

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE RISK ASSESSMENT: AN INVENTORY OF EXISTING TOOLS

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In 2015, 11 people were victims of domestic homicide in Quebec. The same year, one-sixth of attempted murders committed in the province occurred in a domestic context. In both cases, women were the main victims: 72.7% of victims of domestic homicide in 2015 were women and, in four out of five cases, they were the target of attempted murder in a domestic context (ministère de la Sécurité publique, 2017). The abuser was either a current spouse or boyfriend, or former intimate partner. Moreover, domestic violence was often also involved; according to the Committee of experts on intrafamilial homicide, domestic violence was present in nearly 60% of domestic homicide cases (MSSS, 2012). While the rate of homicides and attempted murders represents only a small proportion of assaults against persons and has remained relatively stable over recent years, the severity and complexity of this issue require that different prevention and intervention strategies be implemented or consolidated.

Concerned with how to best prevent these assaults and protect the victims, the Équipe de recherche en violence conjugale : Acteurs en contexte et pratiques novatrices (Research team on domestic violence: Actors in context and innovative practices; *hereinafter-the Research Team*) (FRQSC, 2016-2020) began considering the relevance of developing a tool that would allow women potentially at risk of homicide to identify problem behaviours and consider the steps they may wish to take. To support this process, the Research Team decided to draw up an inventory of domestic homicide risk assessment tools. More specifically, this project aimed to **identify tools intended for people wondering about the dangerousness of their personal situation, which could be used without prior training.**

This document briefly presents the methodology used to identify these tools and sets out the key points of those reviewed, focusing on the following elements:

1

the population targeted by the assessment

2

the tool's format

3

the intended users

The last section of the document presents items from the reviewed tools that could help women at risk of domestic homicide identify problem behaviours.

Research methodology

Two research strategies were deployed to identify existing tools for assessing the risk of domestic homicide. The first strategy involved consulting databases, using keywords.¹ This search was limited to articles published between 2006 and 2017. The second strategy involved consulting the web sites of organizations working directly with the population (victims and perpetrators of violence) to identify the tools and intervention strategies used to prevent the risk of domestic homicide. Where necessary, the organizations were contacted by email by a Research Team member to complete the existing information. These two research strategies led to the identification and review of 35 domestic homicide risk assessment tools. The following section sums up the main characteristics of the tools reviewed and identifies items from these tools that could be used to assess the level of risk of domestic homicide.

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Main characteristics of the tools reviewed

The tools reviewed all differ in terms of the individuals targeted by the assessment, their format and the intended users (see Table 1). Most of these tools are designed to document the risk of domestic homicide with reference to one or the other of the partners involved in the dynamics of violence. Some target the individual experiencing violence (see tools 1, 2, 7, 14, 20, 21, 24, 25 and 27), while others target the perpetrator of violence (see tools 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 15, 19, 30, 31, 32 and 35). Others target both partners involved in the dynamics of domestic violence (see tools 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, 18, 26, 29 and 33) or are intended to be used by the family and friends of people who may be concerned by domestic homicide (see tools 22, 23 and 34).

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The format of the tools varies. Some are in the form of questionnaires and self-assessments (see tools 1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14, 15, 21, 23, 24, 30 and 31) or checklists of risk factors for assessing the dangerousness of a situation (see tools 3, 19, 20, 21 and 22). Others serve as intervention guides or protocols. A small number of the reviewed tools are information documents (see tools 25 and 34). Only one tool is used to plan the behaviours to be adopted by the person at risk of domestic homicide (see Tool 27).

¹ The databases *Current Contents Connect*, *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, *Psyinfo*, *Social Services Abstracts*, *Cinahl Plus* were consulted using the following keywords: tool, questionnaire, self-assessment, risk, danger*, prevent*, tool, survey, predict*, rating scale, measure, self-assessment, self-evaluation, assessment, risk, risk assessment, homicid*, intimate partner violence, partner danger*, violence, partner abuse, domestic violence, wife abuse, family violence, femicide, spouse abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence death, lethal*, murder*.

