



Significant Predictors of Recidivism in Domestic Violence Cases:
A Brief Review of Research
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Introduction

From 2002-2006, over 29,000 people in Idaho were victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in 27,860 IPV incidents. Most recently, the number of IPV victims increased by 8.5 percent and the number of IPV incidents increased by 8.2 percent (2005 to 2006) (Idaho State Police, 2007). In the first 10 months of 2007, 22 IPV homicides occurred in Idaho; this represents a 100% increase from 2006 (FACES, 2008).

In 2008, The Idaho Coordinated Response to Domestic & Sexual Violence (ICRDSV) committee was created through a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to encourage arrests in domestic and sexual violence (Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence (ICASDV), n.d.). The ICRDSV brings together representatives from various statewide agencies to work on initiatives to address issues surrounding domestic and sexual violence across Idaho. Since 2007, this group, facilitated by the ICASDV, has been working on a risk assessment of dangerousness to be used in IPV cases reported to law enforcement. The purpose of this instrument is to assess IPV cases to determine the risk of future violent recidivism for each case. As with most IPV risk assessments that have been developed, the resulting risk level has a variety of uses such as education and safety planning with victims or providing additional information in determining bail and/or release conditions.

In late 2008, the ICRDSV Directors' Committee requested a brief review of significant predictors of recidivism in IPV cases and, specifically, whether or not there was empirical support for the items and factors included on its Idaho Domestic Violence Supplement (IDVS). This remainder of this report is divided into three sections: a review of research, an analysis, and conclusion/recommendations. The review of research explains the purpose, methodology, and results from a brief collection of studies examining significant predictors of recidivism in IPV cases. The analysis provides a comparison of significant predictors found in these studies to those included in the IDVS. Finally, the conclusion/recommendations offers several suggestions for the revision, implementation, and evaluation of the IDVS.

Review of Research

In 2001, Thompson, Saltzman, and Johnson studied predictors of minor and serious physical injury in IPV incidents. Their geographically stratified¹ sample was drawn from a larger study, the Canadian Violence Against Women Survey (CVAWS)², and included 1,976 women who agreed to complete the survey and in their answers indicated that they had been a victim of IPV by their husband (current, ex-, or common-law spouse). Using prior research, Thompson et al. (2001) tested the following hypotheses:

- Prior abuse by the same partner would increase the likelihood of greater injury to the woman (Follingstad, Hause, Rutledge, & Polek, 1992).
- Prior abuse occurring before the marriage (or cohabitation for common-law spouses) would increase the likelihood of greater injury to the woman (Follingstad et al., 1992).
- Having a partner who witnessed violence by his father against his mother would increase the likelihood of greater injury to the woman (Groves, Zuckerman, Marans, & Cohen, 1993).
- Women who witnessed violence by their fathers against their mothers would experience a significant likelihood of greater injury than women who had been victims of IPV but not witnessed it in childhood (Groves et al., 1993).
- Having a partner who was under the influence of alcohol during the abusive incident increased the likelihood of greater injury to the woman (Kyriacou, McCabe, Anglin, Lapesarde, & Winer, 1998).
- Women who suffered emotional abuse or were placed in fear of harm by their partners would experience a significant likelihood of greater injury than women who had been victims of IPV but who were not victims of emotional abuse or threats of harm (O'Leary, 1999).
- The presence of child witnesses during the abusive incident would decrease the likelihood of greater injury to the woman (Thompson et al. (2001) cite no empirical evidence to support this hypothesis).

In their analyses, the authors found the following variables to be significant predictors of serious injury: six or more prior abusive incidents in the relationship (two to five was predictive of minor injuries), the victim's perceived risk of harm (predictive for minor injuries as well), high levels of emotional abuse (moderate levels were significant for minor injuries), partner using alcohol at time of abusive incident (also predictive for minor injuries), abuse prior to the marriage or cohabitation (predictive for minor injuries as well), and the presence of children during the abusive incident (significant for minor injuries, too). The authors conclude that knowledge of individual, situational, and emotional variables are necessary in order to adequately intervene with women involved in abusive relationships (Thompson et al., 2001).

¹ Geographic stratification means that the authors attempted to ensure proportional representation from all geographic areas of Canada.

