

Fact Sheet 5 Key risk factors

Research indicates that some risk factors are associated with greater likelihood and/or severity of family and domestic violence (Campbell 2003; 2004). It is important to keep in mind that these factors might interact in many and complex ways. However, despite the co-occurrence of certain factors with family and domestic violence, none is causal.

The key risk factors reflected in the risk assessment tool are listed below (Table 1). The explanations provided in the following table will assist service providers to build an understanding of the level of risk of harm to women and children, and provide the reason for their inclusion in the risk assessment tool.

Table 1: Key risk factors

Risk factor	Explanation
Use of weapon in most recent event by the perpetrator*	Use of a weapon indicates a high level of risk because previous behaviour is a likely predictor of future behaviour. A weapon is defined as any tool used by the perpetrator that could injure, kill or destroy property.
Escalation – increase in severity and/or frequency of violence by the perpetrator*	Violence occurring more often or becoming worse has been found to be associated with lethal outcomes for victims.
Perpetrator has ever harmed or threatened to harm victim*	Psychological and emotional abuse has been found to be a good predictor of continued abuse, including physical abuse. Previous physical assaults also predict future assaults.
Sexual assault of the victim (including rape, coerced sexual activity or unwanted sexual touching)*	Men who sexually assault their partners are also more likely to use other forms of violence against them.
Perpetrator has ever tried to choke the victim*	Strangulation and choking is a common method used by male perpetrators to kill female victims.
Perpetrator has ever threatened to kill the victim*	Evidence suggests that a perpetrator's threat to kill a victim is often genuine.
Stalking of the victim by the perpetrator*	Stalkers are more likely to be violent if they have had an intimate relationship with the victim. Stalking, when coupled with physical assault, is strongly connected to murder or attempted murder. Stalking behaviour and obsessive thinking are highly related behaviours.
Obsession/jealous behaviour towards victim by the perpetrator*	Obsessive and/or excessive jealous behaviour is often related to controlling behaviours and has been linked with violent attacks.

Recent separation*	For women who are experiencing family and domestic violence, the high risk periods include immediately prior to taking action, and during the initial stages of or immediately after separation. Victims who stay with the perpetrator because they are afraid to leave often accurately anticipate that leaving would increase the risk of lethal assault. The data on time-since-separation suggests that women are particularly at risk within the first two months.
Perpetrator has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill children*	Evidence suggests that where family and domestic violence is occurring, there is a likelihood of increased risk of direct abuse of children in the family. Children are adversely affected through experiencing violence directly and by the effects of violence, including hearing and (or) witnessing violence or through living in fear due to a violent environment.
Perpetrator has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill pets or other animals*	A correlation between cruelty to animals and family and domestic violence is increasingly being recognised. Because there is a direct link between family and domestic violence and pets being abused or killed, abuse or threats of abuse against pets may be used by perpetrators to control family members.
Perpetrator has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill other family members	Threats by the perpetrator to hurt or cause actual harm to family members can be a way of controlling the victim through fear.
Isolation	A victim is more vulnerable if she is isolated from family, friends and other social networks. Isolation also increases the likelihood of violence and is not simply geographical. Other examples of isolation include systemic factors that limit social interaction or support and/or the perpetrator not allowing the victim to have social interaction.
Controlling behaviours (for example, the perpetrator telling the victim how to dress, who they can be friends with, controlling how much money they can access, and determining when they can see friends and family or use the car)	Men who think they 'should be in charge' are more likely to use various forms of violence against their partner.
Perpetrator access to weapons*	Perpetrators who have access to weapons, particularly guns, are much more likely to seriously injure or kill a victim than perpetrators without access to weapons.

Perpetrator has ever threatened or tried to commit suicide*	Threats or attempts to commit suicide have been found to be a risk factor for murder-suicide.
Perpetrator drug and alcohol misuse/abuse*	Perpetrators of family and domestic violence can be more dangerous when they are under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.
Perpetrator depression/mental health issue*	Murder-suicide outcomes in family and domestic violence have been associated with perpetrators who have mental health problems, particularly depression.
Perpetrator unemployment	Unemployment is associated with an increased risk of lethal assault, and a sudden change in employment status – such as being terminated and/or retrenched – may be associated with increased risk.
Financial difficulties	Low income and financial stress, including a gambling addiction, may be associated with increased risk for victims of family and domestic violence.
Perpetrator has breached court orders, for example, a violence restraining order (VRO)	Breaching a VRO indicates the perpetrator is not willing to abide by the orders of a court. Such behaviour should be considered a serious indicator of increased risk of future violence.
Perpetrator is currently on bail or parole in relation to violent offences Perpetrator has served a time of imprisonment or has been recently released from custody in relation to violent offences Perpetrator has a history of violent behaviour other than family or domestic violence	Perpetrators with a history of violence are more likely to use violence against family members. This can occur even if the violence has not previously been directed towards family members. Other victims may have included strangers, acquaintances and/or police officers. The nature of the violence may include credible threats or use of weapons, and attempted or actual assaults. Violent men generally engage in more frequent and more severe family and domestic violence than perpetrators who do not have a violent past.
The perpetrator's family poses a risk to the adult victim	In some cases there may be more than one abuser living in the home or belonging to the extended (victim or perpetrator's) family and community. This might also include female relatives.
Victim pregnancy/new birth	Family and domestic violence often commences or intensifies during pregnancy and is associated with increased rates of miscarriage, low birth weight, premature birth, foetal injury and foetal death. Family and domestic violence during pregnancy is regarded as a significant indicator of future harm to the woman and her child.

Victim was attacked while holding a child	Serious injuries to children can result when attacks occur while the victim is holding a child regardless of whether the perpetrator deliberately intended to target the child.
Children are in the home	The presence of children including step children can increase the risk of domestic abuse for the mother. They too can get caught up in the violence and suffer directly.
Children have tried to intervene in the violence	Children are frequently assaulted when they intervene to defend or protect the victim.
Child contact or residency issues, including Family Court proceedings	Perpetrators may use the children to have access to the victim, violence may occur during child contact visits or there may be a lot of fear and anxiety that the children may be harmed.
Children from previous relationship are in the household	The presence of children including step children can increase the risk of domestic abuse for the mother. They too can get caught up in the violence and suffer directly.

Other issues to consider (professional judgement)	
Victim depression/mental health issue	Victims with a mental illness may become more vulnerable to family violence.
Victim drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse	Victims may use alcohol or other drugs to cope with the physical, emotional or psychological effects of family violence; this can lead to increased vulnerability.
Victim has ever verbalised or had suicidal ideas or tried to commit suicide	Suicidal thoughts or attempts indicate that the victim is extremely vulnerable and the situation has become critical.

* These factors may indicate an increased risk of the victim (adult or child) being killed.

References

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