

Risks and vulnerabilities

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 16 September 2015 Updated 30 March 2026

Risk identification and assessment

Approaches to risk assessment

Officers should treat every domestic abuse case as high-risk until assessed. Risk is dynamic and should be reassessed to reflect any changes in circumstances.

For further guidance, go to:

- [Risk APP](#)
- [Vulnerability-related risks guidelines](#)

The [first responder](#) is likely to be responsible for both the initial investigation and the risk identification and assessment, as well as for developing an immediate safety plan. These responsibilities remain in place until the case is formally handed over to a specialist or other investigating officer.

Risk assessment is the process of estimating and regularly reviewing the likelihood and nature of a risk posed by a perpetrator to a particular victim, children or others. If the police risk assessment concludes that a victim is at high risk of harm, police officers should inform the victim and all those supporting a victim. This should be the case even if they have their own risk management process. Professionals working with domestic abuse victims – for example, [independent domestic violence advisors \(IDVAs\)](#) – may also be at risk of attack from the perpetrator.

Officers should recognise that there are three approaches to risk assessment. These include the following.

- Unstructured clinical judgement – Grading of risk is based solely on the assessor's opinion. This approach is flexible, but prone to the assessor's personal biases. It lacks accountability and is recognised as the least accurate.

- Actuarial – Grading of risk is based solely on mathematical modelling of risk factors. This approach is used to make one-time predictions of the likelihood of abuse recurring. It is recognised as more accurate than unstructured judgement but is inflexible and blind to specific contexts.
- Structured professional judgement – Responsibility for grading risk sits ultimately with the assessor, but their judgement may be guided by a structured tool that includes relevant risk factors. This approach combines a degree of accountability with the flexibility to consider the wider context of specific cases.

Police forces should have implemented, or be in the process of implementing, the College **domestic abuse risk assessment (DARA)** for use by frontline responding officers. The domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and 'honour'-based abuse risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH), or an alternative, can be used by domestic abuse officers involved in secondary risk assessment. DASH is used by most partner agencies.

All officers and staff using standard tools to carry out risk assessments that result in the grading of risk should be trained in their use. Senior management is responsible for ensuring that **training** is provided to those carrying out risk assessments, and that the overall process is monitored by police domestic abuse supervisors. DARA learning materials are available on **College Learn** (registered users must sign in).

Primary risk assessment

When investigating domestic abuse, it is the responsibility of the attending officer or first responder to carry out a primary risk assessment at the first opportunity, usually at the scene. Officers and staff carrying out risk assessments should have a thorough knowledge of the possible risk factors for domestic abuse, including those in relation to **certain groups of victims**.

They should also be skilful in applying these factors to individual cases, using professional judgement. Officers should conduct primary risk assessments using the DARA and should decide on the level of risk. Primary risk assessment should underpin immediate safety planning measures to protect the victim and any children. In cases with significant identified risk factors, officers should notify supervisory and/or domestic abuse officers, as well as other relevant support services, of the need for further action.

In all cases, officers should take the wider context of the relationship and any history of abuse into account. This will include checks of national and local intelligence and information databases. Officers should follow the initial risk identification and **safety planning** processes, even where no criminal offence appears to have been committed. The incident may form part of a pattern of **controlling or coercive behaviour**. Risk identification and assessment should be integral to any police investigative response to domestic abuse.

Any **secondary risk assessment** will consider the grading given by the first responder. Some forces only refer cases for secondary assessment or action by specialist officers if they reach a certain level of risk. The first responder's assessment of risk is, therefore, key to protecting the victim and preventing future harm. If medium-risk or high-risk cases are graded incorrectly as standard risk, they may not receive the intervention they require, which further increases the risk.

If a case is being considered for downgrading, officers and staff should ensure the rationale is clear. Where a risk appears temporarily reduced, for example because the individual is in custody or in a healthcare setting, this should not prevent appropriate safeguarding activity or necessary referrals. Clear lines of communication should be in place to inform any change in risk, such as release on bail or discharge from hospital.

Police forces and partner agencies should not ask victims to sign risk assessments or use any system that suggests victim accountability.

Officers and staff should recognise patterns indicative of controlling or coercive behaviour. The police service is often geared towards dealing with single incidents. In domestic abuse, a call to police may represent a point of crisis in ongoing controlling and coercive abuse. It is vital for the safety of the victim that this is recognised as such.

Secondary risk assessment

Risk assessments are a continuing and dynamic process. They should be subject to frequent review to ensure they reflect any change in circumstances. The first responding officer should be responsible for the continuous assessment of risk. This is unless and until the case is handed over, whether to another officer in the case (OIC) or a specialist domestic abuse or public protection unit. Where responsibility for risk assessment is handed over to another officer or unit, the first responder should ensure that the handover includes all relevant information that has been obtained regarding risk.

