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Policing

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Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA)

Rationale for development, structure and content

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Background

This document sets out the rationale that informed the development of the Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA).

The Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment and Honour-Based Violence Assessment (DASH) risk model has been used by most police forces in England and Wales, but it was not evaluated following its adoption in 2009. Following an inspection of the police response to domestic abuse in 2014, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) recommended that the College of Policing should assess the sufficiency of the tools used by officers to identify and assess risk.

In response to the HMICFRS recommendation, the College commissioned research through the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction to examine how the DASH model operates currently. [The research](#), in three force areas, was conducted in partnership by Cardiff University, the College of Policing and University College London. Key findings included the following.

- There was widespread support for risk assessment both from police and partners.
- The DASH risk tool was not applied consistently at the front line. Officers sometimes used discretion not to submit a risk assessment, specific questions were often altered or omitted, and information was sometimes recorded in an inconsistent or incomplete way.
- Police officers and staff appeared to prioritise criminal offences, especially physical violence with injury at the current incident, at both the initial and secondary stages of assessment.

Assumptions

The underlying assumptions that have informed the design of the DARA, and that reflect the research evidence base, are as follows.

- Coercive control is the most harmful form of domestic abuse and presents the greatest risk of serious injury and homicide (Campbell and others, 2003; Home Office, 2013; Dobash and Dobash, 2015; Myhill, 2015; Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly,

2016; Johnson and others, 2019; Monckton Smith, 2019; Bates and others, 2021).

- Not all of the abuse that comes to the attention of the police under the wide-ranging national definition of domestic abuse is coercive control (Myhill, 2016).
- Frontline officers often take an incident-based approach to domestic abuse (Robinson and others, 2016).
- A revised primary risk assessment tool for first response can focus attention on dangerous patterns of behaviour, improve consistency and completeness of risk data, and improve the accuracy of subsequent risk assessment.
- A more comprehensive risk and needs assessment is better undertaken by a specialist.

Consultation

A programme of consultation was undertaken during development of the DARA. Initial meetings were held with SafeLives and other members of the national policing working group that developed DASH, as well as with Women's Aid, the national umbrella organisation for domestic violence voluntary and charity sector organisations. Through these channels, consultation was ongoing throughout the development period and as the DARA was refined.

Professor Amanda Robinson (Cardiff University), another member of the national policing working group that developed DASH, was also involved in the development of the DARA. Professors Liz Kelly (London Metropolitan University), Marianne Hester (Bristol University) and Betsy Stanko were also consulted on the content of the DARA.

An early version of the DARA was presented and discussed at a workshop at the Women's Aid conference in July 2016. As part of the consultation and development period, College researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with eight domestic abuse survivors (recruited through the Women's Aid panel) and 14 frontline police officers.

Key changes

Research to review the DASH model in England and Wales suggested that the tool does not produce consistent information on risk when used by frontline police officers. In part, this inconsistency is caused by officers not completing the freetext sections of the DASH and not providing adequate detail to set an incident in context.

The DARA attempts to address the issue of inconsistent and incomplete data by:

- reducing the number of questions, so that only key questions for identifying risk and making an initial assessment are asked at the frontline
- changing the response options to scales where appropriate, in order to indicate the frequency of abusive behaviours and focus thinking on patterns of behaviour
- having a summary freetext box where officers are asked to explain their assessment of risk (with prompts for key issues to consider)

New question set

Table 1 shows where questions included in the DARA map across to those on the original DASH and explains any changes in question wording.

Table 2 shows current DASH questions that have not been included in the DARA and the reason(s) for their exclusion.

Table 1: Rationale for questions included in the DARA

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Has (...) ever threatened to hurt or kill the children/dependents?	How often does (...) make threats to harm you or things you care about such as people, pets or property?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	▪ Frequent threats are generally employed in coercive control. ▪ Emphasises the personalised nature of the abuse. ▪ Draws in threats to harm children and control through pets without having separate questions.
N/A	How often does (...) call you names, humiliate or degrade you?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	▪ Captures the frequency of emotional abuse, which is a key tactic of coercive control not assessed directly by the DASH.
Does (...) try to control everything you do and/or are they excessively jealous?	How often does (...) control your daily activities such as how you dress or how you perform household tasks?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	▪ Original question conflates micro-regulation of everyday life (behaviour) and jealousy (possible cause of the behaviour). ▪ Most important in terms of identifying risk is to establish that the behaviour is present.

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Are there any financial issues? For example, are you dependent on (...) for money/have they recently lost their job/other financial issues?	How often does (...) deny you access to money or control what you can spend it on?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	- Financial abuse has been identified as a key element of coercive control (Sharp-Jeffs, 2015). - The current DASH question is often misinterpreted by officers and acts most often as a proxy measure for deprivation, rather than establishing whether there is financial control within the relationship. - The revised question addresses financial control more specifically.
Does (...) constantly text, call, contact, follow, stalk or harass you?	How often does (...) make you account for where you have been or monitor your phone, email or social media to check up on you?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	- Captures the frequency of surveillance within the relationship. - Updates it to include social media.

