventive potential of police intervention in situations of domestic violence. Findings from these studies are essentially based on the assumption that police officers serve a preventive function in that they can reduce the likelihood of recidivism, or of any future crime by instituting proper handling of family altercations. Although these findings point to a compelling need for more effective police intervention, they fall short of addressing what constituted an effective response. As Bard (1971a) himself notes: ‘the protection of the “right” of battered women consists not simply of legal access, but of achieving a functional match between each woman’s unique needs and the resources made available by society’.

One of the earlier studies that addresses the issue of effective police response to situations of domestic violence is the one conducted by Parnas (1967). The data for this study was primarily derived from field observations, interviews and documents made available to him through the co-operation of the Chicago Police Department. By reviewing the training bulletins and teaching curriculum for ‘handling’ domestic violence situations, Parnas notes that the patrolman was instructed, either officially or informally, ‘to cautiously attempt to settle the dispute through the exercise of common sense and discretion. He was also told to avoid arrest whenever possible’ (Parnas 1967: 921) as the majority of
these cases were perceived to be ‘non-criminal calls and don’t warrant any punitive action’ (Parnas 1967: 917).

Accordingly, this police policy of ‘adjustments’, as Parnas describes it, is observed in the practices of the patrolmen responding to situations of domestic violence although an arrest would have been justified by law (Parnas 1967: 930). The practice of avoidance of arrest is manifested in the patrolmen’s procedures of mediation and referral; threats of arrest or other forms of indirect sanctions; voluntary, temporary separation of the disputants; threat of filling cross-complaint; and refusal to arrest except on a warrant (Parnas 1967: 932). Although Parnas’ study indicates that the intervention technique chosen to handle a domestic disturbance and the manner of using that technique depend in large part upon the officers’ and disputants’ backgrounds, personalities, biases and other structural and organisational factors, his study implies that the practice of ‘adjustments without arrest was considered an acceptable and effective way of accomplishing the purpose of the law’ (Parnas 1967: 930).

Black’s study (1980) also attempts to address the debate on what constitutes effective police intervention. He observes four primary styles of police intervention—therapeutic, penal, compensatory and conciliatory—in low-intensity disputes which characterise most domestic violence calls. The therapeutic style of crisis management attempts to identify and solve the underlying problems which are perceived to be leading to violent episodes in the families. The penal style (arresting the offender) defines a ‘violator of a prohibition as one who deserves condemnation or punishment’, while a compensatory style seeks redress from an offender to the victim for the harm suffered by the victim. A conciliatory style simply defines the deviant behaviour as ‘one side of a social conflict

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1 Parnas (1967: 930–31) documents several practical reasons for a non-arrest policy. They include: victim does not want the offender arrested but may call the police to scare the offender into behaving himself, get the offender out of the house for a while, use the future threat of arrest for her benefit or to take the victim to the hospital; victim may not be able to afford having the offender arrested if it results in the loss of his job or temporary loss of support; offence thought to be conduct acceptable to the culture of the disputants and therefore seriously not objectionable to the victim; offender angered by his arrest may cause more serious harm to the victim upon his return to the family home; arrest may cause temporary/permanent termination of familial relationship. Also see Goldstein (1960) ‘Police Discretion Not to Invoke the Criminal Process: Low Visibility Decisions in the Administration of Justice’ Yale Law Journal, 543, 573–77.