

RISK IDENTIFICATION

Domestic violence related homicides account for 1 in 5 murders in Canada. On average, one woman is murdered by her partner every 6 days. And yet, domestic violence homicides are one of the most preventable of homicides. Risk identification is a crucial process in enhancing the safety of clients who are or were in abusive relationships. Risk identification helps to identify and address the risk of future violence, prioritize cases needing increased levels of support and intervention, inform safety plans, and assist in offender management.

"Victims, families or service providers may underestimate the risk of danger in IPV relationships."


BC Coroner's Service Death
Review Panel 2016

Risk assessment tools take into consideration the nature of the domestic violence, perpetrator risk factors, and victim vulnerability factors in attempting to assess the likelihood of future violence. There are a number of recognized domestic violence risk assessment tools, including the *Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment* (ODARA), the *Spousal Assault Risk Assessment* (SARA-V3), and a condensed version of SARA called the *Brief Spousal Assault Form for Evaluation of Risk* (B-SAFER).

In BC, the *Summary of Domestic Violence Risk Factors*, a modified version of the B-SAFER developed for frontline responders, police, child protection workers and anti-violence workers, is an agreed upon tool to assess risk.

Some of the factors most strongly associated with a risk of lethal violence include:

- Past, recent or pending separation 
- Escalation in severity or frequency of violence 
- Custody/guardianship dispute
- Threats to kill or harm partner, pets or others
- Forced sex
- Strangulation or biting 
- Jealousy, stalking and harassment
- Violation of court orders
- Survivor's fear of future violence 
- History of violence, threats and harassment
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Mental illness, especially suicidal ideation 
- Use of (or threats to use) weapons
- Employment / financial problems
- Sudden loss or other crisis

The  indicates a risk factor associated with an increased severity (escalation) of future violence.

Factors to Consider When Domestic Violence Safety Planning was developed for anti-violence workers to ensure they and other justice and child protection system partners have a shared understanding of the risks associated with an increased likelihood of future violence. This tool can be found online at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/law-crime-and-justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/vs-info-for-professionals/training/factors-to-consider.pdf>

While the escalation of an argument was the most common motive in both [intimate partner and non-intimate partner] homicides, jealousy was more often a factor in intimate partner homicides... Nearly one-quarter of female intimate partners and 10% of male intimate partners were killed because of their partner's jealousy.

Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2010 M. Sinha (2012) P. 39

Risk identification is not an exact science. It is important to recognize that risk identification and safety planning are complex and dynamic processes, and that no plan is fully comprehensive or fool-proof. While risk identification is valuable to help a client explore her risks and develop her safety plan, be aware of its limitations, such as:

- Risk factors cannot be used to determine whether someone “fits the profile” of an abuser or of a survivor, or to predict whether someone will be violent.
- Guidelines like those found in risk assessment tools are neither exhaustive nor fixed.
- Checklists can result in a worker taking an oversimplified “cookie cutter” approach, and not thinking through all aspects of the situation.

Short resources such as this EVA Notes are not intended to teach anti-violence workers how to conduct a formal risk assessment. Rather, they are intended to introduce you to the risk factors common to domestic violence cases, to explain how an understanding of them can be used in effective safety planning, and to encourage you to continue to develop your skills and knowledge.

Anti-violence workers must stay alert to changes in the circumstances of either the survivor or the abuser, such as the loss of a job, suicidal ideation, a court decision, pregnancy, or a new relationship. Therefore, information sharing is crucial in risk identification, both to develop an informed assessment of the risk, and to inform the development of wide-ranging risk management strategies.

The Protocol for Highest Risk Cases supplements other sections of the [BC VAWIR policy](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/service-providers/information-resources). It outlines the responsibilities of police, Crown, child protection and victim services for enhanced case coordination and information sharing. The policy and optional forms are at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/service-providers/information-resources.

It is important to remember that other “at risk” individuals can include children, family members, work colleagues, neighbours, service providers, and the primary victim’s new romantic partner, as well as pets and farm animals.



Image: Katherine Evans

Additional Resources:

Domestic Violence Safety Planning Online Training (free for MPSSG-funded anti-violence workers) <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/service-providers/training>

Domestic Violence Risk Assessment and Management (free online training) Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (CREVAWC) <http://onlinetraining.learningtoendabuse.ca/>

Safety Planning Across Culture and Community: A Guide for Front Line Violence Against Women Responders <http://endingviolence.org/safety-planning-across-culture-and-community-a-guide-for-front-line-violence-against-women-responders/>

Accounting for Risk and Danger Practice Checklists: Coordinating Risk Assessment in Domestic Violence Cases <http://www.bwjp.org/assets/documents/pdfs/accounting-for-risk-and-danger-checklists.pdf>

Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative: Risk Assessment, Risk Management, Safety Planning <http://cdhpi.ca/risk-assessment-risk-management-safety-planning>

Document, Monitor, Collaborate: A Primer <http://learningtoendabuse.ca/document-monitor-collaborate>