Table 1. Synthesis of Reviewed Domestic Homicide Risk Assessment Tools

| # | Authors | Name of instrument | Content | Validation | Intended Users |
|---|--|---|---|-----------------------------|--|
| 1 | Campbell, J. C. | Danger Assessment Instrument (DA) (1986, revised in 2003) | 17-item questionnaire with Yes/No responses relating to the behaviour of the abusive partner and the victim, and the frequency of certain incidents | Yes | Tools for intervention workers working with women experiencing domestic violence |
| 2 | Smith, Whiting, Karakurt, Oka & Servino | Safety Assessment of Future Events Scale (SAFE) (2013) | Self-assessment, 15 statements rated on a Likert scale, with subscales assessing verbal and psychological safety, control exerted by the partner and physical safety | Yes | For use in clinical or research settings |
| 3 | Kropp, Hart & Belfrage | Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA) (1994, revised in 2010) | Checklist including 20 risk factors (criminal history, psychosocial adjustment, spousal assault history), and three types of risk (severe and/or sexual assault, use of weapons and/or credible threats of death and violation of "no contact" order) | Yes | Professionals in the legal field and correctional services or government personnel |
| 4 | Echeburua, Fernandez-Montalvo, de Corral et Lopez-Goni | Severe Intimate Violence Partner Risk Prediction Scale (SIVIPAS) (2009) | Risk prediction scale based on the profile of the violence perpetrator; 20 items divided into 6 sub-scales: place of birth, status of the couple, type of violence, male batterer's profile, victim's vulnerability, severe violence risk level | Yes | Police officers, social workers, psychologists and judges |
| 5 | Community Corrections personnel, Nova Scotia | Domestic Violence Inventory (DVI) (date unknown) | Self-report test, 155 true/false items, divided into scales relating to the offender's truthfulness, substance abuse, control issues, stress coping abilities and violence severity | Yes | Professionals working with domestic violence offenders for probation orders; Court appointed evaluators and violence treatment program |
| 6 | Centre de recherche appliquée en intervention psychosociale (CRAIP/Centre for Applied Research in Psychosocial Intervention) | Guides d'intervention Info-social (pour la prévention des homicides intra et extrafamiliaux) (2015) | Intervention guides and evaluation checklists for professionals encountering situations that could potentially lead to homicide (domestic or other) | Yes (validation of content) | Tools for psychosocial intervention professionals working for a 24/7 telephone consultation service (Info-social) |
| 7 | NA | Bail Safety Program Interview Checklist (BSPIC) (date unknown) | Interview checklist used to assess risk factors related to domestic violence, including lethality and recidivism; history of the relationship, details of family composition, issues of power and control, victim's perception of risk | No | Police officers |

