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Australian Institute of Criminology



Domestic-related homicide and domestic violence risk assessment tools

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Overview of presentation

- What are risk assessment tools?
- Use by police in Australia
- Common risk factors
- Project “Risk factors for domestic violence and domestic-related homicide” with Queensland Police
- Conclusions



Risk assessment generally

- “...is a process through which an organisation or professional attempts to assess the degree of harm or injury likely to ensue from family violence, including homicide” (Braaf & Sneddon 2007: 14)
- Broadly three types of risk assessment
 - Unstructured clinical
 - Structured professional
 - Actuarial
- Risk assessment is used widely in other fields
 - Sex offenders
 - Health area
 - Tax office



What are actuarial risk assessment tools?

- Often takes the form of a victim-based interview
- Usually lists common risk factors
- Some training required in their use
- Risk factors will sometimes be ‘weighted’ to give more weight to those considered to be of greater importance
- Actuarial tools have been validated on appropriate populations



Why use risk assessment tools?

- Allows for an assessment of the severity of any future violence
- Encourages victims to become aware of their risk and be actively involved in developing personal safety plans
- Promotes a common language of risk across agencies
- Actuarial tools can be used by non-clinical (but still trained) staff such as police officers



Drawbacks of domestic violence risk assessment tools

- Potential false sense of security
- Human nature dictates no tool will predict human behavior without some margin of error
 - Between 30-40 domestic related homicides in NSW in 2005-06 over the last few years
 - 25,870 domestic related assaults recorded by NSW police in 2005 (BOCSAR Recorded Crime Statistics)
- A US study (Campbell *et al* 2003) found 83% of women killed were rated as high-risk, but so were 40% of women who were not killed



Risk assessment tools and frameworks

- Literature makes it clear tools cannot exist in isolation
- Framework is needed
- Frameworks should (among other things):
 - Be clear about the use of the information collected (both victim referral & data)
 - Be clear about confidentiality issues
 - Outline what is said to the victim to encourage participation
 - Outline training required to administer the tool



The use of risk assessment tools by police in Australia

- Tasmania Police - RAST (Risk Assessment Screening Tool)
- South Australia Police - variation of RAST
- VIC Police - Victoria Police Family Violence Risk Assessment



The use of risk assessment tools by police in Australia cont.

- Northern Territory Police use a more subjective DV/FV safety assessment
- NSW Police are currently undertaking joint work with NSW Health & NSW Community Services to develop a cross agency risk assessment tool
- ACT, QLD and WA do not have formal risk assessment tools in place at this time



Common key risk factors

- **Some high risk factors**

- Offender and victim have recently separated
- Offender has assaulted victim in the past
- Offender has threatened to kill the victim
- Violence is increasing in frequency and/ or level
- Victim believes offender could kill victim/ children
- Victim is terrified of offender
- Offender used a weapon in the most recent event
- Offender has access to weapons
- Offender has ever tried to choke/ strangle victim
- Pregnancy or new birth within the relationship



Common key risk factors cont.

- **Some other risk factors**

- Offender has an alcohol or drug use problem
- Offender is unemployed
- Offender has a history of violence against non-family members
- Offender has attempted/ threatened suicide
- Offender has harmed or killed a family animal
- Offender has stalked victim
- Offender exhibits controlling behavior
- Offender has breached a DV court order



Validation of tools

- Major tools developed overseas have been tested and validated
 - SARA (Spousal Assault Risk Assessment) (Kropp, Hart, Webster, & Eaves, 1995)
 - DA (Danger Assessment) (Campbell 1988)
- Use of the tools in Australia has not been validated
- Little work (exception Romy Winter, TILES at UTAS) has been done in Australia to validate/ test these tools



Current Project

- Funded provided through the *National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children*
- Funding to boost the AIC's National Homicide Monitoring Program to investigate domestic violence-related homicides to inform future interventions to protect women and children from violence
- AIC has funded Queensland Police Service to conduct the project "Risk factors for domestic violence and domestic-related homicide"



QLD Statistics

- Approximate numbers only (01/10/07 - 30/09/08)
- Police attended 28 000 domestic violence (DV) incidences
- 6700 private DV applications were made.
 - Over 3500 persons were respondents in at least 2 DV incidences
 - Around 2000 persons were recorded as respondent in 3 or more incidences



Research Aims

- What are the risk factors associated with domestic homicide?
- What are the early warning signs of domestic violence that might predict the likelihood of homicide and future violence?
- Assess Risk Assessment tools ability to predict the likelihood of:
 - A homicide occurring
 - A domestic violence incident occurring again
 - Whether the incident will be more serious



Method

- Literature Review
- Design of a new QLD Police Domestic Violence/
Homicide Database
- Statistical Analyses
- Major Report and Findings



Planned Analyses

- **Statistical analyses**
- **Data**
 - National Homicide Monitoring Program (AIC).
 - QLD police systems and case files as available.
- **Time Period: 01/10/2007 – 30/09/2008.**
 - “Q-Prime” contains most accurate data for this time period in comparison to previous years.



Benefits of Research

- Internal validation of current risk assessment tools
- Identifications of risk factors
- Strategies and practices to reduce risk.
- Assess scope for risk assessment tool in Qld



Conclusions

- Risk assessment tools are currently being used by Australian state/ territory Police Services
- While not perfect they provide operational police officers with a guide to levels of risk present
- Risk assessment tools should be supported by a comprehensive framework
- The AIC have engaged Queensland Police Service to retrospectively test some of the major tools/ risk factors in the Australian context



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Questions or comments?

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