

A team of researchers studied the Danger Assessment and found that despite certain limitations, the tool can with some reliability identify women who may be at risk of being killed by an intimate partner.



## Assessing Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Homicide

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The research reported here was supported with a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (R01 DA/AA 11156), with funding also provided by NIJ. Many people contributed: Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Ph.D., R.N., F.A.A.N., School of Nursing, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland; Daniel Webster, Sc.D., Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University; Jane Koziol-McLain, Ph.D., R.N., Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand; Carolyn Rebecca Block, Ph.D., Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, Chicago; Doris Campbell, Ph.D., R.N., College of Medicine, University of South Florida, Tampa; Mary Ann Curry, Ph.D., R.N., School of Nursing, Oregon Health Sciences University, Portland; Faye Gary, Ed.D., R.N., College of Nursing, University of Florida, Gainesville; Judith McFarlane, Ph.D., R.N., Texas Women's University, Houston; Carolyn Sachs, M.D., M.P.H., School of Medicine, University of California at Los Angeles; Phyllis Sharps, Ph.D., R.N., School of Nursing, Johns Hopkins University; Yvonne Ulrich, Ph.D., R.N., School of Nursing, University of Washington, Seattle; and Susan A. Wilt, Dr.P.H., New York City Department of Health.

**W**hy does domestic violence turn to murder? Can we measure the risk of death for a battered woman? Which women in abusive relationships are most likely to be killed?

One helpful tool for finding answers to these questions is called the Danger Assessment.<sup>1</sup> The series of 15 questions on the Danger Assessment is designed to measure a woman's risk in an abusive relationship. (See figure 1.)

### Figure 1: The Danger Assessment Tool

The Danger Assessment Tool was developed in 1985 and revised in 1988 after reliability and validity studies were done. Completing the Danger Assessment can help a woman evaluate the degree of danger she faces and consider what she should do next. Practitioners are reminded that the Danger Assessment is meant to be used with a calendar to enhance the accuracy of the battered woman's recall of events. The Danger Assessment can be printed from <http://www.son.jhmi.edu/research/CNR/homicide/DANGER.htm>, which also gives directions regarding permission for use.

#### DANGER ASSESSMENT

Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Ph.D., R.N.  
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Several risk factors have been associated with homicides (murders) of both batterers and battered women in research conducted after the murders have taken place. We cannot predict what will happen in your case, but we would like you to be aware of the danger of homicide in situations of severe battering and for you to see how many of the risk factors apply to your situation.

Using the calendar, please mark the approximate dates during the past year when you were beaten by your husband or partner. Write on that date how bad the incident was according to the following scale:

1. Slapping, pushing; no injuries and/or lasting pain
2. Punching, kicking; bruises, cuts, and/or continuing pain
3. "Beating up"; severe contusions, burns, broken bones
4. Threat to use weapon; head injury, internal injury, permanent injury
5. Use of weapon; wounds from weapon

(If any of the descriptions for the higher number apply, use the higher number.)

Mark Yes or No for each of the following. ("He" refers to your husband, partner, ex-husband, ex-partner, or whoever is currently physically hurting you.)

1. Has the physical violence increased in frequency over the past year?
2. Has the physical violence increased in severity over the past year and/or has a weapon or threat from a weapon ever been used?
3. Does he ever try to choke you?
4. Is there a gun in the house?
5. Has he ever forced you to have sex when you did not wish to do so?
6. Does he use drugs? By drugs, I mean "uppers" or amphetamines, speed, angel dust, cocaine, "crack," street drugs, or mixtures.
7. Does he threaten to kill you and/or do you believe he is capable of killing you?
8. Is he drunk every day or almost every day? (In terms of quantity of alcohol.)
9. Does he control most or all of your daily activities? For instance: does he tell you who you can be friends with, how much money you can take with you shopping, or when you can take the car? (If he tries, but you do not let him, check here: )
10. Have you ever been beaten by him while you were pregnant? (If you have never been pregnant by him, check here: )
11. Is he violently and constantly jealous of you? (For instance, does he say "If I can't have you, no one can.")
12. Have you ever threatened or tried to commit suicide?
13. Has he ever threatened or tried to commit suicide?
14. Is he violent toward your children?
15. Is he violent outside of the home?

