

## SME RESEARCH BRIEF

### Research Review – Risk Assessment for Intimate Partner Violence

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#### *How can risk appraisal instruments inform police response to intimate partner violence?*

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Processes for assessing risk of violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), have been in existence for decades and are often conducted by clinicians and correctional professionals at the post-conviction and/or post-sentencing phase to inform supervision, risk reduction case management strategies, and release decision-making. However, given the central role police play in responding to IPV on the front line, it is important to understand whether risk appraisal instruments meaningfully inform police response and case prioritization in IPV situations when acute risk concerns are often most salient.

#### *About the research*

To answer the research question, studies examining police use of risk assessment instruments for appraising the risk of IPV were reviewed. The ability of available risk appraisal tools used by police and other professionals has been summarized in discussion papers, individual studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses that combine the effects of individual studies to examine overall conclusions and patterns in the data at a statistical level, though data on their use and impact when used specifically by police officers and in policing contexts is limited.

#### *What does the evidence say?*

Most unstructured, gut-based appraisals of violence risk are unreliable as they typically over-estimate or under-estimate actual risk (Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Campbell et al., 2009). This is usually because relevant risk factors are missed, and irrelevant factors are given more weight out of false beliefs of their relevance to violent behaviour. Numerous studies have shown that the reliability of one's risk appraisal is enhanced by use of structured risk tools that guide the user in the consideration of research-supported risk factors that elevate risk of the target outcome when present. A handful of these tools exist for IPV, with a few being specifically designed for non-clinicians (e.g., B-SAFER) and for police officers (e.g., ODARA). Among the commonly available tools, the ODARA tends to produce the most reliable risk estimates for predicting future IPV based on meta-analytic findings (Messing & Thaller, 2013), followed by the SARA and the Danger Assessment.

A few primary studies (Belfrage & Strand, 2012; Belfrage et al. 2012; Storey et al. 2014) conducted with police officer risk appraisers in Sweden have demonstrated that when officers match the intensity of their proactive interventions (e.g., information provision, safety planning, home monitoring, referral to community services, arrest) to the formally appraised (B-SAFER or SARA) IPV risk level, the rate of subsequent intimate partner violence is significantly lowered in the follow-up period in low (12%) and high (28%) risk cases relative to

when there is a mismatch between the appraised risk level and the actual intensity of the police response (i.e., over-respond in low risk situations = 21% recidivism rate; under respond in high risk situations = 37% recidivism rate; Storey et al., 2014). This result is consistent with research from the broader criminal justice risk appraisal and risk mitigation literature and speaks to the importance of crime reduction interventions being informed by accurate appraisals of risk for that behaviour re-occurring (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Thus, there is reason to argue for that use of validated risk tools by frontline police officers and domestic violence units to prioritize cases for higher intensity police/community responses and allocation of resources accordingly. Recent Canadian research indicates that most police officers are receptive to using IPV risk appraisal tools to guide their use of discretion and responses to IPV situations (Ballucci et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018;).

### **Additional Factors**

Although most available IPV risk tools were developed in Canada, or at least in collaboration with Canadian researchers, studies examining the field use of these tools by Canadian police is lacking. There are systematic differences between police forces in Canada and other jurisdictions, so we need more of this research in the Canadian context to ensure these meaningful effects on IPV recidivism reduction can be replicated in Canada. Some of this work is currently underway in New Brunswick, with close examination of police use of the ODARA and its influence on police response and risk reduction outcomes. Research is also needed to inform training to teach police officers how to integrate the risk appraisal information into their decision-making about the appropriate risk mitigation strategies to put in place for individual cases (i.e., knowing the risk level of a case is the first step in risk management process, but knowing how to use the risk appraisal information to inform risk mitigation planning is another crucial step in the risk management process (Wynn, 2015). Furthermore, most of the available research on IPV risk tools focuses on physical forms of violence, male abusers, female victims, and adults; thus, validation in their use with diverse populations and for non-violent forms of IPV is warranted.

### **Implications for Practice**

By means of structuring an appraiser's review of relevant risk factors for IPV, formal risk assessment instruments have the potential to positively impact risk mitigation decisions that lead to reduced incidents of IPV. For these tools to be useful, sufficient training on their scoring, interpretation, and application is required to maintain fidelity to the tool's predictive validity and its intended purpose (Messing & Thaler, 2013). It is also important to note that police response to IPV is only one piece of the puzzle for targeting IPV. Engagement with community partners to support and service the victims, perpetrators, and families impacted by IPV must work in tandem with police organizations to achieve long-term risk reduction and safety for victims.

### **Key references**

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