

# Domestic Violence Lethality Factors



**“If it’s predictable, it’s preventable.”**

Incorporating lethality factors into judicial decision-making will help courts to prioritize domestic violence cases and create orders that promote victim safety and offender accountability. Research bears out that the behaviors below describe perpetrators who are more likely to kill their intimate partners. Courts can use these indicators of lethality in their criminal and civil decision-making that impacts the safety of victims and their children.

## Threatens with Weapons

Research shows that an abused woman whose partner threatens her with a gun or other weapon is 20 times more likely to be subsequently murdered than other women.<sup>1</sup>

## Has Access to Firearms

When a gun is present in the household, an abused woman is six times more likely to be killed.<sup>2</sup> Perpetrators who shot and killed intimate partners were asked whether they would have used another weapon if a gun were not available – most said no.<sup>3</sup>

## Threatens Homicide

Threats can include explicit death threats but can also include nonverbal threats – displaying a weapon or threatening to shoot a pet.<sup>4</sup> Abused women whose partner threatened to kill them were 15 times more likely than other abused women to be killed.<sup>5</sup>

## Attempts Strangulation

Strangulation, often referred to as choking, is one of the best predictors of a future homicide in domestic violence cases. Victims of prior attempted strangulation are seven times more likely to be killed by their intimate partner.<sup>6</sup>

## Violently Jealous/Controlling Daily Activity

A national study found when an intimate partner is violently or constantly jealous – homicide is nine times more likely; when the partner controls the victim’s daily activities – homicide is five times more likely.<sup>7</sup>

## Recent Separation

The time immediately after a woman leaves an abusive partner is the most dangerous time for her.<sup>8</sup> More than half of the victims of domestic violence homicides were estranged from their abuser or planning to leave the relationship at the time they were murdered.<sup>9</sup>

## Stalking

Stalking is highly prevalent in cases of actual or attempted female homicide. Women who reported that an intimate partner followed or spied on them were more than twice as likely to be attempted or actual homicide victims.<sup>10</sup>

## Unemployment

Perpetrator unemployment combined with a history of domestic violence can be a significant risk factor for murder-suicide in intimate partner domestic violence cases.<sup>11</sup>

## Threatened Suicide

There is an increased risk of homicide when the batterer is suicidal.<sup>12</sup> In 70 percent of cases where people killed their families and then committed suicide, prior domestic violence was a factor.<sup>13</sup>

## Child Who Is Not Abuser's Biological Child

A child who is not the biological child of the abuser reminds the perpetrator that the victim was once with someone else and the child is a product of that relationship. Having a child living in the home who is not the abuser's biological child more than doubled the risk of homicide.<sup>14</sup>

## Victim Believes Abuser Would Kill Them

Researchers asked victims whether they believed their abuser had intended to kill them during the most serious assault. 90 percent of the women said yes, and 95 percent of the attempted homicide victims believed the reason to kill them was "to punish me."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Jacqueline C. et al., "Assessing Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Homicide," *NIJ Journal* (250) (2003): 16. NCJ 196547.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell (2003): 16.

<sup>3</sup> David Adams, *Why Do They Kill? Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partner*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Rothman, E., D. Hemenway, M. Miller, and D. Azrael, "Batterer's Use of Guns to Threaten Intimate Partners." *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association* 60(1)(2006): 62-68.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell (2003): 16.

<sup>6</sup> Glass, N.K. Laughon, J. C. Campbell, R. B. Block, Hanson, G., & P.S. Sharps, "Strangulation is an Important Risk Factor for Attempted and Completed Femicides." *Journal of Emergency Medicine* (35) (2008): 329-335.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell (2003): 17.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, Jacqueline C., N. Glass, P.W. Sharps, K. Laughon, and T. Bloom, "Intimate Partner Violence, Trauma, Violence & Abuse," 8 (July 2007): 246-269.

<sup>9</sup> Adams 2007.

<sup>10</sup> McFarlane, J., J. Campbell and K. Watson, "Intimate Partner Stalking and Femicide: Urgent Implications for Women's Safety," *Behavioral Science and the Law* (20) (2002): 51-68.

<sup>11</sup> Auchter, Bernie, "Men Who Murder Their Families: What the Research Tells Us." *NIJ Journal* (266) (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Campbell (2003): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, J.C., Glass, N., Sharps, P.W., Laughon, K., and Bloom, T., "Intimate Partner Violence, Trauma, Violence & Abuse," 8 (July 2007): 246-269.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, J.C. et al., "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results From a Multisite Case Control Study," *Am J Public Health*. 2003 July; 93(7): 1089-1097.

<sup>15</sup> Adams, 2007.

This project was supported by subgrant No. 26422 awarded by PCCD, to the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) and from the AOPC to PCADV by means of a pass through agreement. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PCCD, AOPC or the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.