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Does (...) constantly text, call, contact, follow, stalk or harass you?	How often does (...) follow or stalk you, or try to contact you when you do not want them to?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	Relates more specifically to post-separation stalking and harassment.
Do you feel isolated from family/friends i.e. does (name of abuser(s)) try to stop you from seeing friends/family/Dr/others?	How often do you feel isolated or like you have no one to turn to for support?	Never/occasionally/often/all the time	- DASH question conflates feeling isolated with controlling behaviour, which is covered by another question. - Captures frequency of feeling isolated and not feeling able to access support.
N/A	How often does (...) use physical violence towards you such as pushing, slapping, punching or kicking?	Never/once only/occasionally/often	Captures the frequency of physical violence, which is important for identifying coercive control and for reducing false positives (for example, one-off incidents or situational fighting between family members being graded medium risk just because there is an actual bodily harm level injury).

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Has (...) ever attempted to strangle/choke/suffocate/drown you?	How often does (...) strangle you or attempt to choke, suffocate, or drown you?	Never/once only/ occasionally/often	▪ Captures frequency of sub-lethal violence, which is important for immediate risk assessment. ▪ Officers should be aware that even isolated or infrequent sub-lethal assaults are an indicator of heightened risk.
Has (...) ever used weapons or objects to hurt you?	How often does (...) use or threaten to use weapons such as household items, knives or guns to hurt you?	Never/once only/ occasionally/often	▪ Captures frequency of potentially sub-lethal or controlling violence, which is important for immediate risk assessment. Officers should be aware that even isolated or infrequent use of weapons might be an indicator of heightened risk.
Has (...) ever threatened or attempted suicide?	How often does (...) threaten or attempt suicide?	Never/once only/ occasionally/often	▪ Captures frequency of controlling behaviour that has been linked to domestic homicide.

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Have you separated or tried to separate from (name of abuser(s)) within the past year?	Have you recently separated from (...) or do you plan to separate from them? [If yes at Q12] 12a. Has this/will this put you in danger?	Yes/no	- While separation in the context of coercive control is associated with domestic homicide, the question as worded in the DASH can result in inconsistent and possibly inaccurate data. - For instance, the DASH question is phrased in the past tense, which can lead to confusion and inaccurate recording if a victim says that they intend to separate as a result of the abuse. - Separation is also highly correlated with domestic abuse, but not all cases are in the context of coercive control. - The DARA question clarifies that the (planned) separation must have increased the threat.

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
Is the abuse getting worse?	Is the abuse you are experiencing from (...) getting worse?	Yes/no	Escalation of abuse has been identified by research as associated with increased risk.
Has (...) ever threatened to kill you or someone else and you believed them?	Has (...) ever threatened to kill you and you believed they were capable of doing it?	Yes/no	- Captures specific and credible threats to kill the victim. Threats to harm people the victim cares about are covered in an earlier question. - The original DASH question potentially draws in perpetrators' threats to acquaintances and strangers.
Has (...) ever hurt the children? Has (...) ever threatened to hurt or kill the children?	Has (...) ever hurt the children?	Yes/no	Abuse of children is serious in its own right, as well as indicating greater risk to the victim. There is also provision in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 for children as victims of domestic abuse if they see, hear or experience the effects of the abuse to a parent.

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
			Threats to people other than the primary victim is captured by the first DARA question.
Is there conflict over child contact? (please state what)	Does (...) use child contact arrangements to control you or continue to abuse you?	Yes/no	- There is potential for conflict over child contact between many ex-partners. - The DARA question makes a specific link between using child contact to continue the abuse and control.
Are you currently pregnant or have you recently had a baby in the past 18 months?	Are you pregnant or have you recently had a baby?	Yes/no	- Pregnancy and recent birth have been associated in some research studies with the onset of abuse. - Pregnancy and/or caring responsibilities for a young child may increase a victim's vulnerability and allow a perpetrator to exert control more effectively. - Feedback from the testing of DARA suggested that not asking

DASH question	DARA question	Response options	Rationale
			about pregnancy may result in missed opportunities for referrals and safeguarding.
N/A	On a scale of 0 to 10, where '0' is not at all likely and '10' is very likely, how likely do you think it is that (...) will seriously injure you in the future?	0-10	- Research has shown that victims' own perceptions of risk are as accurate as some actuarial risk assessment tools. - Victims are well placed to know the imminent and future threat posed by the perpetrator. - Officers will be given guidance that low scores on this scale may not necessarily reflect the actual threat and should be considered in combination with other information and responses.

Table 2: Original DASH questions not included in the DARA

DASH question	Rationale for not including in DARA
Has the current incident resulted in injury? (Please state what and whether this is the first injury)	- Officers should ascertain this information anyway as part of their investigation into the incident. - A survivor interviewed as part of the development of the DARA suggested that as officers ask what has happened at the current incident prior to the risk assessment, being asked this question can make a victim feel as though they were not believed. - The question also asks only about injurious violence, when research suggests that much of the physical violence in coercive control is non-injurious but repeated (Stark, 2013). - The more pertinent issue is to establish how often physical violence is used as a tactic of control.
Are you very frightened? What are you afraid of? Is it further injury or violence?	- This question is very vague if there is no contextual information recorded. - Survivors said there may be a difference between how somebody feels at the time of a specific incident, and how they feel more generally. - Evidence about fear of crime suggests it is more helpful to ask about likelihood of further victimisation than generic fear, as fear can be context-specific. - The follow-up question directs officers down the route of focusing specifically on physical violence.

