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 more likely to kill at specific times. Regardless of whether there is a protection from abuse order in effect, officers should evaluate whether an assailant is likely to kill his partner or other family members and/or police personnel and take appropriate action.

Assessment is tricky and never foolproof. It is important to 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. 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, the greater the likelihood of a life-threatening attack.

Use all of the information you have about the batterer, current as well as past incident information. A thorough investigation at the scene will provide much of the information necessary to make this assessment. However, law enforcement will not obtain reliable information from an interview conducted with the victim and perpetrator together or from the batterer alone.

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 woman, the children or himself, his access to those weapons increases 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, and 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. **Depression.** Where a batterer has been acutely depressed and sees little hope for moving beyond the depression, he may be a candidate for homicide and suicide. Research shows that many men who are hospitalized for depression have homicidal fantasies directed at family members.

8. **Access to the battered woman and/or to family members.** If the batterer cannot find her, he cannot kill her. If he does not have access to the children, he cannot use them as a means of access to the battered woman. Careful safety planning and police assistance are required for those times when contact is required, e.g. court appearances and custody exchanges.

9. **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. The more calls, the greater the potential danger.

10. **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.

11. **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.

If an intervention worker concludes that a batterer is likely to kill or commit life-endangering violence, extraordinary measures should be taken to protect the victim and her children. This may include notifying the victim and law enforcement of risk, as well as seeking a mental health commitment, where appropriate. The victim should be advised that the presence of these indicators may mean that the batterer is contemplating homicide and that she should immediately take action to protect herself and should contact the local battered woman's program to further assess lethality and develop safety plans.