| # | Authors | Name of instrument | Content | Validation | Intended Users |
|----|---|--|---|------------|---|
| 8 | Government of Nova Scotia | High Risk Case Coordination Protocol Framework (2004) | Coordinated intervention protocol. Steps to follow: identifying risk factors for lethality, contacting primary service providers, ongoing information sharing, collaborative action planning. | No | Police, Victim Services working with victims and perpetrators of violence, Corrections, Child Welfare, etc. |
| 9 | Williams & Houghton | Domestic Violence Screening Instrument-Revised (DVSI-R) (2012) | 11-item assessment checklist dealing with various aspects of the behavioural history of the perpetrator, at the judicial and personal/familial levels, and different contextual elements related to the dangerousness of the situation | Yes | Actors in the justice system |
| 10 | Kropp, Hart & Belfrage | Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER) (2010) | 10-item checklist, in two subsections: 1) Perpetrator's risk factors; 2) Psychosocial adjustment; used to evaluate whether there is a short-term or long-term risk for violence or risk for death | Yes | Police officers |
| 11 | Hilton, Harris, Rice, Lang, Cormier & Lines | Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA) (2004) | 13-item questionnaire with Yes/No responses relating to risk factors, covering the accused man's criminal record, past incidents, relational context, history of violence, signs of substance abuse, barriers to victim's support | Yes | Police officers |
| 12 | Delem, Delisle, Paquin & Verret | Outil d'Évaluation du Risque d'Homicide ou de Dangerosité (2008) | 15-item questionnaire with Yes/No responses, assessing the risk for domestic homicide relating to the current situation and the behaviours of both partners | No | Psychosocial workers |
| 13 | Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence | Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) (2005) | Intervention protocol for the police. The program is activated if an individual is at a high risk of being seriously injured or killed. If the individuals involved are intimate partners and there is a manifestation of danger, the Lethality Screen is administered. | Yes | Police officers and other professionals (medical sector, social services, etc.) |
| 14 | Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence | Lethality Screen (2009) | 11-item questionnaire with Yes/No responses relating to the behaviour and profile of the perpetrator of violence, the victim's perception of the situation and the conjugal context | Yes | Police officers and other professionals (medical sector, social services, etc.) |
| 15 | Hilton, Harris, Rice, Houghton & Eke | Domestic Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (DVRAG) (2008) | 14-item questionnaire assessing the risk for domestic violence recidivism; same items as ODARA combined with those from the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) | Yes | Professionals working with domestic violence perpetrators |

| # | Authors | Name of instrument | Content | Validation | Intended Users |
|----|---|--|---|------------|--|
| 16 | Alternative pour elles, Sûreté du Québec, SATAS, DPCP, CAVAC-AT, CISSS-AT | Projet Rabaska (2017) | Intervention protocol involving 4 steps: 1) Identifying situations at risk for domestic or intrafamilial homicide; 2) Management of the risk by the organization; 3) Contacting regional coordinators; 4) Choosing the intervention: joint intervention plan or crisis management unit | No | Intervention workers |
| 17 | Comité V.C.A.S. de Vaudreuil-Soulanges | Alerte Lanaudière (2013) | Intervention protocol | No | Intervention workers |
| 18 | Côté, CAVAC de Laval & Métivier | Arrimage Groupe d'Intervention Rapide (A-Gir) (2014) | Three-level intervention protocol: 1) Contacting the coordinators of a crisis management unit and institutional respondents when a situation presents an imminent risk for homicide or suicide; 2) Contacting the crisis management unit if there are reasonable grounds to believe that there is an imminent risk to the life or safety of a person (getting in touch with/contacting the crisis management unit); 3) Intervention by the crisis management unit | No | Intervention workers in the health and social services network or organizations in Laval |
| 19 | Drouin, Lindsay, Dubé & Blanchette | Intervening with Men to Prevent Spousal Homicide (2012) | Risk assessment tool broken down into three steps: Identification of risk elements, triggering events and protection elements. Summary of interventions to prevent spousal homicide and intervention guide. | No | Intervention workers working with male partners |
| 20 | CriViff; SPVM; SPVQ | Preventing Spousal Homicide – a checklist (2009) | List of risk indicators relating to the victim and the abuser, used to distinguish between a critical situation and a persistent situation presenting no imminent danger. | No | Police officers and intervention workers |
| 21 | Drouin, Drolet et al. | Preventing Domestic Homicide of Women – An Intervention Guide (2004) | Imminence of Danger Grid containing three levels of danger: imminent danger, short/medium term danger and persistent danger. The danger level indicator includes dimensions associated with the situational and relational context and indicators associated with the male partner in the relationship and the female partner. | No | Intervention workers working with women |
| 22 | Government of Manitoba | Warning Signs of Abuse (date unknown) | List of 16 signs to look for in the potential homicide perpetrator (10) and the potential victim (6) known to aggravate the dangerousness of a situation | No | Family and friends of the individuals involved in the dynamics of domestic violence |