DASH question	Rationale for not including in DARA
Are you feeling depressed or having suicidal thoughts?	▪ <u>Depression is now extremely common</u>, with one in four people in England estimated to experience depression in any given year. ▪ The potential for this question to help discriminate between the possible levels of risk a victim faces is therefore not clear. ▪ A secondary assessment would be a better time to understand the victim's needs in relation to their mental health.
Are there any children, step-children that aren't (.....) in the household? Or are there other dependents in the household (i.e. older relative)?	▪ We do not feel it is necessary to ask this question at the initial identification and assessment stage, and feel that it would be better considered in a more thorough secondary risk and needs assessment. ▪ The underlying pattern of control identifies risk is present. A child that is not the abuser's has been correlated with increased risk of serious harm, but it is an aggravating factor.
Has (...) ever threatened to hurt or kill the children/dependents?	▪ Victims have the opportunity to consider threats to children when asked about threats more generally in the first DARA question.
Is the abuse happening more often?	▪ Coercive control is continuous by its nature, and specific tactics of control will be frequent. ▪ A better indication of escalation is if the abuse is perceived to be getting worse (for example, the perpetrator is having to increase the type or severity of abuse to try to maintain control). ▪ The question on whether the abuse is getting worse has been retained.

DASH question	Rationale for not including in DARA
Does (...) do or say things of a sexual nature that makes you feel bad or that physically hurt you or someone else?	- While research suggests that sexual coercion is present frequently in coercive control, frontline police officers are not best placed to get full disclosure. This question is likely not to produce complete or consistent data. - A study of DASH data by Myhill and others (under review) found a disclosure rate of 4%. A higher level of disclosure is likely to be achieved by asking this question during a secondary risk assessment, resulting in more accurate information on which to base the full risk and needs assessment. - Sexual coercion is also unlikely to occur without some of the other controlling behaviour and abuse of the victim that is covered by the DARA. - Women's Aid, SafeLives and all prominent academics consulted agreed that this question should not be asked at the front line.
Is there any other person that has threatened you or that you are afraid of? (If yes, consider extended family if honour based violence. Please specify who)	- This question was originally intended to act as a way to identify possible so-called honour-based violence (HBA). We are not sure how effective this question is, or how many forces then go on to ask the additional DASH HBA specific questions. - Academic experts have suggested a question on multiple perpetrators is not a consistent way to identify HBA, as many perpetrators use other people, such as friends, children and family members, as part of their campaign of abuse, irrespective of whether it is HBA.

DASH question	Rationale for not including in DARA
	▪ A bespoke question for HBA would likely be difficult to draft, as feedback from practitioners is that some victims may not identify with a potentially stigmatised term such as 'honour'. ▪ In addition, a bespoke question would not be applicable to the vast majority of domestic abuse victims, and when such questions are included in risk assessments officers can become cynical about it being a 'tick box exercise'. ▪ Probing for, and identifying, HBA may be covered by training and ensuring understanding. ▪ Officers are asked to consider HBA in their freetext summary of risk to the victim at the end of the DARA.
Do you know if (...) has hurt anyone else?	▪ A victim will not always be aware of a perpetrator's history and so might unintentionally provide inaccurate information as a result. ▪ If the perpetrator has come to the attention of the police for acts of violence or abuse against others (including previous partners), this information can be identified from police systems either by the attending officer(s) or during a more comprehensive secondary risk and needs assessment.
Has (...) mistreated an animal or the family pet?	▪ Many officers believe this question to imply that men who are violent towards animals are more likely to be violent to people. ▪ The original DASH guidance in fact emphasises how (threats towards) pets are used to control victims and prevent them from leaving.

DASH question	Rationale for not including in DARA
	Victims have the opportunity to consider pets when asked about threats more generally in the first question of the revised risk assessment.
Has (...) had problems in the past year with drugs (prescription or other), alcohol or mental health leading to problems in leading a normal life?	- Opinion was divided among stakeholders as to whether questions on the 'toxic trio' of mental ill health, alcohol and substance abuse should be included. - In practice, it was found to be very difficult to phrase questions to be specific enough to provide useful information. - Significant issues relating to substance abuse and/or mental health are likely to emerge in a victim's initial account. - Officers are encouraged to mention any such issues in the freetext summary at the end of the DARA.
Has (...) ever breached bail/an injunction and/or any agreement for when they can see you and/or the children?	This information should be available through police records without officers having to ask it of the victim.
Do you know if (...) has ever been in trouble with the police or has a criminal history?	- A victim may not be aware of a perpetrator's history and so might unintentionally provide inaccurate information. - This information can be applied more accurately at a second stage risk assessment, using data held on police systems. - Frontline officers are expected to complete background checks during initial investigations.

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