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Communication Development Unit
Room 264,
Home Office,
50 Queen Anne's Gate,
London SW1H 9AT.

Tel: 020 7273 2084
Fax: 020 7222 0211
publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Domestic violence offenders: characteristics and offending related needs

Elizabeth Gilchrist, Rebecca Johnson, Rachel Takriti, Samantha Weston, Anthony Beech and Mark Kebbell

Risk factors such as antisocial attitudes, drug dependency, low level education and poor vocational, cognitive and interpersonal skills contribute directly to criminal behaviour (Vennard and Hedderman, 1998). These risk factors can be targeted for change in programmes designed to reduce further offending (Andrews, Bonta and Hart, 1995). The study reported here investigated and described the characteristics and offending-related or 'criminogenic' needs of domestic violence offenders on probation or referred for a pre-sentence report, in order to inform the Probation Services' response to this group of offenders.

Key points

- There is no specific domestic violence criminal offence. Offences in the sample ranged from assault occasioning actual bodily harm to harassment and criminal damage.
- Domestic violence offenders were found to be a heterogeneous group, with a wide variety of needs which would have to be considered as targets in treatment interventions.
- Several risk factors for domestic violence in this sample were identified. These include witnessing domestic violence in childhood, disrupted attachment patterns, high levels of interpersonal dependency and jealousy, attitudes condoning domestic violence and lack of empathy.
- Alcohol use was a feature in a majority of offences (62%) and almost half the sample (48%) were alcohol dependent. Alcohol may be a distinguishing factor in domestic violence offenders. Problems of alcohol use should therefore be addressed where identified as a criminogenic need and consideration given to its potential impact on interventions and other needs.
- The research identified two types of domestic violence offender: 'Borderline/emotionally dependent' offenders – they had high levels of jealousy and stormy, intense relationships, high levels of interpersonal dependency, high levels of anger and low self-esteem. 'Antisocial/narcissistic' offenders – they tended to have hostile attitudes towards women, low empathy and had the highest rate of alcohol dependence and previous convictions.
- The offenders who were mandated by the courts to attend a domestic violence probation programme had higher alcohol and drug dependence and more 'antisocial', 'sadistic' and 'borderline' tendencies than those who did not receive a sentence to attend such a programme.

An understanding of the offending-related needs and characteristics of perpetrators of domestic violence (DV) in the UK may help to identify and predict dangerous behaviour and target treatment effectively. DV offenders are a heterogeneous group, similar to other types of offenders, with specific criminogenic needs. Domestic violence recidivists tend to be younger, unmarried with unstable lifestyles, have low verbal intelligence, a tendency to hold others responsible for their circumstances and have a history of criminal behaviour (Cunningham et al., 1998). With some DV offenders, psychopathology in the form of borderline personality organisation has also been implicated (Dutton, 1998).

The current study

Data was collected about 336 male offenders from case files in six probation areas.

The sample areas

- 30% were from the West Midlands
- 28% were from Merseyside
- 21% were from Cheshire
- 14% were from Greater Manchester
- 4% were from Leicester
- 3% were from Kent.

The research sample only included convicted DV offenders and therefore may not be representative of all DV perpetrators in England and Wales. Information regarding general characteristics, offender history, current offence, family background and alcohol or drug use was recorded where available (areas varied in the consistency with which some information was recorded). Details as to whether domestic violence was used in previous relationships and alcohol use were missing in 56% to 85% of case records respectively and therefore are only available in this study due to the additional use of psychometric test data. Of the offenders, 58% had begun a domestic violence probation programme, whilst 42% were at the pre-sentence report stage of being assessed for suitability to attend.

A representative subset of the men – 219/336 (65%) – completed psychometric tests. In addition, semi-structured interviews and psychometric assessments were used to explore the characteristics and experience of partners of DV offenders. Of the 72 females with whom safe contact could be arranged, 42 agreed to participate in this study.

Findings

General characteristics

The average age of the offender in this sample was 35 years (range 19–60). The majority of the sample was 'White UK' (93%), 60% were unemployed and 83% had previous convictions: 54% for a violent offence, 71% for a non-violent offence. The mean age of first conviction was 24 years.

A large minority of the sample had mental health problems. Depression was the most frequently noted problem (22%). Other problems were anger (2%), stress (2%) and anxiety (1%). A history of alcohol abuse was noted in 49% of the sample and substance abuse in 19% of the sample.

