



**REDUCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
...WHAT WORKS?
ASSESSING AND MANAGING THE
RISK OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Crime Reduction Research Series
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Introduction

The analysis of the extent and nature of domestic violence, and of programmes to reduce it, has developed rapidly over the last two decades, but is still at an early stage compared with the analysis of many other crimes. Accurate data on firstly, the prevalence and incidence of domestic violence, and secondly, the extent and distribution of risk, is needed as an essential first step in the process of assessing the costs and benefits of different domestic violence reduction programmes. This work reviews the extent of domestic violence, and the risk factors for women associated with the onset of domestic violence.

Overall risk of domestic violence

The British Crime Survey (Mirrlees-Black, 1999) provides what is probably the best available data on domestic violence for England and Wales. It covered men and women aged 16 to 59, and by including a special set of questions on domestic violence and using CASI (Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing), found that:

- Over their lifetime, 22.7% of women and 14.9% of men reported being a victim of domestic assault.
- Women were significantly more severely affected than men:
 - they were twice as likely to have been injured in attacks;
 - they were much more likely to have been subject to frightening threats;
 - they were more likely to have suffered multiple assaults; and
 - they were much more likely to have been upset and frightened at the time of the incident.

It has been shown that acts of violence by women are largely carried out in self-defence and in retaliation.

Furthermore, Criminal Statistics for England and Wales (1997) showed that 47% of female homicide victims were killed by their partners (compared to 8% of men).

However, the BCS is limited by:

- its emphasis on crimes which may restrict reporting of events which may not be perceived as crimes;
- the limited amount of time available to gently tease out details of traumatic events;
- the presence of others in the room during the interview;
- the omission of information on sexual coercion i.e. rape and sexual assault; and
- the limitation of the sampling frame to those permanently resident in domestic households to the exclusion of those in temporary or refuge accommodation.

State-of-the-art surveys locate domestic violence in a context so as to ascertain its meaning and impact, include sexual coercion, and broaden their range of violence to include that against women outside the home. These surveys have reported significantly higher rates of violence than surveys that have asked the questions within the framework of a generic crime survey. As a consequence, the BCS is likely to underestimate the true extent of domestic violence. England and Wales needs a survey dedicated to measuring domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, which uses the kind of state-of-the-art methods used in surveys carried out in Canada, the US, Australia and Finland.

Risk factors

Previous domestic assault

- Previous domestic assault is the simplest, most

robust, risk marker of subsequent domestic assault. 35% of households have a second incident within five weeks of the first.

- Although desistance is possible, minor violence is a predictor of escalation to major violence.

Separation

- Women who are separating from their partner are at much higher risk of domestic violence than women in other marital statuses. The BCS found that 22% of separated women were assaulted in the previous year by their partners or ex-partners.
- The BCS data does not provide information on whether the separation occurred before or after the assault.

Gender inequality

- Egalitarian partnerships have a lower risk of domestic violence. The risk of violence is increased by marital dependency and lack of economic resources. The BCS found that women who were unemployed or housewives had a higher risk of domestic violence.
- Men who believe that wife beating is legitimate are more likely to become perpetrators. Dobash et al (1996) showed a correlation between a reduction of patriarchal attitudes and a reduction in the extent to which men used violence against their partner.

Poverty and social exclusion

- The BCS found that people living in poor households and financially insecure households were more likely to suffer from domestic violence. However, the correlation between poverty and domestic violence does not mean that domestic violence is not found in better off households as well.
- Domestic violence can also lead to poverty as it makes it more difficult for women to hold down jobs and can increase ill health. Furthermore, unemployment and lack of economic resources may make it harder for them to leave a violent partner.

Ethnicity

- There is no significant difference in the risk of domestic violence by ethnicity reported in the BCS. However, women from ethnic minorities may have greater difficulties in accessing support services because of racism among service providers, language difficulties and cultural differences.

