

## Evidence-Based RED FLAGS for Intimate Partner Homicide

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### Limitations of red flags and caution against use of risk rating tools

This document lists “serious risk factors — those that may indicate an increased risk of the victim being killed or almost killed as a result of intimate partner violence,” which we call ‘red flags’ for lethality rather than ‘indicators,’ to make abundantly clear that **lethality (risk of death) cannot be predicted**.

Violence can escalate to homicide even with none or few of these red flags. Accordingly, while these red flags are important to pay attention to when they become known, **screening tools that attempt to rate the level of risk on a continuum of severity are typically inadequate, inaccurate, and unhelpful.**

*“Empirical testing of the validity of family violence risk assessment instruments shows they are extremely fallible. The state of knowledge about which indicators predict which types of harm is constantly evolving, and none can reliably differentiate between the risk of harm and the risk of mortality.<sup>1</sup> A review of the utility and efficacy of risk and lethality assessment tools over two decades and across five countries (including Aotearoa) found that risk assessments give ‘false negatives’ (i.e. fail to predict violence) in up to 33 percent of cases.<sup>2</sup>”*

**Lethality red flags should NOT be used as a threshold to identify when support should be offered to victim-survivors. ALL victim-survivors who are at ongoing risk of harm should be offered support, and ALL users of violence held accountable and supported to change.**

Further, research to date on intimate partner homicide risk factors is limited in terms of representation of diverse communities:

*“Research is needed to update risk factors for IPH and to expand data collection across diverse communities by including victims and survivors of all gender and sexual identities, racial/ethnic identities, and geographies. It is also vital that future research seeks to better understand how diverse communities experience known risk factors... In addition, it is important to identify any additional risk factors based on community norms and experiences. Recognizing that risk factors may be different, present differently, or be experienced differently across diverse groups increases the ability to target prevention interventions and bystander education.<sup>3</sup>”*

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, M. (2010). Threat Assessment and Risk Management in Domestic Violence Cases: An Overview of Ontario Justice and Community Collaboration for 2010 and Future Directions. Center for Research & Education on Violence against Women and Children, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Roehl, J., Sullivan, C. O., Webster, D., & Campbell, J. (2005). Intimate partner violence risk assessment validation study final report. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209732.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Messing, J., AbiNader, M., Bent-Goodley, T., & Campbell, J. (2022). Preventing Intimate Partner Homicide: The Long Road Ahead. Homicide Studies 2022, Vol. 26(1) 91–105. SAGE Publications

## Potential usefulness of identifying red flags

The potential usefulness in identifying red flags in the history of any particular victim-survivor is to help professionals understand the seriousness of a situation and motivate them take urgent and appropriate action to prevent or minimise the risk of further violence from the person causing harm to the victim-survivor. In some situations, they may also be useful to help victim-survivors themselves perceive the severity of their situation, where a high level of risk has become normalised, and be provided with information and language they can use if they wish to communicate their level of danger to others. However, it is critical to note that it should never be made the victim-survivor's responsibility to do this.

In the 2021 Inquiry into the deaths of Ngaire Elaine McKenzie and Murray James Daley, Coroner M. Borrowdale found that Mr Daley killed Ms McKenzie by strangulation, then killed himself by hanging. The coroner commented (pp.25-27):

“These comments are made in order to raise public awareness of the wide range of ‘red flags’ that may indicate risk of serious family violence, and to protect the public from domestic coercive control.

...There are publicly available resources describing the help available to people who fear physical violence from their partners. Common “red flags” of domestic violence risk are listed. These red flags include strangulation events and escalating violence...But the listed red flags also include the kinds of less-obvious signs that did characterise Mr Daley’s behaviour towards Ms McKenzie, and which many people may not immediately realise are serious danger signs that a person is at risk of being killed by their partner: a) Controlling behaviour, b) Intimidation, c) Intense jealousy or possessiveness, d) Stalking.

Ms McKenzie’s death is a singular example of what can happen when these behaviours are not seen for the danger signs that they are.”