Index offence

There is no specific DV criminal offence. The offences recorded for the sample of 336 men included:

- assault occasioning actual bodily harm (38%)
- common assault (37%)
- criminal damage (11%)
- harassment (6%)
- threats to kill (6%)
- affray (5%)
- grievous bodily harm (2%).

In 73% of the cases, alcohol had been consumed prior to the offence although the offenders' state of intoxication could not reliably be inferred from the files. A weapon (i.e., any implement used to inflict injury) was used in 23% of cases.

The specific context of offence was recorded for 197 (59%) of the sample. The most frequently cited contexts were jealousy, separation and issues concerning children (e.g., child access and childcare). Less frequently recorded contexts included disagreements about drinking, money and sex.

Offenders' background

At least 43% of the sample had remained with both biological parents continuously until at least the age of 16 (data was not recorded for 25% of offenders). The sample was divided into at least 36% who had reported witnessing violence between their parents and at least 36% who had

Table 1 Subtypes of offender

Antisocial/narcissistic – antisocial (n=108, 47%)

Tendency to engage in antisocial behaviour, likely to have alcohol and drug dependence, tendency to endorse macho attitudes, likely to have difficulties with empathy and likely to have previous convictions.

Antisocial/narcissistic – narcissistic (n=29, 13%)

Tendency to be paranoid and narcissistic. These offenders tended not to endorse macho attitudes. However, they also have a tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner, indicating that their low endorsement of macho attitudes may not be valid. They are also likely to have a dismissive attachment style.

Antisocial/narcissistic – low pathology (n=28, 12%)

Tendency to be narcissistic. These offenders have moderate macho attitudes although again they also tend to respond in a socially desirable manner. These offenders do not express high levels of anger, tend not to engage in ideas of suicide and are not likely to report having experienced abuse in childhood.

Borderline/emotionally dependent (n=65, 28%)

Highly interpersonally dependent, tendency to have high levels of anger, likely to suffer from depression and/or anxiety, likely to suffer from low self-esteem, be likely to blame others for their circumstances (external locus of control), likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse in childhood, tendency to have a fearful attachment style and likely to engage in suicidal thoughts.

not (data was not available for 27% of offenders). At least 23% of the sample reported that they had been physically abused as a child, and at least 6% had been sexually abused (data was not available for approximately 33% of the offenders in both cases). Almost half the sample (48%) were found to be alcohol dependent.

Psychological tests

The data gathered from the psychometric tests was analysed to see whether the offenders in the sample varied in terms of their characteristics. Four specific groups were identified (described in Table 1). Of these four groups, three exhibited, to a greater or lesser degree, antisocial and narcissistic traits. These three groups were all labelled as antisocial/narcissistic. The remaining offenders – borderline/emotionally dependent offenders – formed a quite distinct group.

The offenders who were mandated by the courts to attend a domestic violence probation programme (DVPP) had more 'antisocial', 'sadistic' and 'borderline' tendencies than those who did not receive a sentence to attend a DVPP. Offenders mandated to attend DVPPs also had higher alcohol dependence and drug dependence scores. There were no significant differences between DVPP and non-DVPP men on any of the other psychometric measures used.

Interviews with partners

From the interviews with the small group (42) of partners, a striking difference emerged between the responses given by partners of antisocial/narcissistic offenders and borderline/emotionally dependent offenders. Antisocial/narcissistic offenders were more likely to use intimidation, emotional abuse generally within the relationship and male privilege. Borderline/emotionally dependent offenders were

less likely to use intimidation and only tended to be emotionally abusive during an attack. They were, however, more likely to try and isolate their partner from friends and family and make threats to harm or kill. The types of behaviour reported by the partners of the men split by typology are shown in Table 2.

Implications for assessment and intervention

As there is no specific DV criminal offence, a variety of index offences were recorded across the sample. It would be much easier to identify and work with these offenders if a specific offence of domestic violence was included in the current list of offences. However, there would be difficulties in establishing generic sentences for domestic violence, due to the wide variety of current offences that this would represent.

DV offenders were found to be a heterogeneous group, with a wide variety of needs that would need to be considered as targets in treatment interventions. Previous research on victims of domestic violence has found that almost a quarter of all women aged 16–59 have experienced an assault from a former or current partner (Mirrlees-Black, 1999). These victims came from all types of social classes, family circumstances and localities. Given the prevalence and wide ranging characteristics of DV victims, the heterogeneity of DV offenders is unsurprising.