² The Canadian Violence Against Women Survey (CVAWS) was actually the prototype for the National Violence Against Women Survey in the United States (Thompson et al., 2003).

In 2003, Thompson, Saltzman, and Johnson conducted a study comparing the CVAWS to the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) done in the United States. The purpose of this study was to compare significant predictors of physical injury resulting from IPV incidents across the two samples for commonalities and differences. Based on the results of their 2001 study, Thompson et al. (2003) narrowed their hypotheses to only those variables that were identified as significant predictors: violence prior to the marriage or cohabitation, perpetrator's use of alcohol at the time of the incident, presence of children during the incident, prior abusive history with the current partner, victim's perceived of harm, and high levels of emotional abuse by the male partner.

Due to differences in survey instruments and methods of deciding who is asked what questions, this sample is more narrow than the previous CVAWS analysis. Women whose abusive partners were ex-spouses had to be removed because the NVAWS only asked pertaining to risk factors of women whose abusers were current partners. In addition, there were differences in the types of questions asked in order to ascertain physical injury³; therefore, only those questions that overlapped both surveys were included in this analysis. After these changes, the sample for this study included 281 NVAWS women and 627 CVAWS women. These numbers represent five percent or less of both surveys (Thompson et al., 2003).

Results from this study found two variables, six or more prior abusive incidents by the same perpetrator and use of alcohol by the perpetrator during the incident, to be significant predictors of physical injury across both surveys. Differences in the NVAWS sample included the presence of children witnessing the abusive incident and high levels of emotional abuse (no longer significant in the CVAWS sample) significantly predicting physical injury, while the victim's perceived risk of harm was not a significant predictor (although it was in the CVAWS). The models for each survey (how well the entire group of variables predicted risk for physical injury) accurately predicted increased risk of physical injury in 76% (NVAWS) and 79% (CVAWS) of the cases (Thompson et al., 2003). The authors conclude that the similar findings (prior abuse history and use of alcohol) across both surveys should be examined as important variables to be considered in attempting to address intimate partner violence (Thompson et al., 2003).

Block (2003) conducted a year-long study of 2,500 women seeking health care at either a hospital or clinic in neighborhoods identified as high risk for IPV. Women were asked questions that screened for both involvement in a relationship and IPV. Twenty percent of those screened indicated they were involved in an abusive relationship and completed a more extensive interview. Approximately 33 percent of those screened who indicated they were in a relationship that was not abusive in nature were also interviewed. In addition, Block conducted a qualitative data collection, examining the case files, Chicago Homicide Dataset, medical examiner files, and other sources of all IPV homicides involving a woman victim or woman offender during the year-long study (Block 2003).

³ Questions regarding sexual assault were not included in either analyses (Thompson et al. (2001) or Thompson et al. (2003)) due to the low response rates in the CVAWS and the different questions used for sexual assault in the NVAWS.

Results show a much more complicated picture of predicting future violence, including homicide, in IPV relationships. Increasing frequency of violence, type of past violence, number of days since the last incident (within 30 days for homicides), prior serious injury, strangulation (25% of homicides), past attempts to leave the relationship (75% of homicides & 85% of critical injuries) or actual separation (45% of homicides), use and display of weapons during an incident were all significant predictors of future violence (Block 2003). In addition, separate indicators were identified for IPV homicides involving a female victim when no prior violence existed. Twenty percent of women were murdered or critically injured during their first abusive incident. The risk factors associated with these cases differed from those with prior abuse history: partner's extreme jealousy or level of control over the woman, drug use by the partner, and partner's use of violence outside the home (Block 2003).