## The evidence base for these red flags

The red flags listed here are largely taken from The Victorian Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework or MARAM ([www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-foundation-knowledge-guide/evidence-based-risk-factors-and-maram-risk](http://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-foundation-knowledge-guide/evidence-based-risk-factors-and-maram-risk)). The MARAM Practice Guide explains that these “evidence-based risk factors developed in international jurisdictions, and in Australia, are largely derived from reviews of coronial inquests into family violence homicides.”<sup>4</sup>

Comparable work has not yet been undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand. In part, this is because routine collection of intimate partner homicide data began relatively recently (2010). Further, the data collection was not developed with the expressed purpose of identifying intimate partner homicide risk factors (for which a comparison population would be required). As such, readers should be aware that there may be cultural or situational factors that influence risk of intimate partner homicide in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Please note that this is not a complete list – it is not possible to enumerate all of the contextual factors that enhance the likelihood of a homicide occurring.

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<sup>4</sup> MARAM Practice Guides Foundation Knowledge Guide, Guidance for professionals working with child or adult victim survivors, and adults using family violence, page 27, accessed from [MARAM practice guides Guidance for professionals working with adults Foundation Knowledge 0.pdf](http://MARAM.practice.guides/Guidance%20for%20professionals%20working%20with%20adults%20Foundation%20Knowledge%200.pdf) ([content.vic.gov.au](http://content.vic.gov.au))

Because this is a list of evidence-based lethality red flags, it does not include other flags for family violence harm and entrapment more generally, such as financial abuse, neglect, withholding or obstructing access to basic necessities and care needs, which may cause severe harm to victim-survivors.

The last red flag listed is critical to understanding the picture of risk, as poor responses can vastly increase the likelihood of lethality. Health responses in particular play a critical role in lethality, as timely access to medical treatment can be the difference between survival or fatality.

As stated in other parts of the Guideline, **all risks and needs relating to safety and wellbeing for victim-survivors must be seen as important and addressed with appropriate responses.**

<b>INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE RED FLAG</b> From MARAM	<b>EXPLANATION</b>
Victim-survivor planning to separate or recent separation	Victims are at greatest risk of being killed from the moment they intend to leave until they have been separated for several months. For victims who are experiencing intimate partner violence, the high-risk periods include when a victim starts planning to leave, immediately prior to taking action, and during the initial stages of or immediately after separation. Victims who stay with the perpetrator because they are afraid to leave often accurately anticipate that leaving would increase the risk of lethal assault. Victims (adult or child) are particularly at risk during the first two months of separation.
Escalation — increase in severity and/or frequency of violence, particularly a recent increase	Escalation can mean violence is happening more, involves more tactics than it used to, is getting more severe, is becoming more threatening, personal, or degrading. A recent or rapid escalation can signal an immediate risk of homicide.
Physical assault while pregnant/following new birth	Family violence often commences or intensifies during pregnancy and is associated with increased rates of miscarriage, low birth weight, premature birth, foetal injury, foetal death, and fatal health consequences for the mother.
Controlling behaviours	Use of controlling behaviours is strongly linked to homicide. Perpetrators who feel entitled to get their way, irrespective of the views and needs of, or impact on, others are more likely to use various forms of violence against their victim, including sexual violence. Perpetrators may express ownership over family members as an articulation of control. Examples of controlling behaviours include the perpetrator telling the victim how to dress, who they can socialise with, what services they can access, limiting cultural and community connection or access to services, preventing work or study, controlling access to money or other financial abuse, determining when they can see friends and family or use the car. Perpetrators may also use third parties to monitor and control a victim or use systems and services as a form of control over a victim, such as intervention orders and family court proceedings
Obsession/jealous behaviour toward victim	A perpetrator's obsessive and/or excessive behaviour when experiencing jealousy is often related to controlling behaviours founded in rigid beliefs about gender roles and ownership of victims.
Sexual assault of victim	Perpetrators who sexually assault their victim (adult or child) are also more likely to use other forms of violence against them, including lethal violence.