| # | Authors | Name of instrument | Content | Validation | Intended Users |
|----|---|---|---|------------|---|
| 23 | Coupal | Spot the Signs Before Someone Dies (2008) | 26-item risk assessment questionnaire with Yes/No responses relating to relationship history, perception of risk, abuser history and access to weapons | No | Family and friends of the individuals involved in the dynamics of domestic violence |
| 24 | CriViff & Assistance aux femmes | I think I May Need Support (2008) | 12-item risk assessment questionnaire with Yes/No responses relating to different aspects of the relationship and post-separation interactions | No | Ex-partner experiencing post-separation domestic violence |
| 25 | Drouin, Drolet et al. | Are You Afraid of Your Partner? How to Identify a High-Risk Situation? (2004) | Information brochure containing 11 risk assessment indicators and suggested protection strategies | No | High-risk victim/partner |
| 26 | Department of Justice Canada | Enhancing Safety (2013) | Handy reference document, including assessment of the dangerousness of the situation and potential for lethal outcome | No | Actors in the justice system |
| 27 | Public Legal Education and Information service of New Brunswick | Safe Leaving Safe Staying (2010) | Self-assessment tool, 15-item checklist of risk factors and safety planning tool | No | High-risk victim/partner |
| 28 | Carrefour Sécurité en Violence Conjugale | Grille d'évaluation du niveau de risque pour la sécurité (2013) | Risk assessment tool based on the collection of general information and actuarial, clinical and scientific indicators (manifestations, fears, impacts on the victim, attitudes/affects/arguments, intent gap, past history, other aggravating factors and protection factors). Includes an intervention protocol. | Yes | Actors in the justice system and psycho-social professionals |
| 29 | Table de concertation sur la violence conjugale et sexuelle faite aux femmes et aux enfants Beauharnois-Salaberry | Prévention des Homicides intra-familiaux par des Actions Rapides et Engagées (PHARE) (2013) | Intervention protocol based on risk level (immediate, imminent or high risk) | No | Intervention workers in partner organizations |
| 30 | Donne-toi une chance | Grille de prévention de l'homicide conjugal (date unknown) | Checklist for assessing the level of dangerousness of the situation based on risk factors | No | Workers working with male partners |
| 31 | Diotte, Vaillancourt, Donato (1999), adapted by the association Donne-Toi une chance | Crisis data collection tool (2005) | Data collection tool: dangerousness, symptoms and behaviours, aggravating factors, information on the application of Law P-38, etc. | No | Workers working with male partners |

| # | Authors | Name of instrument | Content | Validation | Intended Users |
|----|--|--|--|------------|---|
| 32 | Donne-toi une chance | Protocole d'intervention en situation de crise (date unknown) | Intervention protocol based on the level of dangerousness of the situation | No | Workers working with male partners |
| 33 | Centre de recherche appliquée en intervention psychosociale (CRAIP) (Centre for Applied Research in Psychosocial Intervention) | Guide to homicide risk assessment and management (2015; revised in 2017) | Intervention guide including a Homicide Risk Assessment Tool and a Homicide Risk Management Tool (intra and extrafamilial, including spousal homicide) | Yes | Psychosocial professionals in the Québec Health and Social Services Network and the partners involved |
| 34 | Western Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children | Domestic Violence, Is There a Risk of Death? (2017) | Explanatory guide on domestic violence, including factors involved in domestic homicide | No | Neighbours, friends and families |
| 35 | First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission, in coll. with the association À cœur d'homme | Pamphlet- Preventing Spousal Homicide (First Nations and Inuit) (2016) | Intervention tool and spousal homicide risk assessment tool | Non | Intervention workers working with First Nations and Inuit |

Few tools are accessible to women who may be wondering about the dangerousness of their personal situation or of that of someone close to them.