Lorber and O'Leary (2004) investigated predictors of recidivism in IPV cases in terms of the continuation of male aggression amongst married couples. They proposed similarities in predictors of anti-social behavior and male aggression over the long term (30 months). Their initial sample consisted of 396 couples planning to be married who responded to media ads recruiting subjects for a study of marriage. Only those couples (n=94) who were interviewed at each of four points in time and reported that the male partner was physically abusive were included in this analysis. Data was collected using a variety of instruments (Conflicts Tactics Scale, alcohol screenings, personality tests, and background questionnaires). Results indicated that premarital abuse and abuse of the perpetrator as a child were significant predictors of continued physical abuse in the relationship. The more abuse that occurred prior to the marriage (during dating), the more persistent the abuse was over time during the marriage. In fact, more than 40 percent of men who were abusive prior to the marriage were abusive throughout the 30 months of the study. In addition, while only a little more than one-third of the men were severely abusive prior to marriage, over half of all of the men were severely abusive at some point in time during the 30 months of marriage covered by the study. For child abuse, the relationship was inverse: the worse the victimization of the male partner as a child, the less persistent the abuse was over time. Using their model which consisted of physical aggression, aggressive personality, impulsive personality, general aggression, child abuse, interparental aggression (witnessing IPV as a child), and problem drinking, they accurately predicted how physically aggressive the male partner would be at later stages of study 60 percent of the time with better accuracy at both the lower and higher ends of the aggression scale (Lorber & O'Leary, 2004).

In 2005, Hilton and Harris conducted a review of over 100 empirical studies assessing risk of 'wife assault', lethality, and onset of abuse. Continued violent assaults were predicted by a variety of factors, such as age, low socioeconomic status, anti-social personality disorder and lifestyle, drug and/or alcohol abuse, prior criminal history, prior conflict within the marriage (non-abusive), prior abuse history, and not completing batterers' treatment. Most of these variables overlap with the significant predictors of violent recidivism in general. Hilton and Harris acknowledge (echoing Block (2003)) that lethality is quite difficult to predict given that homicide is a rare crime in general and the inherent bias that can exist amongst living subjects who provide information about the lethal relationship in question. However, they concluded that lethality is associated with some risk factors: the victim is young, female, with children from a

prior relationship (outside of the current IPV relationship), has left the IPV relationship, and recently begun a new relationship. Stalking behaviors by the abuser and threats of harm were cited as additional possible risk factors. As for the onset of violence in a relationship, significant predictors were identified as the abuser having a conduct disorder, abusing drugs and/or alcohol, and emotionally abusive. Supporting the conclusions of Lorber and O'Leary, Hilton and Harris (2005) also cite empirical evidence that men who are at the low level of physical aggression early in the relationship are less likely to continue that aggression, however those who are severely aggressive are at the greatest risk of continuing that level of violence.

Wooldredge and Thistlewaite (2005) examined the issue of recidivism in IPV from a different perspective: likelihood of rearrest. The sample was comprised of 3,662 individuals (men and women) who were arrested during a six month period in 1993 or a six month period in 1996 with follow-up occurring after a two year period post arrest. They examined predictors of rearrest for misdemeanor or felony IPV assault (prevalence), number of rearrests for IPV assault (incidence), and length of time after court jurisdiction had ended before they were rearrested (time). Variables found to be significant predictors of all three outcomes were: male perpetrator, younger age, residential instability, lower levels of education in the neighborhood, higher number of prior violent convictions, cohabitating as opposed to being married, under court jurisdiction for an earlier charge at the time of the initial arrest, not being charged, and not being placed on probation. Differences exist between significant predictors for the three outcomes. Receiving a split sentence (probation and jail) is a significant predictor of both increased prevalence and incidence of rearrest, but not time until rearrest. Attending a batterer intervention program was a significant predictor of reduced incidence but not for prevalence or time until rearrest. Higher neighborhood levels of residential stability were a significant predictor of less time until rearrest, but not of prevalence or incidence. Again highlighting the complicated nature of predicting recidivism, Wooldredge and Thistlewaite identified significant interactions between court disposition and race, prior violent arrests, residential stability, among other variables. The model (all of the variables) was more accurate in predicting time to rearrest than prevalence or incidence. The authors also point out that class status and neighborhood variables had some of the strongest reported effects on the likelihood of rearrest (Wooldredge & Thistlewaite, 2005).

