

THE BLUEPRINT APPROACH TO RISK

WHO IS AT RISK AND IN WHAT WAYS?

The Blueprint for Safety organizes everyone in the criminal justice system to keep this question in the forefront of their response to domestic assault cases.

Under the Blueprint, assessing for risk and danger in domestic violence-related crimes is built into each step in the response. Every practitioner, from the 911 call-taker to the judge and the supervising probation officer, is positioned to understand, collect, and communicate information about the kind of violence that is occurring (context) and the level of harm that has occurred and is likely to occur in the future (dangerousness). The Blueprint seeks to provide practitioners at each point of intervention with the knowledge, authority, and capacity to adjust responses along a continuum of interventions, moving to an elevated and then maximum response depending upon the circumstances surrounding the case. [From the Blueprint Supplement, see *Practitioner’s Guide to Risk and Danger in Domestic Violence Cases* and the *Training Memo—Risk and Dangerousness: Managing Severe or Lethal Violence*].

The Blueprint approach differs from that of actuarial tools designed to measure specific acts or factors, such as prior assaults or employment status, and produce a score. The Blueprint approach to risk and danger seeks to “connect the dots,” i.e., to paint a picture of the violence in context and make that picture visible throughout the criminal case process. In that sense, the Blueprint takes a qualitative approach to analyzing risk and danger, using a more narrative framework that adds to, but does not replace, actuarial tools used to complete certain tasks, such as making pretrial release recommendations. Under the Blueprint approach, a judge gets a picture of the history and level of abuse used by the defendant, both toward the victim of the immediate crime and toward other intimate partners, in addition to a numerical score.

The Blueprint approach recognizes that 911 and law enforcement officer have a unique role in developing information about context and dangerousness. Because offenders tend to threaten victims for participating in the criminal case, a victim’s willingness to share information about the history, severity, and context of the violence usually diminishes over time. The initial response may be the only opportunity to accurately identify the risk a particular offender poses to the victim.

The Blueprint requires patrol officers to ask three open-ended questions in order to help get an early and accurate picture of the nature of the risk and danger involved. The questions (based on Jacquelyn Campbell’s Danger Assessment research¹) encourage risk-focused dialogue that helps patrol officers zero in on the essentials of the case, quickly assess for urgency, and determine who is in danger from

¹ Campbell, Jacquelyn C. "The danger assessment instrument: Risk factors of homicide of and by battered women." Questions and answers in lethal and non-lethal violence 1 (1993): 27-38.

whom, and in what ways. The risk questions require responding officers to engage in conversation with victims of violence, as opposed to simply filling out a checklist. Such interaction creates opportunity for dialog between the victim and the officer, and conveys messages of concern for everyone's safety.

The Blueprint risk questions:

- Do you think he/she will seriously injure or kill you or your children? What makes you think so? What makes you think not?
- How frequently and seriously does he/she intimidate, threaten, or assault you? Is it changing? Getting worse? Better?
- Describe the time you were the most frightened or injured by him/her.

Officers use follow-up questions to get at more specific and relevant detail, including the extent to which a victim has been threatened for seeking help, particularly from the criminal justice system. When documented in the police report, the responses serve as the foundation for further investigation, charging decisions, sentencing, and conditions of release and probation. Each practitioner from thereon has a role in filling in the picture and disseminating what is known about context and dangerousness. The *Training Memo-Risk and Dangerousness: Managing Severe or Lethal Violence* outlines the primary tasks and requirements for each point of intervention in the Blueprint's coordinated flow of risk management information.

Concern about accurately identifying risk and danger in domestic assault cases has been a focus of criminal justice system response and research for decades. A number of tools and approaches exist, such as the Danger Assessment, the Maryland Lethality Assessment Program, ODARA, and the Domestic Violence High Risk Team Model². The developers of the Blueprint for Safety conducted an extensive literature search and consulted key researchers on risk assessment to develop the Blueprint framework, which includes the *Practitioner's Guide to Risk and Danger in Domestic Violence Cases* and the *Training Memo-Risk and Dangerousness: Managing Severe or Lethal Violence*. They selected the risk questions as a way of immediately capturing key information on the scene that would help everyone intervening from that point onward produce as accurate a picture as possible of the danger and safety needs and respond accordingly. The three questions are not the only ones that should be asked, but they provide a patrol officer who is working under a high call volume or other time constraints a way to readily develop a picture of the case that would otherwise be lost or difficult to reconstruct.

The Blueprint's approach to risk seeks to capture and communicate what is known about an offender via institutional sources such as arrest and conviction records, protection and harassment restraining order affidavits and court records, and probation supervision violations. The *History of Domestic Violence*

² Risk, Domestic Violence High, and Team DVHRT Model. "Examining Domestic Violence High Risk Teams: A Qualitative Assessment of this Promising Approach in Massachusetts." (2014).

Summary (HDVS³) template helps organize and share a running record of an offender’s conduct over time without having to recreate the information at every point of intervention or with every new incident. The HDVS captures not only case outcomes, such as guilty pleas to domestic assault charges, but concretely describes the violence: e.g., “restrained/headlock, spit in her face, left bruises” or “headlock involved squeezing neck; angry about any contact with other males; monitors phones calls; demands accounting of where she’s been.”

The information in the HDVS is key to helping practitioners differentiate responses to domestic violence cases based on context and dangerousness. The HDVS helps provide each practitioner acting on the case—from the bail evaluator to the responding officer to the charging attorney to the sentencing judge—with information that helps answer the following questions:

- What is the context of this act of domestic violence? Is this person engaging in a pattern of coercion, intimidation, and violence that establishes a relationship of dominance or control over the victim? Or, is this another type of domestic violence that requires a different kind of response?
- How frequent and severe is the violence and, if applicable, other related abuse? Is it escalating? Who is at risk and in what ways?

Find the following references to the Blueprint approach to assessing risk and danger under supplemental materials and training memos at http://www.praxisinternational.org/bp_materials.aspx:

- *Practitioner’s Guide to Risk and Danger in Domestic Violence Cases*
- *Training Memo-Risk and Dangerousness: Managing Severe or Lethal Violence*
- *History of Domestic Violence Summary Instructions and Sample*

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³ Supplement to the Blueprint for Safety, Appendix 1D