Stalking of victim	Stalkers are more likely to be violent if they have had an intimate relationship with the victim or desire one including during, following separation and including when the victim has commenced a new relationship. Stalking when coupled with physical assault is strongly connected to murder or attempted murder. Stalking behaviour and obsessive thinking are highly related behaviours. Stalking includes technology-facilitated abuse, including on social media, surveillance technologies
Has ever threatened to self-harm or suicide	Threats to self-harm or commit suicide are a risk factor for intimate partner homicide, which is often missed by police and health professionals who focus on the more obvious risk of suicide. This factor is an extreme extension of controlling behaviours.
Has ever tried to strangle or choke the victim	Strangulation or choking or suffocation is a common method used by perpetrators to kill victims and to demonstrate or threaten their ability or power to kill, and is linked to a general increased lethality risk to a current or former partner. Loss of consciousness from forced restriction of airflow or blood flow to the brain is linked to increased risk of lethality (both at the time of assault and following) and hospitalisations, and of acquired brain injury
Has ever threatened verbally or physically to kill victim	Evidence shows that a perpetrator's threat to kill a victim (adult or child) is often genuine and should be taken seriously, particularly where the perpetrator has been specific or detailed, or used other forms of violence in conjunction to the threat indicating an increased risk or ability of carrying out the threat, such as strangulation and physical violence. This includes where there are multiple victims, such as where there has been a history of family violence between intimate partners, and threats to kill or harm another family member or child/children.
Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill pets or other animals	There is a correlation between cruelty to animals and family violence, including a direct link between family violence and pets being abused or killed. Abuse or threats of abuse against pets may be used by perpetrators to control family members.
Access to weapons, especially firearms	A weapon is defined as any tool or object used by a perpetrator to threaten or intimidate, harm or kill a victim or victims, or to destroy property. Perpetrators with access to weapons, particularly guns and knives, are much more likely to seriously injure or kill a victim or victims than perpetrators without access to weapons
Use of weapon in most recent event, especially firearms	Use of a weapon indicates a high level of risk because previous behaviour is a likely predictor of future behaviour.
Prior Police contact or criminal history; perpetrator failing to be deterred by police or criminal justice intervention, e.g. Protection Order breaches	Someone who uses violence and is not deterred by police or criminal justice intervention (e.g. someone who repeatedly breaches a protection order) is difficult to stop from perpetrating further violence, thus justice interventions that may create safety for victim-survivors in other situations will not have the same effect.

Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse	Perpetrators with a serious problem with illicit drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs or inhalants creates an increased risk of family violence and lethality. This includes temporary drug-induced psychosis.
Perpetrator is unemployed / disengaged from education	A perpetrator's unemployment is associated with an increased risk of lethal assault, and a sudden change in employment status — such as being terminated, made redundant, or demoted — may be associated with increased risk. Disengagement from education has similar associated risks to unemployment
Presence in the household of children who are not the perpetrator's biological offspring	Presence in the household of children who are not the perpetrator's biological offspring is a validated red flag for intimate partner homicide, while it is also well-known that these children are more at risk of direct harm than the perpetrator's biological children.
<b>INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE RED FLAG (Additional)</b>	<b>EXPLANATION</b>
Victim-survivor is suicidal	It's important to be aware that the victim-survivor's risk of dying is not just from homicide but also suicide. Most often this is a result of victim-survivors' entrapment, because the person using violence violated their mana, tapu, dignity, resources, parenting capacity, reputations and/or opportunities, and often because their help-seeking attempts have met with poor responses. Responses often assume the victim-survivor has a mental health issue that needs to be treated, rather than understanding that safety from family violence is a re-requisite to being safer from suicide and that coercion and abuse tactics may directly incite suicide. Every year, more Women's Refuge clients die from suicide than from homicide.
System interventions have failed to stop the violence.	An almost universal feature in all family violence death events is the failure of organisations and systems to use their opportunities to intervene to bring about an end to the person's use of violence, thereby limiting the effectiveness of all other safety strategies.