Using a similar method as Wooldredge and Thistlewaite (2005), Kingsnorth (2006) examined predictors for rearrest using a sample of 872 misdemeanor IPV or violation of protection order cases over an 18-month follow-up period. He examined three outcomes: rearrest after the initial arrest, prosecutorial decision to file, and full prosecution. Only one variable was a significant predictor of rearrest across all three outcomes: any prior arrest. Some differences across the outcomes did exist. Existence of a protection order was a significant predictor of rearrest after the initial arrest and rearrest after the prosecutorial decision to file (or not file) charges with stronger effects after the initial arrest. Whether or not a weapon was used in the initial incident was also a significant predictor for rearrest after both the initial arrest and prosecutorial decision, again, with the stronger effect after the initial arrest. The number of days from filing to closing the case and the number of original charges were both significant predictors of rearrest for only full prosecution (conviction or dismissal). The longer the time between filing and closing the case, the less likely the offender was to be rearrested; similarly,

the higher the number of original charges, the greater the likelihood that the offender would be arrested 18 months after closing the case.

Finally, Dobash, Dobash, Cavanaugh, and Medina-Ariza (2007) compared significant predictors for nonlethal and lethal acts of IPV. Using data from two separate studies, the researchers compared variables for 122 men convicted of using nonlethal IPV and 206 men convicted of lethal IPV. Both studies were three years in length and utilized numerous data sources. Significant differences existed in significant predictors between nonlethal and lethal perpetrators across childhood, adulthood, and situational variables. Within the childhood variables, lethal perpetrators were more likely to come from traditional households (father a skilled, white collar professional, mother a homemaker, fewer instances of alcohol abuse by father, paternal violence towards mother, and physical abuse of children by father) than nonlethal perpetrators. Within the adulthood variables, nonlethal perpetrators were more likely than lethal perpetrators to be unskilled workers, chronically unemployed, alcohol dependent, convicted of at least one prior crime, and previously convicted of a violent crime. However, lethal perpetrators were more likely to have been violent towards a prior partner (other than the homicide victim) than nonlethal perpetrators. In terms of situational variables pertaining prior to and at the time of the actual assault/homicide, the findings become quite varied. Nonlethal perpetrators were more likely than lethal perpetrators to be cohabitating, committed prior violence against the victim, and have been under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. Lethal perpetrators, on the other hand, were more likely than nonlethal perpetrators to be in a serious relationship or engaged, demonstrate possessiveness at the time of the homicide, be separated from their partner at the time of the homicide, commit a sexual assault at the time of the event, strangle or choke the victim at the event, and use an instrument or weapon to commit the homicide. These findings continue the argument that predicting lethality versus nonlethality is difficult at best.

Analysis

Table 1 displays the factors included in the Idaho Domestic Violence Supplement and the peer reviewed research offering support for that factor's predictive value. As can be seen, most of the items included on the supplement are supported by the reviewed research. A number of items showed strong support: prior unwanted physical contact, victim perception of future risk, prior use of weapons to injure or threaten, recent separation, recent or imminent court action, loss of employment, threats and intimidation, other prior police contact, drug and/or alcohol abuse, and suspect under the influence when current altercation started.

Table 1. Empirical support for items and factors in the IDVS

Idaho Domestic Violence Supplement Factors	Empirical Support
<i>Factor 1: History of Domestic Violence</i>	
Current civil protection order	Kingsnorth (2006)
Current criminal no contact order	
Violation of civil or criminal no contact order today	Kingsnorth (2006)
Recent escalation of violence	Block (2003)
Prior unwanted physical contact	Hilton & Harris (2005); Dobash et al. (2007); Lorber & O'Leary (2004); Dutton & Kropp (2000); Block (2003); Thompson et al. (2001); Thompson et al. (2003)
Victim reports threat of future harm	Dutton & Kropp (2000); Hilton & Harris (2005)
Caused serious injury to another in prior incident	Hilton & Harris (2005); Block (2003)
Stalking	Hilton & Harris (2005)
Forced partner to have sex	Dobash et al. (2007) for lethality; Dutton & Kropp (2000)
Previous attempt(s) of strangulation	Dobash et al. (2007) for lethality; Block (2003) for both
Threatened/allegation of abuse of animals	