Secondary risk assessors should generate further risk assessments after locally agreed periods of time to ensure that risk factors are managed and are part of a **risk management** plan, where appropriate. Secondary risk assessment may be undertaken by:

- trained police staff
- specialist domestic abuse or public protection officers
- IDVAs
- trained voluntary sector staff

Secondary risk assessment should consider all relevant information, including:

- intelligence
- the results of the initial investigation
- information from local systems and partner agencies.

Risk management

Risk management is used here to refer to management of the responses adopted in cases where risk is identified, to minimise risk of further harm by the suspect or offender. Where appropriate, risk management in domestic abuse cases should include a multi-agency approach to developing and implementing interventions and risk management plans. This should be underpinned by effective **information sharing**.

Domestic abuse may continue after separation, and the risk of further harm or homicide can increase during and following the breakdown of a relationship. Officers should consider signs of escalation and ensure that both victim safety plans and perpetrator management plans are in place and regularly reviewed.

For further information, go to:

- **Checklist: Risk management**
- **Checklist: Reducing risk in identified cases**

Referral to multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)

When a victim is assessed as being at high risk of harm, escalation or repeat victimisation, they should be referred to a **MARAC**.

A key output of the MARAC process is the creation and implementation of a multi-agency risk management plan. This allocates actions and accountability across agencies to reduce risk and prevent further harm. If a victim is re-homed in another police area, the new force should be notified as part of the MARAC process.

Domestic violence disclosure scheme (DVDS)

Forces must implement, and adhere to, the DVDS in accordance with [statutory guidance](#) and [College of Policing principles](#). The DVDS allows individuals to ask, or to be told by the police through engagement with them, whether a new or existing partner has a history of domestic abuse. This supports early risk management, enabling victims to make informed decisions about their relationships and put safety measures in place where needed.

The scheme also allows police to identify potential serial perpetrators or concerning patterns of requests. This can inform proactive management and intervention.

For further information, go to:

- [DVDS \(Clare's Law\)](#)

Perpetrator management as a risk reducing measure

Police forces should maintain systems for the active management and monitoring of known domestic abuse perpetrators, particularly serial or high-risk offenders. Forces may deliver this through specialist domestic abuse perpetrator officers, neighbourhood teams, or multi-agency arrangements, such as integrated offender management or [multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#).

Perpetrator management should combine diversionary and disruption tactics, such as:

- supporting access to housing or employment
- issuing [domestic violence protection notices or orders \(DVPNs or DVPOs\)](#)
- implementing targeted monitoring strategies

A management plan should always be established before a perpetrator's release from custody, aligned with a reviewed victim safety plan.

Drive

Forces may also consider whether referral to the [Drive Project](#) is appropriate as part of perpetrator focused risk management. Where available, participation in Drive may be considered alongside existing perpetrator management arrangements to strengthen safeguarding and reduce the likelihood of further harm.

For further information, go to:

- [College Learn public protection tactical menu of options](#) (restricted to registered users)
- [Principles for the management of serial and potentially dangerous perpetrators of domestic abuse and stalking](#)
- [Using intelligence to target perpetrators](#)

Risk factors and vulnerabilities

Officers should understand that victim-related factors contribute to vulnerability. These include:

- isolation from family or friends
- current or imminent separation
- disputes over children
- pregnancy
- disability
- poor physical or mental health
- substance misuse

Dependency on the suspect, whether financial, cultural or immigration-related, may increase the risk and reduce opportunities for seeking help.

Officers should also understand that risk is often associated with factors relating to the suspect. These include:

- a history of violence
- escalation in severity
- use of weapons or strangulation
- abuse of children or animals
- controlling and coercive behaviour, stalking or possessiveness
- threats of suicide or homicide

- criminal history or breaches of orders
- substance misuse
- unmanaged mental ill health

For further information, go to:

- APP on [suicide and bereavement](#)

Issues affecting certain groups of victims

Certain groups face additional barriers to reporting or escaping abuse. Officers should be alert to cultural pressures, language barriers and insecure immigration status, which perpetrators may exploit to maintain control. Suspected **'honour'-based abuse (HBA)** should be central to the risk assessment and safety plan. Other victims who may all face distinct challenges in reporting or accessing support include those who are:

- members of the LGBT+ community
- disabled
- teenagers
- older people
- military and emergency service families

Officers should apply existing safeguarding and referral pathways and should consider signposting to specialist services where available.

Familial abuse, including abuse by adult children, siblings or carers, falls within the definition of domestic abuse. It must be treated in the same way as intimate partner abuse. Officers should be aware of additional complexities in these cases and involve children's or adult services where appropriate.

For further detail and practice advice on responding to the needs of these groups, go to [appendix B](#).

For further information, go to:

- [Risk APP](#)
- [Vulnerability-related risks guidelines](#)

Tags

APP Domestic abuse