Several characteristics were observed across the sample (e.g. personality psychopathology, negative early experiences, unemployment and alcohol dependence) and as such these offenders could benefit from intervention which addresses these criminogenic needs, in particular: anger, self-efficacy and perspective-taking and cognitive distortions surrounding masculinity.

Table 2 Types of behaviour reported by partners of offenders

Type of abuse and incidence	Antisocial/narcissistic	Borderline/emotionally volatile
Economic abuse	Money not a big issue, more a matter of jealousy, i.e., wife away working with men	Very controlling over money
Emotional abuse	Very emotionally abusive	Only at time of assault
Male privilege	Does not do much about the house Expects gratitude	If takes an active role in the house, it is for his own reasons, i.e., will do the shopping to stop her going out
Isolation	Lets partner go out (unless impinges on him, e.g., childcare)	Actively stops partner going out. Wants to stop family and friends visiting and partner seeing them
Coercion and threats	Threatening and attempting suicide	Threats to kill children, family members, smashing property
Minimising	Apologising, blaming and denying	Apologising, blaming and denying
Intimidation	Uses looks to make her feel afraid, smashes property, uses children	Limited use of intimidation
Using children	Threats to take children, emotional blackmail, arguing with children, emotional abuse towards children Insulting partner through children Refusing to see children to hurt partner	Threats to take children, emotional blackmail, arguing with children, emotional abuse towards children Insulting partner through children Refusing to see children to hurt partner

Alcohol dependence was prevalent within the sample. It should be considered as a target for intervention because DV offenders with alcohol dependence have been shown to have a poorer outcome than those without such a dependency (Tolman and Bennett, 1990). Previous research has suggested that only a minority of offenders on probation have an alcohol 'problem' (Mair and May, 1997), therefore alcohol may actually be a distinguishing factor in domestic violence offenders. Whilst substance abuse treatment in itself may not be sufficient to change abusive behaviour, problematic alcohol use may limit the effectiveness of intervention programmes with these offenders.

In terms of intervention for the two main groups of DV offenders, the research suggests that both types of offender might benefit from the cognitive-behavioural approach that explores both the antecedents, behaviour and consequence associated with their abusiveness and methods of reducing their abusive behaviour. Other approaches could be considered separately for the two groups.

Antisocial/narcissistic offenders

Narcissistic and antisocial types tended to display hostile attitudes towards women and attitudes which condone DV. However, narcissistic offenders may explicitly display socially desirable attitudes and only evidence endorsement of macho attitudes in interviews with skilled practitioners. This type of offender might engage with treatment that includes a 'cost-benefit' analysis of behavioural options and explicitly covers the personal advantages of changing offending behaviour.

Borderline/emotionally dependent offenders

Studies that have investigated DV offender typology typically identify a group of DV offenders who fit a borderline-type profile. These offenders tend to be psychologically

distressed, emotionally volatile and dysphoric. They tend to have high levels of jealousy and stormy intense relationships (Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart, 1994). Borderline personality traits are suggested to originate from insecure attachment in childhood and early shaming. As a result anger is experienced as an unavoidable part of intimacy (Dutton, 1998). This group of offenders had very high levels of anger and might benefit from an intervention programme that addresses this. Borderline offenders may be too disruptive, confused and distressed to benefit from group work and may benefit more from intervention delivered on an individual basis.

Conclusion

The main findings from this examination of the criminogenic needs of DV offenders on probation or referred for a pre-sentence report in England were that they are not a homogeneous group in terms of characteristics and criminogenic need. Two types of DV offenders were identified:

- borderline/emotionally dependent offenders, who were primarily characterised by high levels of interpersonal dependency, high levels of anger and low self-esteem
- antisocial/narcissistic offenders, who were primarily characterised by hostile attitudes towards women, low empathy and had the highest rate of alcohol dependence and previous convictions.

Further, interviews conducted with partners of DV offenders revealed differing patterns of abusive behaviour to be common according to offender type.

The authors suggest therefore that practitioners consider a variety of targets and interventions in addressing the wide range of needs associated with domestic violence.

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There is a full report by the authors of this Findings. For further details contact Rachel Walmsley, Room 411, Home Office, Horseferry House, Dean Ryle Street, London SW1P 2AW.

Elizabeth Gilchrist is at Coventry University. Rebecca Johnson, Anthony Beech and Samantha Weston are at the University of Birmingham. Rachel Takriti is at Sheffield Hallam University and Mark Kebell is at James Cooke University, Australia.