Victim perception of future risk	Hilton & Harris (2005); Block (2003); Thompson et al. (2001)
Access to weapons	
Prior use of weapons to injure or threaten	Dobash et al. (2007); Dutton & Kropp (2000); Block (2003); Kingsnorth (2006)
Weapon moved	
Attempted strangulation: breathing difficulty	
Attempted strangulation: voice change	
Attempted strangulation: swallowing changes	
Attempted strangulation: behavioral changes	
Attempted strangulation: loss of consciousness	
<i>Factor 2: Threats to Kill</i>	
Specific threats to kill victim	
Specific threats to kill children	
Displayed weapon at time of threat	Block (2003); Kingsnorth (2006)
<i>Factor 3: Threats of Suicide</i>	
Suspect suicidal	
Depression or other mental illness	Hilton & Harris (2005) for psychopathy & anti-social personality disorder; Dutton & Kropp (2000)
Other stressors	Dutton & Kropp (2000)

<i>Factor 4: Recent Separation</i>	
Recent separation	Dobash et al. (2007)-for lethality, if separate at the event; Dutton & Kropp (2000); Block (2003)-for lethality
Recent or imminent court action	Hilton & Harris (2005)-for prior domestic violence arrest; Dobash et al. (2007)-for prior conviction & prior violent conviction; Wooldredge & Thistlewaite (2005)-for number of prior violent convictions
Loss of employment	Hilton & Harris (2005)-for low socioeconomic status; Dobash et al. (2007) for chronic unemployment; Dutton & Kropp (2000)
<i>Factor 5: Obsessive/Controlling Behaviors</i>	
Threats and intimidation	Hilton & Harris (2005)-for psychological abuse; Dobash et al. (2007)-for lethality with possessiveness at the event; Thompson et al. (2001; 2003)-for emotional abuse
Destruction of property or pets	
Monitoring by suspect	Thompson et al. (2001)-for emotional abuse; Thompson et al. (2003)-for high levels of emotional abuse
Isolation of victim	Thompson et al. (2001)-for emotional abuse; Thompson et al. (2003)-for high levels of emotional abuse
Economic control by suspect	
<i>Factor 6: Prior Police Contact</i>	
Prior civil protection order	
Prior criminal no contact order	

Other prior police contact	Hilton & Harris (2005)-for prior domestic violence arrest; Kingsnorth (2006)-for any prior arrest; Wooldredge & Thistlewaite (2005)-for pending charges at time of initial arrest
Factor 7: Alcohol/Drug Abuse by Suspect	
Drug and/or alcohol abuse	Hilton & Harris (2005)-for violence in the short term; Dobash et al. (2007)-for lethality using alcohol; Block (2003)
Under influence when current altercation started	Hilton & Harris (2005); Dobash et al. (2007)-for nonlethality; Thompson et al. (2001; 2003)-for both minor & severe injury

On the other hand, a number of items did not find any support in the group of research reviewed: current criminal no contact order, threatened abuse or allegation of abuse of animals, weapon moved, all of the attempted strangulation items, specific threats to kill victim, specific threats to kill children, suspect suicidal, destruction of property or pets, economic control by suspect, and prior civil and criminal protection orders. This is not to say that these items do not have merit; it is simply to conclude that, at this time with these articles, no empirical support could be found. However, the process of creating the IDVS included reviewing IPV homicide cases in Idaho which may have identified some of these items. If they are exclusive to Idaho or to lethality cases, they may not have appeared as significant in other research.

In addition, there are a number of measures that do show support in the literature but do not appear on the IDVS. For non-lethal recidivism, background measures regarding the suspect, such as paternal alcohol abuse, father violent towards mother, child abuse, being a child witness of paternal violence towards mother, history of violence towards acquaintances and stranger, aggressive personality, impulsive personality, general aggression, and belief in attitudes that support violence against women. In the same respect, there are situational measures that are also not included on the IDVS, but have empirical support: couple is cohabitating, history of emotional abuse in the relationship, the number of days since the last incident, abuse occurring prior to cohabitation or marriage, frequency of prior abuse in the relationship, having a child witness the assault, and how long the couple has resided in their home. For lethal recidivism, there are also background measures regarding the suspect that do not appear on the IDVS, such as father in a skilled occupation, mother a homemaker, and violence towards a prior partner and situational measures, such as the suspect being a skilled/white collar worker, having any prior conviction, and the current relationship being a serious dating one or an engagement.

