

Domestic Homicide Review into the death of Adult K - Learning briefing

DHRs are a way to improve our local coordinated community response. Looking at the death of a person aged 16+ as a result of DVA, they aim to: understand what happened; identify where agency responses could be improved; learn lessons including how agencies work together; identify how to improve responses; and to prevent something similar happening to others in the future.

Introduction: The East Sussex Safer Communities Partnership undertook a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) to evaluate multi-agency responses to the murder in April 2018 of a woman in her early 50s. The bereaved family were given the opportunity to provide a pseudonym for the homicide victim but chose to use the terms 'victim' instead.

If you work with adults or children affected by domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in East Sussex, there may also be additional specific actions and recommendations for your agency and your role. Please ask your manager, or contact your representative on the Safer Communities Board.

Key learning points

This DHR identified a number of recommendations. These can be grouped into four priority areas and include:

Indicators of domestic and economic abuse – The victim experienced domestic abuse by her son in the form of coercive control and economic abuse. The Review highlighted that economic abuse needs to be seen as an indicator of coercive control and a recommendation was therefore made to promote awareness of the indicators of economic abuse and its significance to understanding risk. There were missed opportunities for routine enquiry.

Adult Child – Parent Abuse – The review identified that domestic abuse in the context of child-to-parent abuse is less understood than domestic abuse within intimate partner relationships and there are particular barriers that parents, and mothers in particular, face. Practitioners need to better understand child-to-parent abuse and ensure that their assessment of risk is not minimised by unconscious bias about the nature of the relationship.

Substance misuse and mental health - The victim's son suffered from moderate anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence; took reckless amounts of recreational drugs; overdosed on aspirin; self-harmed; considered suicide; gambled and used alcohol and drugs to self-medicate.

Managing Risks - Key indicators of risk associated with familial domestic homicide were identified in this case and detailed below. The importance for all agencies in acting to reinforce measures taken against domestic abuse perpetrators so that the onus is not on the victim to protect herself is also highlighted, along with the importance of regularly reviewing risk assessments when additional information comes to light

History: This review focused on the homicide of a fifty-one-year-old woman by her twenty-two-year-old son in July 2018. Her son was found guilty of manslaughter with diminished responsibility.

The victim's son had dropped out of music college in America and returned to the UK to live with his mother. He experienced problems with drug use and mental health issues. The victim continued to be concerned about her son's mental health and he was assessed by mental health services at various points in the years and months leading up to the homicide.

Victim's perspective: The review was unable to establish whether the victim defined her experience as domestic abuse, but she did disclose feeling frightened of her son to agencies. Due to the nature of the abuse being inter-familial (child to parent abuse), there may have been barriers to the victim recognising her experience of domestic abuse. The victim was clearly motivated to get support for her son's mental health.

Information from the perpetrator: The Independent Chair consulted with the perpetrator's psychiatrist, and subsequently the perpetrator was invited to engage with the review but did not return contact. The perpetrator pleaded guilty to manslaughter by virtue of diminished responsibility. The criminal investigation found that he kept a diary which offered significant insights into his state of mind during the period leading up to the offence. Within sentencing remarks, the judge expressed concern, "The risk of a further psychotic episode remains, in particular, if you were to use illicit substances again".

The review sought to get a more complete view of the lives of the victim and the perpetrator and see the homicide through the eyes of the victim and perpetrator.

Domestic Violence and Abuse: The [statutory definition of domestic abuse](#) of DVA is:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; and emotional

Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour

Coercive behaviour is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

The Domestic Abuse Act includes a statutory definition of domestic abuse which includes economic abuse. Economic abuse as defined in the Act means "any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B's ability to;

- (a) acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or
- (b) obtain goods or services.

Indicators of domestic and economic abuse:

The perpetrator was financially dependent upon the victim; he demanded money; became aggressive when money was refused; damaged her property; broke into her home at night and when she was away, and stole a large amount of personal jewellery. He was also seen to be using his relationship as a son to manipulate and coerce his mother to provide him with money.

The son's crimes were understandably viewed as 'acquisitive crimes', but viewing them as domestic abuse, including burglary of the victim's home and the significance of economic abuse may have been understandably obscured in this case for agencies, including the Police.

Economic abuse is most commonly associated with the control and impoverishment of the victim. In this case, there was no indication that the perpetrator's economic abuse of his mother impoverished her.

Financial dependency and economic abuse may be more obscured in familial abuse compared to interpersonal abuse, as parents may continue to take responsibility for their children.

Economic abuse rarely occurs in isolation. Like other forms of domestic abuse, it is motivated by a sense of ownership and entitlement and this sense of entitlement was a constant feature in the perpetrator's presentations. Economic abuse should be seen as an indicator of coercive control

Learning Point

□ Practitioners need to be curious and open to the possibility of economic abuse, particularly because it rarely happens in isolation. If we miss economic abuse, we may potentially be missing the opportunity to uncover other possible forms of coercive control and domestic abuse.