Total "Yes" Answers

**Thank you. Please talk to your nurse, advocate, or counselor about what the Danger Assessment means in terms of your situation.**

#### References:

- Campbell, Jacquelyn C., *Assessing Dangerousness: Violence by Sexual Offenders, Batterers, and Child Abusers*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Campbell, Jacquelyn C., Phyllis W. Sharps, and Nancy Glass, "Risk Assessment for Intimate Partner Violence," in *Clinical Assessment of Dangerousness: Empirical Contributions*, ed. Georges-Franck Pinard and Linda Pagani, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 136-157.

*A tool like the Danger Assessment—or another risk assessment process—may assist women (and the professionals who help them) to better understand the potential for danger and the level of their risk.*

A team of researchers studied the Danger Assessment and found that despite certain limitations, the tool can with some reliability identify women who may be at risk of being killed by their intimate partners. The study found that women who score 8 or higher on the Danger Assessment are at very grave risk (the average score for women who were murdered was just under 8). Women who score 4 or higher are at great risk (the average score for abused women was just over 3). The findings indicate that the Danger Assessment tool can assist in assessing battered women who may be at risk of being killed as well as those who are not.

The study also found that almost half the murdered women studied did not recognize the high level of their risk. Thus, a tool like the Danger Assessment—or another risk assessment process—may assist women (and the professionals who help them) to better understand the potential for danger and the level of their risk.

### Limitations and Caveats

Eighty-three percent of the women who were killed had scores of 4 or higher, but so did almost 40 percent of the women who were *not* killed. This finding indicates that practitioners can use the Danger Assessment (like all intimate partner violence risk assessment tools) as a guide in the process rather than as a precise actuarial tool.<sup>2</sup>

It also indicates the need for a more precise cutoff score. Perhaps giving greater weight to certain questions, such as those related to guns and threats, could accomplish greater precision.

Cutoff scores should identify those who are at great risk of being killed, not miscategorize women who are not likely to be killed. Both categories are important because if the cutoff score is too high, women in extreme danger

may be missed. If the cutoff score is too low, women with a lower risk of being murdered may be scared unnecessarily, and potential perpetrators' liberty may be restricted unfairly. Although finding a realistic cutoff score is difficult, it is crucial and something the researchers will continue to study.

### High Correlations: Guns and Threats to Kill

Previous studies have looked at the relationship of gun ownership or possession to intimate partner homicide, particularly when the partners live apart.<sup>3</sup> The Danger Assessment study found that women who were threatened or assaulted with a gun or other weapon were 20 times more likely than other women to be murdered. Women whose partners threatened them with murder were 15 times more likely than other women to be killed. When a gun was in the house, an abused woman was 6 times more likely than other abused women to be killed. (See figure 2.)