When you examine the IDVS by each factor, differences become evident in the level of empirical support across these factors. Table 2 displays the percentage of items within a factor that have demonstrated any empirical support within the articles reviewed for this report. Two

factors, recent separation and drug/alcohol abuse by suspect, received 100 percent support in the literature for their items. Two factors, threats of suicide and obsessive/controlling behaviors, received 60-67 percent support. Factor 1, history of domestic violence, received a rating of 55 percent, while two factors, threats to kill and prior police contact received only 33 percent support. Some of the variation across factors has to do with the number of items included in that factor. For example, history of domestic violence has 20 different items with five of the items focusing on descriptions of prior attempted strangulations. The removal of these five items from this factor (possibly moving them to subsets of the previous attempt(s) of strangulation item) would increase the strength of this factor to 73 percent. In addition, there is no mention in the literature of current criminal no contact orders and this may possibly be that researchers are inclined to believe that whatever deterrent effect may come from having a criminal no contact order is not significantly different from having a civil protection order (which is included in studies, but often is not found to be a significant predictor of recidivism). Combining these two items into one (current civil protection or criminal no contact order) increases the strength of factor 1 to 79 percent.

Table 2. Distribution of empirical support across factors

IDVS Factor	Percentage of items showing demonstrated empirical support in the reviewed literature
Factor 1: History of domestic violence (20 items)	55%
Factor 2: Threats to kill (3 items)	33%
Factor 3: Threats of suicide	67%
Factor 4: Recent separation	100%
Factor 5: Obsessive/Controlling Behaviors	60%
Factor 6: Prior police contact	33%
Factor 7: Alcohol/Drug abuse by suspect	100%

Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to provide information regarding significant predictors of recidivism in IPV cases and, specifically, to gather information on the level of empirical support for the items included in the IDVS. This information is to be used to offer recommendations concerning policies in regards to victim contact emanating from the assessment.

While the strength of empirical support for each factor varies tremendously, the author would not recommend creating any kind of weighting system in order to ascertain an overall assessment score. Many of the individual items that enjoy significant empirical support are distributed across factors as opposed to being concentrated within one factor. That makes weighting the seven factors more cumbersome and possibly less effective.

While there are some items that do not demonstrate any empirical support in the research reviewed for this report, it does not remove the possibility that empirical support may exist in some other study not discovered in this review. In addition, some of these items may have appeared consistently across case studies of IPV homicide in Idaho. And, in all likelihood, the IDVS is really meant to serve two purposes: assess risk and gather data for possible criminal charges. Removing some of the more descriptive items will reduce the picture that can be drawn from the information gathered in using this form. Therefore, elimination of these items is not recommended at this time.

Based on all of the information contained in this report, here are the recommendations at this time:

- Clearly identifying each of the seven factors on the IDVS. Currently, they are only delineated by a number (e.g., “1. History of Domestic Violence”) and are indistinguishable from other squares containing checkboxes (e.g., Appearance & Emotional State) that are not assessment factors.
- Clearly indicate which items belong to which factor category. For example, for the history of domestic violence factor, there are four separate boxes included in this factor (history of abuse, victim perception of future risk, weapons, and attempted strangulation). There is nothing visually that ties these four squares together to ensure that whomever is completing the form understands that a checkmark in any one of these squares means a checkmark for factor 1.
- Include instructions explaining that people should add up the number of **factors** that have at least one *item* marked instead of leaving open the possibility that someone may believe that it is the number of *checked items* that determines what victim follow-up is necessary.
- Correct the final risk assessment distribution to: 1-3 different factors, 4-5 different factors, 6-7 different factors.
- Suggest that cases where at least one *item* is checked across 1-3 different **factors** require standard follow-up procedures with an IPV victim; cases where at least one *item*

is checked across 4-5 different **factors** require following up with the victim within 72 hours; and cases where at least one *item* is checked across 6-7 different **factors** require following up with the victim within 48 hours. One exception to this policy should be cases in which attempted strangulation, recent separation, forced sex, and extreme possessiveness or controlling behavior exist as these have been demonstrated across some studies as significant predictors of lethality. For these cases, it is recommended that, *no matter how many factors contain a checked item, contact with the victim should be made within 24 hours.*

- An evaluation of the IDVS should be conducted examining the accuracy with which this assessment and individual factors and items predict (1) violent recidivism and (2) lethality in both urban and rural parts of Idaho.

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