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 Stop the Violence -- Family Violence Hurts All of Us
 

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# The Community Coalition on Family Violence

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 www.ccfv.org -- Knoxville, Tennessee
 

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## Assessing Whether Batterers Will Kill

Some batterers are life-endangering. While it is true that all batterers are dangerous, some are more likely to kill than others and some are more likely to kill at specific times. Regardless of whether there is a protection order in effect, police officers, prosecutors, probation counselors and advocates should evaluate whether an assailant is likely to kill his\* partner, other family members and/or criminal justice system personnel and take appropriate action.

It is important that responding officers conduct an assessment at every call, no matter how many times an officer has responded to the same household. The dispatcher and responding officer can utilize the indicators described below in making an assessment of the batterer's potential to kill. Prosecutors, probation counselors and advocates should, likewise, make an assessment during each interview with a battered woman.

Assessment is tricky and never fool-proof. Considering these factors may or may not reveal actual potential for homicidal assault. But, the likelihood of a homicide is greater when these factors are present. The greater the number of indicators that the batterer demonstrates or the greater the intensity of indicators, the greater the likelihood of a life-threatening attack.

The evaluation should use all information available about the batterer. Reliable information cannot be obtained from an interview conducted with the victim and perpetrator together. Furthermore, information obtained from the victim is significantly more reliable than that from the batterer.

1. **Threats of homicide or suicide.** The batterer who has threatened to kill himself, his partner, the children or her relatives must be considered extremely dangerous.
2. **Fantasies of homicide or suicide.** The more the batterer has developed a fantasy about who, how, when, and/or where to kill, the more dangerous he may be. The batterer who has previously acted out part of a homicide or suicide fantasy may be invested

- in killing as a viable "solution" to his problems. As in suicide assessment, the more detailed the plan and the more available the method, the greater the risk.
3. **Weapons.** Where a batterer possesses weapons and has used them or has threatened to use them in the past in his assaults on the battered woman, the children or himself, his access to those weapons increase his potential for lethal assault. The use of guns is a strong predictor of homicide. If a batterer has a history of arson or the threat of arson, fire should be considered a weapon.
  4. **"Ownership" of the battered partner.** The batterer who says "Death before Divorce!" or "You belong to me and will never belong to another!" may be stating his fundamental belief that the woman has no right to life separate from him. A batterer who believes he is absolutely entitled to his female partner, her services, her obedience and her loyalty, no matter what, is likely to be life-endangering.
  5. **Centrality of the partner.** A man who idolizes his female partner, or who depends heavily on her to organize and sustain his life, or who has isolated himself from all other community, may retaliate against a partner who decides to end the relationship. He rationalizes that her "betrayal" justifies his lethal retaliation.
  6. **Separation Violence.** When a batterer believes that he is about to lose his partner, if he can't envision life without her or if the separation causes him great despair or rage, he may choose to kill.
  7. **Escalation of batterer risk.** A less obvious indicator of increasing danger may be the sharp escalation of personal risk undertaken by a batterer; when a batterer begins to act without regard to the legal or social consequences that previously constrained his violence, chances of lethal assault increase significantly.
  8. **Hostage-taking.** A hostage-taker is at high risk of inflicting homicide. Between 75% and 90% of all hostage takings in the US are related to domestic violence situations.
  9. **Depression.** Where a batterer has been acutely depressed and sees little hope for moving beyond the depression, he may be candidate for homicide and suicide. Research shows that many men who are hospitalized for depression have homicidal fantasies directed at family members.
  10. **Repeated outreach to law enforcement.** Partner or spousal homicide almost always occurs in a context of historical violence. Prior calls to the police indicate elevated risk of life-threatening conduct.