



## **REDUCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ...WHAT WORKS? PERPETRATOR PROGRAMMES**

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### **Introduction**

Perpetrator programmes have been developed to try and make perpetrators change their unacceptable behaviours and attitudes. There are around 30 perpetrator programmes currently running in the UK. Government backing has been given to probation service work with perpetrators and also to voluntary sector projects. The National Practitioners' Network in the UK provides minimum standards and good practice guidelines covering matters such as the size of groups, programme length, and training and supervision for workers. The major challenge concerning perpetrator programmes is to demonstrate that they constitute an effective way of tackling domestic violence. The authors of this report carried out a survey for the Joseph Rowntree Trust on good practice in working with families where there is domestic violence. This briefing note draws on some of the results of that survey.

### **Programme design**

There is general agreement that neither work on managing anger nor on reducing alcohol misuse will be effective in ending domestic violence as neither issue provides a sufficient explanation as to why it occurs. However, some perpetrators are heavy drinkers and parallel or subsequent work on this problem might be useful. Similarly, work with couples and families is ineffective because it makes assumptions about shared blame and may place the woman in greater danger. It may also prevent women participating openly and honestly as they may have been threatened with repercussions by their abuser.

There is a commonly accepted belief that the most appropriate model for working with perpetrators is a broadly cognitive-behavioural approach combined with gender analysis. This model is now widespread in practice.

- Cognitive-behavioural or psycho-educational approaches view violence as a learned behaviour that can be unlearned (rather than as a consequence of individual pathology, stress, alcohol abuse or a 'dysfunctional' relationship). The approach aims to foster mutual respect and requires men to accept responsibility for their past actions and future choices. It requires regular group attention and needs skilled group facilitators who can challenge denial and minimisation, and harness the dynamic of the group to do the same.
- Gender analysis tackles the belief system that convinces male perpetrators that they have a right to control women in intimate relationships. Failure to address this belief system means that men may simply switch from physical to emotional abuse, and women and children will continue to live in fear.

Groups in the UK run programmes which range from 20 hours over 10 weeks to 120 hours over 48 weeks. The National Practitioners' Network recommend programmes of 75 hours over 30 weeks, with a minimum of 50 hours over six months.

Virtually all facilitators in the survey had had some basic awareness training on domestic violence, although sometimes as little as a one-day course. The majority had training on working with perpetrators but not all had had child protection training or any training on the safety issues affecting women and children when perpetrators are challenged to change their behaviour.

All respondents in the survey limited men's rights to confidentiality so that women could be given information appropriate to their safety needs. The supervising probation officer was kept abreast of the men's progress in the group and of any disclosures of repeat violence or other concerns. All respondents also said that contact with women was routine and that they had direct links to

support services for women. However, seven had no child protection policies, four had not consulted women's organisations when establishing their programmes and three did not keep partners informed if men failed to attend the group.

## Effectiveness of perpetrator programmes

### *UK programmes*

The evaluation of CHANGE and Lothian Domestic Violence Probation Project (Dobash et al, 1996) showed 67% of men avoided further violence for a year after the programmes as against only 25% of men subject to other disposals. However, the sample declined over time and so the suggested 67% success rate represented only 40.2% of those who responded initially. As some of the missing cases may have been successes then the total success rate may have fallen somewhere between these two figures. The numbers involved in the study were extremely low by the end, and cause and effect claims require larger numbers than this.

An evaluation of the Violence Prevention Programme in London (Burton et al, 1998) found that the programme had some impact on most of those who maintained attendance for a reasonable time. However, this evaluation also suffered from low numbers as by the end only 31 men out of 351 went onto the second stage of the programme, and only six cases could be tracked and interviewed following substantial programme participation.

The Cheshire programme (Skyner and Waters, 1999) recorded statistically significant changes in the men's attitudes towards the offence and in their acceptance of responsibility. However, the numbers were too small and the evaluation relied on self-reports from a user group notoriously given to minimisation and denial. In addition, the study did not allow for a follow-up period during which successes could decline.

### *US programmes*

Evaluations in the US suggest that programmes have modest successes in reducing overt violence. A long-term comparative study of four programme sites after 30 months (Gondolf, 1998) found that nearly half the men had used violence once, 23% of men had been repeatedly violent and continued to inflict serious injuries, and only 21% of men were neither physically nor verbally abusive. Most women respondents felt better off and safer; 60% of couples had split up and 24% had no contact.

However, a study of three perpetrator programmes (Harrell, 1991) found that participants had success rates no better than others who were found guilty but subjected to other disposals. The participants actually had worse results in terms of physical aggression. However, these groups fell below the nationally recommended minimum duration standard in the UK.

## Evaluating perpetrator programmes

Perpetrator programmes are extremely difficult to evaluate for a wide range of methodological reasons.

Partner reports are the most valid and reliable measure for project evaluation because self-reporting is subject to perpetrator denial and minimisation, and official data is limited because of low reporting and low prosecution rates. Project evaluation should also go beyond whether the violence has stopped and ask whether survivors feel safe and whether the perpetrator's attitude towards her has improved.

Evaluations need to have a follow-up period of more than a year, and longer is almost certainly better.