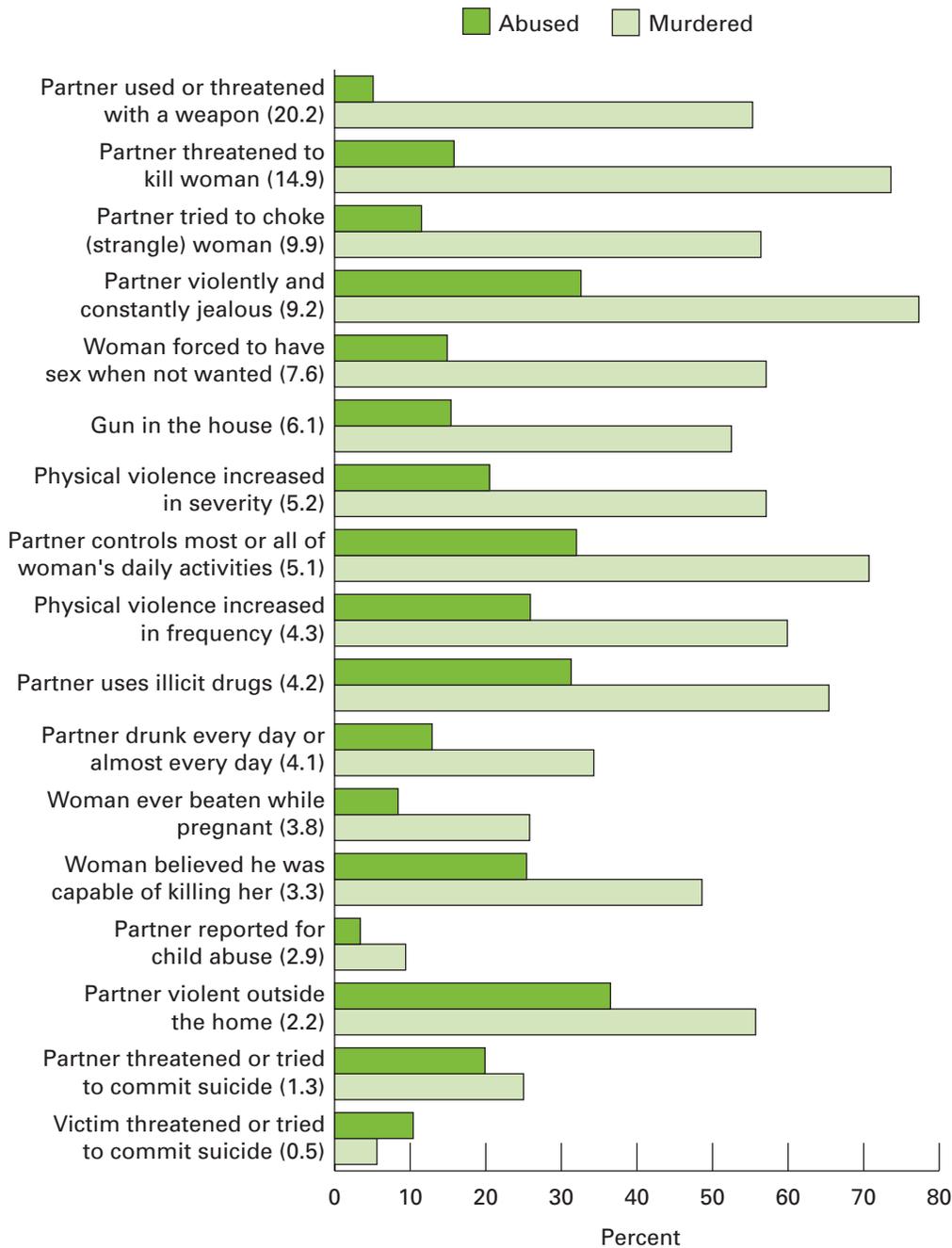
Although drug abuse or serious alcohol abuse (where the abuser was drunk every day or almost every day) also translates into increased risk and tends to separate batterers from intimate partners who kill, threats to kill, extreme jealousy, attempts to choke, and forced sex present higher risks.<sup>4</sup>

### Low Correlation: Threatened or Attempted Suicide

Threatened or attempted suicide by either males or females in the study were not found to be predictors of intimate partner homicide. However, there is an increased risk of homicide when the man is suicidal and there has not been any physical abuse. Approximately one-third of the murders studied were homicide-suicides. Further analysis is needed to learn how a man's potential for suicide increases his partner's risk of becoming a homicide-suicide victim.

**Figure 2: Danger Assessment Risk Factors Among Murder Victims and Abused Women**

(The numbers in parentheses are unadjusted odds ratios and indicate the likelihood of being in the homicide versus the abused group.\*)



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\* All items had significant odds ratio (95 percent confidence interval excludes the value of 1), except the last two factors (partner and victim suicidality).

*In safety planning, an abuser's threats with a weapon or threats to kill should be rated as particularly serious, as should a possible murderer's access to a gun.*

## THE NUMBERS

Women are killed by intimate partners—husbands, lovers, ex-husbands, or ex-lovers—more often than by any other category of killer.<sup>1</sup> It is the leading cause of death for African-American women aged 15 to 45 and the seventh leading cause of premature death for U.S. women overall.<sup>2</sup> Intimate partner homicides make up 40 to 50 percent of all murders of women in the United States, according to city- or State-specific databases (as opposed to the Federal Supplementary Homicide Reports).<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the Federal report doesn't have an ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend category, which accounts for as much as 11 percent of intimate partner homicides of women and for 2 to 3 percent of intimate partner homicides committed by women.

In 70 to 80 percent of intimate partner homicides, no matter which partner was killed, the man physically abused the woman before the murder.<sup>4</sup> Thus, one of the primary ways to decrease intimate partner homicide is to identify and intervene promptly with abused women at risk.

