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# Opinion: We need to listen to science about abusers

**By Margaret Bassett**

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The recent tragic triple homicide in Austin is a stark reminder that perpetrators of domestic violence can escalate to homicide. That happened at least 178 times this past year in Texas alone. The Texas Council on Family Violence's compelling and gut-wrenching annual report offers a brief account of each Texas victim.

Stephen Broderick, who is accused of the shootings in Austin, had prior allegations of family violence, including strangulation and sexual assault of a child. His wife applied for a protective order after he was arrested. She stated, "I'm afraid he will try to hurt me or my children because these allegations have come out and he may lose his career. Stephen has prior military experience and is SWAT trained. If he wanted to hurt someone, he would know how."

When someone shows you who he is, believe him the first time. Broderick showed us who he was – a lethal abuser.

And the community did not do enough to stop him.

We didn't stop him in part because domestic violence is considered a personal or family issue and not a community issue. However, studies show that 1 in 3 adult Texans experienced domestic violence during their lives. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will be physically assaulted by their intimate partners. Domestic violence is a public health crisis. It is not a personal or family crisis.

Just as we manage our current public health crisis with a coordinated community effort and science, we need to address the pandemic of intimate partner violence similarly. We need to dispel myths, biases and misinformation to ensure victim safety and to hold offenders accountable in a meaningful way.

Here is the science: Living with someone abusive is dangerous. Survivors are 3.6 times more likely to be killed when leaving than if they stayed. Without intervention, some people who are abusive will kill their partners, and in those situations, children, other family members, bystanders and first responders are also at risk of being killed. Abusers are motivated by control, and that motivation is connected to risk and threat. Abusive behavior is complex and nuanced. The misinformation, myths and biases about domestic violence are getting people killed. We can fix that by educating those in power.

We should encourage multidisciplinary intimate partner violence education for prosecutors, law enforcement, domestic violence advocates and judges, similar to what Gov. Greg Abbott's office is funding at the University of Texas, to provide training on the ethical use of expert witnesses in interpersonal violence cases.

These trainings offer an opportunity for participants and experts to work together to increase understanding of nuance and context with the goal of improving prosecutorial response. Right now these trainings are voluntary. They should be mandatory.

It's vital that attorneys, community advocates, law enforcement officials, mental health professional, medical personnel and judicial representatives understand how trauma affects victim and offender behavior. By better understanding coercive control and the complexity and danger of leaving an abusive relationship, those in positions of influence can help end the cycle of trauma. They can develop pragmatic and effective ways to educate the courts on these topics and share their learned science.

Broderick posed a threat to his family because there was nothing that changed his behavior. Even though he and his wife were separated and she had a protective order, he still wanted to control her. In fact, he was looking for another way to control his family, which he found. His wife told us he was at risk for escalation and lethality. It's time to prioritize the safety of survivors so we don't have more homicides. It's time for a communitywide scientific approach to ending intimate partner violence. It's time to listen to the science and expand education for judicial stakeholders.

*Bassett is the director of applied research and innovative instruction and director of the Expert Witness Program in the Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault at the University of Texas.*