Background of violence/criminal career

- It has been argued in the past that witnessing domestic assault is linked to being a perpetrator of

domestic violence as an adult. However, the underlying causes of domestic violence, according to US data, appear to involve: an 'anti-social personality' similar to that sometimes associated with a criminal career and a belief that it is legitimate for men to beat their wives.

Child abuse

- There is evidence of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse in the same family. Child abuse can be seen as an indicator of domestic violence in the family and vice versa.

Youth

- Youth is a risk factor for domestic violence. The BCS found that 10.1% of women aged 16 to 19 and 9.2% of women aged 20 to 24 reported that they had been assaulted in the previous year (as compared to an average of 4.2%). As women become older, the risk of domestic violence decreases.
- There is some correlation between pregnancy and domestic violence. However, this correlation may exist because young women are a group at higher risk of domestic violence and pregnancy is associated with this age group.

Professional assessments of risk

Public services often come into contact with groups with high risks of domestic violence. This is especially the case for services involved with women who are trying to leave violent men and who need access to courts, housing services and benefits, in order to reconstruct their lives. Many professional bodies who come into contact with domestic violence survivors are now developing revised or new protocols to identify whether their clients are likely to have suffered domestic violence. They vary in the extent to which they utilise some of the risk factors identified above. Some, such as the police, have long engaged with the issue. However, Plotnikoff and Woolfson (1998) found that the police did not always record incidents as repeat victimisation. Similarly, in the health services, incidents are not recorded as resulting from domestic violence. However, the health service is developing and testing new protocols. Other agencies such as social services and the probation service, appear to be a little further behind, but are also proceeding along this route. There are many examples of innovation and good practice but some agencies have found the prioritisation of resources to implement the new protocols and policies hard to achieve.

Conclusions and recommendations for practice

The existing literature suggests that the simplest and

most robust risk marker for domestic violence is that of previous assault. The greater the frequency of previous assaults, the more likely there will be further assaults. The best evidence of this is when victims self-report previous assaults (although records of any previous incidents or any previous pleas for help can also indicate risk). A secondary risk marker is that of separation. Indeed it is at the point of separation that many women who have been subject to domestic violence go to the agencies under discussion.

The majority of the work on the assessment of risk of domestic violence is from the US. However, it is not known to what extent findings from other countries may be accurately applied to the UK, since there are significant differences in the nature and effect of the criminal justice system, welfare system, patterns of social exclusion, and gender relations. One study found that disabled women are at greater risk of victimisation from domestic and sexual violence in Australia. It is not known whether this is the case in the UK.

Research on risk factors has primarily focused on the onset of domestic violence. There is also a need for research on what works in stopping domestic violence. This is especially important in the evaluation of interventions and programmes that aim to reduce domestic violence. It should not be assumed, but rather investigated, as to whether these are the same or different factors as those associated with onset. It pushes the analysis beyond individual risk factors to consider the risk of domestic violence in different social contexts. Factors relevant to desistance – when domestic violence between a perpetrator and a specific victim has ceased – could include the availability of formal and informal support services, the readiness and availability of family and friends to provide assistance, and the extent and effectiveness of informal and formal sanctions. It is known that support from a number of agencies is extremely important in the achievement of desistance of domestic violence. Additionally, criminal sanctions and treatment programmes reduce domestic violence.

There is a need for a dedicated random sample national survey in the UK. This would estimate more fully the extent and nature of the risks of domestic violence. This should be designed to improve our knowledge on factors associated with:

- desistance and its associated factors (such as the use of specific agencies);
- escalation, the changing frequency and severity of assaults, and the factors associated with this;
- the impact on women's income;
- the relationship of domestic violence to other victimisation (such as stalking);
- the relative prevalence of domestic violence against pregnant women; and
- the relative prevalence of domestic violence before and after separation.

This would assist the public services and other agencies to tailor their policies and procedures more effectively to meet survivor needs. Furthermore, it would enable more accurate costing of programmes to reduce domestic violence.

Further reading

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