## Increasing participation

Completion rates are problematic in all countries surveyed. In addition to those men judged unsuitable for the programme, rates for 'no shows' and drop-outs at subsequent stages are uniformly high. Evaluation of the Violence Prevention Programme showed 12% were refused places (for reasons such as drug, alcohol or mental health problems or lack of acceptance of responsibility or of a need to change). 65% did not show up, 33% attended fewer than six sessions, and only 33% went onto the second stage group.

Criminal justice interventions can dramatically increase compliance with perpetrator programmes. In Pittsburgh, arrest warrants were issued if perpetrators failed to appear at the programme intake interview or if there was not evidence of compliance at 30 days or at programme completion. The no-show rate dropped from 36% to 6% between 1994 and 1997 (albeit in the context of much reduced take-up overall), and this short programme had re-arrest prevention rates comparable to longer post-conviction programmes.

The studies reviewed found that groups work best if:

- they are for longer rather than shorter periods;
- can change men's attitudes enough for them to discuss their behaviour;
- can sustain men in membership; and
- are integrated with a criminal justice system which takes prompt, rigorous and agreed action in cases of a breach of conditions.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Perpetrator programmes are controversial for a number of reasons including:

- the lack of conclusive evidence of their success;
- fears that they will fail and leave survivors in greater danger;
- the view that programmes can dilute the criminal justice response; and
- arguments that programmes will compete for resources with other successful survivor services.

*Perpetrator programme provision should not dilute or divert attention away from services for survivors and children, which have far sounder track records.*

Programmes will always be of secondary importance to meeting the needs of women and children for emergency services, outreach and aftercare. It would also be inappropriate for programmes to divert from, or dilute, criminal justice action against perpetrators.

*Considerations about the safety of partners and children need to be at the forefront of planning programmes.*

Women may base decisions whether to leave or stay with the perpetrator on the fact of his entering a programme. Perpetrator programmes should, therefore, never be set up in isolation; they need to be linked with other services that meet the support and safety needs of women and children. This includes the criminal justice system, women's organisations, child welfare and child protection agencies, and multi-agency fora. There also needs to be clear communication channels between women and the programme co-ordinators. Women need to be able to alert the programme co-ordinators if the man's involvement in the group is having any adverse effects. Partners should also be consulted about the programme and its effect on the perpetrator.

Programme co-ordinators should:

- inform the woman when her partner or ex-partner starts a programme;
- keep her informed of his progress of attendance through the group, particularly if he drops out or is asked to leave before completion;
- warn her if they believe she is in any danger;
- check with her periodically about her safety;
- give her information about the perpetrators' programme and about ways in which the man may use it against her to reinterpret her behaviour;
- tell her about other agencies and crisis services open to her;
- raise her awareness of realistic levels of change to expect and ensure that she is never given false hope;
- offer her confidential contact at anytime;
- take a believing approach towards her;
- respect her confidentiality; and
- not guarantee complete confidentiality to the perpetrator or to anyone else if this would place the woman at risk.

*There must be effective evaluation of programmes.*

It is crucial to learn more about whether violent men can change as a result of intervention. No new programmes should be established without in-built evaluation, preferably externally conducted. Comprehensive, long-term evaluations will help to pinpoint which programmes work best and exactly what makes men change.

*All perpetrator programmes must be aware of, and take steps to address, the issue of low completion rates.*

Action should be taken by the police, Crown Prosecution Service, courts and probation service to minimise non-completion rates by referring men through to programmes as quickly as possible and by actively pursuing non-compliance with realistic sanctions. Low completion rates could also be tackled by alternative sanctions. These could include an insistence that the man begins the programme again or that the man place money and a signed confession at his partner's disposal. Alternatively, pre-entry groups, one-to-one support from an established attender, and early arrival at the programme venue by new participants before their first meeting, could encourage men's involvement in perpetrator programmes.

*Perpetrator programmes need to acknowledge the diversity of men attending groups.*

Provision needs to be made for groups that include:

- men in isolated rural areas;
- men screened out of programmes on mental health or substance misuse grounds or because of a learning difficulty;
- men in prison;
- men with inadequate language skills for full participation;
- ethnic minority groups; and
- gay men.

*In the long-term, public attitudes towards perpetrators may assist in changing men's attitudes over time.*

There is enormous scope for work in schools where recent studies have shown that boys hold worryingly tolerant attitudes towards domestic violence and those who perpetrate it.

## **Further reading**

Burton, S., Regan, L. and Kelly, L. (1998) *Supporting Women and Challenging Men: Lessons from the Domestic Violence Intervention Project*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Healey, K. and Smith, C. with O'Sullivan, C. (1998) *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. (<http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/168638.txt>)

Morran, D. and Wilson, M. (1997) *Men Who are Violent to Women: A Groupwork Practice Manual*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

Mullender, A. (1996) *Rethinking Domestic Violence: The Social Work and Probation Response*. London: Routledge.

The National Practitioners' Network (1994) *Statement of Principles and Guidelines for Good Practice for Intervention Programmes Working with Men towards*

*ending their Violence and Abuse to Women Partners.* Obtainable from the Domestic Violence Intervention Project, PO Box 2838, London W6 9ZE.