Child to Parent Abuse:

The Review highlights that national guidance on child-(adolescent)-to-parent abuse is applicable to this case, emphasising that isolation, stigma, shame, guilt and fear are particular barriers for parents in seeking help and that these barriers are compounded by the fear of blame and responsibility for the shortcomings in their own parenting (Home Office, 2015b:5). Research with abused parents found that many parents felt guilty; felt that they had failed in the parenting role; felt that the behaviour of their children was at least partly their fault and found these feelings were exacerbated when their child also misused drugs or alcohol (Adfam, 2012).

In the earlier reports, the victim, like others, was reluctant to take action against her son and although she consented to criminal action being taken when the perpetrator's behaviour towards her worsened, it was clear from her dealings with agencies throughout these years that she nevertheless wanted her son to receive help.

The Review raises the issue and risk of unconscious bias and assumptions being made which may minimise the specific risks inherent in child-to-parent abuse as opposed to response to risks with interpersonal domestic violence. Specifically, whether agencies may have been more concerned about an abused woman returning home with an abusive partner than an abusive son.

Learning point

□ Practitioners need to be aware of the barriers that mothers face in defining their experiences of child-to-parent abuse as domestic abuse and they should always be signposted to specialist domestic abuse services.

Mental Health, Substance Misuse and addictions:

During the period considered by this review, the perpetrator suffered from moderate anxiety and depression; alcohol dependence; took reckless amounts of recreational drugs; overdosed on aspirin; self-harmed; considered suicide; gambled and used alcohol and drugs to self-medicate.

The Review highlighted that it was not always clear to the victim what treatment the perpetrator needed or where best this could be provided as the relationship between his mental health and substance misuse was subject to professional assessments.

The degree to which his anxiety and lapses into episodes of worsening mental health, fuelled by substance misuse, exacerbated his thoughts and behaviour cannot be known with certainty. The perpetrator was never actively engaged in treatment and so the impact of his substance misuse on his behaviour was not assessed from this perspective.

However, in at least one mental health assessment, it was considered that his symptoms had been brought on by substance misuse. This assessment was consistent throughout the following years and he was repeatedly warned about the seriously detrimental effect that substance misuse would have on both his mood and his behaviour.

The perpetrator appeared to use his mental health issues as part of his manipulation and control of others at times, including his mother, who was often alarmed by her son's behaviour and took him to Emergency Departments at these times of crisis. By contrast, it was noted that he was frequently much more coherent when he was seen by health professionals.

Likewise, on several occasions when the victim called the police because of her son's volatile, aggressive, and erratic behaviour, he appeared calm and rational when the police arrived. It, therefore, appeared that he was able, at times, to control his own behaviour when it was in his interests to do so, irrespective of how at other times, his behaviour may have been exacerbated by substance misuse and anxiety

Learning point:

- It is the responsibility of all agencies to reinforce measures, such as restraining orders, that are taken against domestic abuse perpetrators and staff need to be supported to undertake this safely.

Managing Risk in Familial Abuse

Key indicators of risk associated with familial domestic homicide and relevant to this case, amongst other factors include the perpetrator having:

- suicidal thoughts
- a sense of entitlement to financial resources
- issues with addiction

From an agency perspective, the review has recognised the importance for all agencies in acting to reinforce measures taken against domestic abuse perpetrators so that the onus is not on the victim to protect herself. Acting to reinforce measures needs to be undertaken with care and done safely, accompanied by safety planning with the victim wherever possible.

The Domestic Abuse Act includes a provision establishing the new consolidated Domestic Abuse Protection Order (DAPO) and that breach of a DAPO will be a criminal offence. This Order consolidates a range of existing orders that can be used in domestic abuse cases, including Non-Molestation Orders, Occupation Orders, Restraining Orders and DVPOs. For more information <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-bill-2020-factsheets/domestic-abuse-protection-notices-orders-factsheet>

Each agency assessed the perpetrator's threat to others as low during their assessments. However, agencies could have assessed his threat as medium risk following the second burglary of his mother's home and this would have strengthened the impetus to refer the victim to domestic abuse services. This highlights the important of regularly reviewing risk assessments when additional information comes to light.

Learning point:

- This review provides further evidence of some of the key indicators of risks associated with familial domestic homicide including an abuser having suicidal thoughts; issues with addiction and a sense of entitlement to financial resources.
- The importance of reviewing risk assessments when new/ additional information comes to light.
- The importance of sharing new/ additional information with agencies involved to enable more effective and accurate risk assessments and referrals.
- For practitioners to ensure that measures, such as the newly established DAPO, are taken against domestic abuse perpetrators so that the onus is not on the victim to protect herself.