

# Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Risk Assessments

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'RISK'?

Risk often refers to the risk of re-offense. In the IPV context, 'risk' refers to the risk of domestic violence re-occurring and the risk of the violence escalating to lethal or near-lethal violence. For further understanding, think about these two questions:

**Domestic violence risk:** is this person at risk of committing another domestic violence related crime?

**Domestic violence lethality risk:** is this survivor at risk of being killed or nearly killed by their intimate partner?

### WHAT ARE RISK ASSESSMENTS?

Risk assessments are a type of evaluation tool that aim to predict the likelihood of an event occurring. They do this by examining risk factors and key characteristics. Risk assessments help identify risk levels and potential areas for intervention.

### WHAT ARE RISK FACTORS?

Risk factors are the characteristics of a person, their situation, and past behaviors that correlate with an increased risk of an event occurring, falling into two broad categories:

**Static risk factors:** these are characteristics of a person that are unchangeable; it cannot be changed through any type of intervention- e.g. prior criminal history.

**Dynamic risk factors:** also referred to as 'criminogenic needs,' these are characteristics of a person that could potentially change or fluctuate over time. Because of their changing nature, they can impact the level of risk at different times- e.g. substance use.

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN APPROACHES TO RISK ASSESSMENTS?

**Actuarial:** these look at specific information and risk factors that have been scientifically researched and found to predict the likelihood of an event occurring. A risk score is calculated using this information.

**Clinical:** these rely on practitioner experience, intuition, and professional judgment to assess the level of risk. Unlike actuarial assessments, there is no set guidance or scale.

**Structured:** these look at specific information and a structured list of risk factors. The risk level is based on the professional judgment of a practitioner. Structured risk assessments are usually a combination of actuarial and clinical approaches.

### WHEN SHOULD A RISK ASSESSMENT BE USED?

Risk assessments can be used at various stages and each of them are designed for specific settings and purposes.

For example, one can be used at pre-trial to inform decisions about release, or one could be used to inform treatment planning and supervision.

### ARE THERE SPECIFIC RISK ASSESSMENTS FOR IPV?

There are specific risk assessments for IPV cases that are also used at various stages and for particular purposes. IPV risk assessments broadly fall into two categories:

**Recidivism assessments:** these are focused on the person who causes harm and examine their risk of re-offense and re-assault.

**Lethality assessments:** these are focused on the survivor and examine the risk of violence escalating to potential homicide.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT IPV RISK ASSESSMENTS  
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### WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR IPV?

There are recidivism risk factors and lethality risk factors in IPV risk assessments. Some recidivism risk factors are previous criminal history, history of harmful behaviors in past relationships, and substance use. Recidivism risk factors inform how likely the person causing harm is to re-offend. Some lethality factors are strangulation, abuse during pregnancy, and recent separation. Lethality risk factors inform how likely the survivor is to be killed or seriously injured by their intimate partner.

### IS AN IPV RISK ASSESSMENT THE SAME AS A 'HIGH RISK TEAM'?

Risk assessments and High-risk teams are not the same. *High-risk teams* are composed of multidisciplinary practitioners who come together to discuss and manage high risk IPV cases. They often use a risk assessment to inform decision making and determine whether a case is 'high risk.'

### WHERE ARE IPV RISK ASSESSMENTS COMMONLY USED?

Risk assessments can be used in many different settings. For example, they can be used on-scene by law enforcement when responding to an IPV-related call. They can be used in court by probation officers to inform supervision and treatment planning. And they can be used in the community by advocates, to inform safety planning.

### HAVE IPV RISK ASSESSMENTS BEEN VALIDATED AND WHAT DOES 'VALIDATED' MEAN?

Many have been validated, meaning they have been tested to see how well they perform at predicting outcomes. Two particularly relevant types of validity for risk assessments are:  
**Inter-rater reliability:** the degree in which an assessment generates the same score, in the same case, when used by different assessors.  
**Predictive validity:** the accuracy of the assessment in predicting future violence.

### HOW DO WE KNOW WHICH IPV RISK ASSESSMENT TO USE?

This depends on where you're assessing risk and your purpose for assessing risk. For example, you may want to assess risk during the on-call scene and connect the victim to services, or you may want to assess risk to determine an offender's supervision level. Because different risk assessments serve different purposes, multiple risk assessments can also be used at various system entry points. It's important to understand the risk assessments that are available, what each assessment looks at, and the requirements for successful implementation.

### WHAT ARE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING AN IPV RISK ASSESSMENT?

There are many things to consider when implementing a risk assessment. These include, ensuring that the assessment is implemented in a way that is culturally responsive, trauma informed, and survivor centered; having a diverse range of partners and community buy-in, with appropriate confidentiality procedures for information sharing; and understanding the requirements for fidelity and having a plan for ongoing sustainability of use.

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