1. Mercy, James A., and Linda E. Saltzman, "Fatal Violence Among Spouses in the United States, 1976–85," *American Journal of Public Health* 79 (1989): 595–599; Bailey, James E., Arthur L. Kellermann, Grant W. Somes, Joyce G. Banton, Frederick P. Rivara, and Norman B. Rushforth, "Risk Factors for Violent Death of Women in the Home," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 157(7) (1997): 777–782; and Bachman, Ronet, and Linda E. Saltzman, *Violence Against Women: Estimates From the Redesigned Survey*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Institute of Justice, 1995 (NCJ 154348).
2. Office of Justice Programs, *Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Factbook, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, March 1998 (NCJ 167237).
3. Campbell, Jacquelyn C., "If I Can't Have You, No One Can: Power and Control in Homicide of Female Partners," in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, ed. Jill Radford and Diana E.H. Russell, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992: 99–113; and Langford, Linda, Nancy Isaac, and Stacey Kabat, "Homicides Related to Intimate Partner Violence in Massachusetts," *Homicide Studies* 2(4) (1998): 353–377.
4. Pataki, George, *Intimate Partner Homicides in New York State*, Albany, NY: State of New York, 1997; Office of Justice Programs, *Violence by Intimates*; Campbell, "If I Can't Have You"; McFarlane, Judith M., Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Susan A. Wilt, Carolyn J. Sachs, Yvonne Ulrich, and Xiao Xu, "Stalking and Intimate Partner Femicide," *Homicide Studies* 3(4) (1999): 300–316; and Campbell, Jacquelyn C., *Assessing Dangerousness: Violence by Sexual Offenders, Batterers, and Child Abusers*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.

This study did not examine the risk faced by men of intimate partner homicide when the woman was suicidal, so this factor's weight was not determined.<sup>5</sup> However, since the question of whether a woman is suicidal is important for prevention efforts, the researchers recommend that it remain on the assessment.

## The Safety Plan

In safety planning, an abuser's threats with a weapon or threats to kill should be rated as particularly serious, as should a possible murderer's access to a gun. Thus, the researchers suggest that the legal prohibition against gun ownership

for those convicted of domestic violence is especially important to enforce, and any protection order should include firearms search-and-seizure provisions.

However, criminal justice practitioners making decisions about an alleged batterer's bail or sentencing should keep in mind that more than a third of women who had a score of 4 or higher were not murdered. The research showed that only a score of 8 or 9 reliably identified those women who were killed. Thus, while the current cutoff score of 4 suggests the need for great caution and for protective action, it does not reliably identify a woman's risk of death.

NCJ 196547

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#### For more information

- Background information on the Danger Assessment plus the full text of the questionnaire is available at <http://www.son.jhmi.edu/research/CNR/homicide/DANGER.htm>.

#### Notes

1. Pataki, George, *Intimate Partner Homicides in New York State*, Albany, NY: State of New York, 1997; Campbell, Jacquelyn C., Phyllis W. Sharps, and Nancy Glass, "Risk Assessment for Intimate Partner Violence," in *Clinical Assessment of Dangerousness: Empirical Contributions*, ed. Georges-Franck Pinard and Linda Pagani, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 136–157; Bennett, Lauren, Lisa Goodman, and Mary Ann Dutton, "Risk Assessment Among Batterers Arrested for Domestic Violence," *Violence Against Women: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal* 6(11) (2000): 1190–1203; and Weisz, Arlene N., Richard M. Tolman, and Daniel G. Saunders, "Assessing the Risk of Severe Domestic Violence: The Importance of Survivors' Predictions," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 15(1) (2000): 75–90.
2. An actuarial instrument is one that provides weightings and published scores that have been shown through formal and independent research to predict violent outcomes. See Roehl, Jan, and Kristin Guertin, *Current Use of Dangerousness Assessments in Sentencing Domestic Violence Offenders*, Pacific Grove, CA: State Justice Institute, 1988; and Quinsey, Vernon L., Grant T. Harris, Marnie E. Rice, and Catherine A. Cormier, *Violent Offenders: Appraising and Managing Risk* (1st ed.), Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1998.
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4. See Sharps, Phyllis W., Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Doris Williams Campbell, Faye Gary, and Daniel Webster, "The Role of Alcohol Use in Intimate Partner Femicide," *American Journal on Addictions* 10(2) (2001): 1–14, for a complete multivariate analysis of substance abuse of both the perpetrator and victim in these data.
5. Browne, Angela, Kirk R. Williams, and Donald G. Dutton, "Homicide Between Intimate Partners," in *Homicide: A Sourcebook of Social Research*, ed. M. Dwayne Smith and Margaret A. Zahn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999: 149–164.