Furthermore, the great majority of the reviewed tools (see tools 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35) were developed to meet the needs of social workers, police officers or actors in the justice system. These intervention workers are required to have prior training in the use of these tools. Very few tools are intended for the general population. Tools such as *Are You Afraid of Your Partner?* (2004), *Spot the Signs Before Someone Dies* (2008), *Warning Signs of Abuse, I Think I May Need Support* (2008), *Safe Leaving Safe Staying* (2010), *Domestic Violence: Is There a Risk of Death* (2017) are exceptions. Thus, few tools are accessible to women who may be wondering about the dangerousness of their personal situation or of that of someone close to them. Moreover, in general, the women in question need to recognize the dynamics of domestic violence in order to gain access to the tools (for example, by contacting an organization that assists victims of violence). This is a significant problem because potential victims of domestic homicide do not necessarily see themselves as victims of domestic violence and, thus, may not be inclined to seek information on this issue.

To address this problem, the Research Team thus sought to identify, based on the tools reviewed, items that could be used by women at risk of homicide to identify problem behaviours and consider the steps they might wish to take. The following section briefly presents the selected items.

Items that could be used to assess the risk of domestic homicide

Items were selected by prioritizing those that could be used by the women in question to assess the dangerousness of their situation regarding domestic homicide without necessarily referring directly to domestic violence. These items are associated with the characteristics of the perpetrator of violence and/or the victim, violent and coercive behaviours, and the context of the conjugal and family relationship. These items were selected based on our literature review, which identified risk factors. There are no causal links involved here since the presence of these risk factors does not indicate that domestic homicide will occur. However, their presence increases the probability that such an event may occur.

Items associated with the characteristics of the perpetrator of violence

| | |
|---|--|
| Not working or on unemployment or experiencing financial difficulties | History of suicide attempts, suicidal threats or suicidal ideation |
| Desire for revenge, hatred or resentment | Lack of empathy and compassion |
| Mental health problems | Sudden and unexplained change in attitudes and behaviours, emotional instability |
| Feeling of being persecuted, being a victim | |

Items associated with the characteristics of the victim of violence

| | |
|--|---|
| Fear of partner, fear of his reactions | Fatalism regarding the outcome of the situation |
| Ambivalence regarding the need to seek help, leave the partner or report the situation of violence | Tendency to minimize the dangerousness of the situation |

Context of conjugal relationship and family context

| | |
|---|--|
| Rapid deterioration of relationship | In the process of separating or recently separated |
| Ex-partner's negative reaction to the separation and, if applicable, to the presence of a new partner | Multiple separations of the couple (the partner's reactions in previous separations) |
| Presence of a child who is not his own | Financial problems (couple) |
| Continuing to cohabit after the decision to separate | |

Items assessing violent or coercive behaviours

Presence of coercive behaviours:

- Controlling most of the female partner's daily activities (telling her who she can be friends with, when she can see her family, how much money she can use, etc.)
- Limiting her mobility (confining her to a room, refusing to let her use the phone or go out of the house)
- Forcing her to have sexual relations

Violent behaviours:

- Threatening to kill/injure a pet or actually harming or killing a pet
- Threatening with a weapon (additional danger if there are firearms in the home)
- Increasing number and severity of violent acts
- History of police or psychosocial interventions for domestic or family violence
- Fear of aggravated violent behaviours if the partner is arrested or released following arrest

Presence of harassing behaviours:

- Repeated phone calls and multiple text messages
- Destroying her property
- Following and spying on her
- Breaking and entering

Making threats to those close to her

Conclusion

This review shows that a large number of the existing domestic homicide risk assessment tools are not accessible to the general population. They are primarily intended for people who have prior training in their use (social or legal workers, police officers). Among the tools that do not require training for use, most nevertheless involve the women in question associating their personal situation with the dynamics of domestic violence, since the tools are mainly disseminated by organizations dealing with this issue.

However, many items drawn from the existing tools could be taken and adapted to create a self-assessment tool accessible to the general population. This tool, which could be available online and disseminated, for example, through social media campaigns, could help women in the general population to, first, identify problem behaviours and, second, consider the steps they may wish to take. This approach aimed at prevention and detection would respect the confidentiality of the women using this tool and the right of all women to consider the steps they wish to take.

A large number of the existing domestic homicide risk assessment tools are primarily intended for people who have prior training in their use.

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