



The Domestic Violence Safety Action Tool (DVSAT): Results from the first 12 months of implementation

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Aim: To report on the first 12 months of implementation of the DVSAT.

Method: All referrals in the Central Referral Point (CRP) database were linked to NSW police data to obtain responses to individual items contained in the DVSAT. Descriptive analysis of the DVSAT data was collated including the proportion of 'yes', 'no', 'refused' or 'unknown' responses for each question, and the total number of 'yes' responses for both intimate and non-intimate violence.

Results: In the first 12 months of the operation of the *It Stops Here: Safer Pathway Program*, the DVSAT was administered to a total of 102,605 victims of domestic violence. One in five reported victims of intimate partner violence and one in 10 reported victims of non-intimate partner violence were classified as 'at serious threat'. Threat level was strongly related to scores on the DVSAT but there was also evidence that referrer risk ratings were determined by other factors. Regardless of the DVSAT results, alleged victims were initially classified as 'at serious threat' if they had reportedly experienced three or more prior domestic violence incidents. This arrangement was found to create a high level of service demand and has since been dropped.

Conclusion: Research should be undertaken to assess the extent to which the DVSAT tool can accurately predict risk of further victimisation.

Keywords: domestic violence, DVSAT, Safer Pathway, risk assessment

Background

Domestic violence is a prominent issue in New South Wales (NSW) and as such has gained particular significance and importance as a priority for the NSW Government. A number of strategies have been introduced at various levels of Government to promote the safety of women and reduce the harms associated with domestic violence to victims and their families and to the wider Australian community.

One such program is the *It Stops Here: Safer Pathway* initiative in NSW. *Safer Pathway*, a whole-of-government initiative, is one of the elements of the NSW Government's Domestic and Family Violence Framework for Reform. It introduces new streamlined referral pathways to ensure that services are swiftly and efficiently 'wrapped' around domestic violence victims in a coordinated way, and ultimately, that victim safety is secured.

Key features of the program are:

1. Consistent early identification of risk utilising the Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT) with referral of

victims 'at threat' or 'at serious threat' to a Central Referral Point (CRP);

2. An electronic state-wide CRP, operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to receive referrals from police and allocate them to Local Co-ordination Points (LCPs), making the referral process more streamlined and efficient;
3. A state-wide network of LCPs to provide local domestic violence case co-ordination for female victims; and
4. Safety Action Meetings to develop and implement multi-action Safety Action Plans designed to provide an integrated multi-agency response to victims who are at serious threat of escalating violence.

Safer Pathway is being rolled out across NSW in stages. All four elements of the *Safer Pathway* program were launched in September 2014 in two pilot sites, Orange and Waverley. Four additional sites, Bankstown, Broken Hill, Tweed Heads and Parramatta, began operation in June 2015.¹

On 1 July 2015, the DVSAT and the CRP became operational statewide. The focus of the current study is on the use of the DVSAT by NSW Police during its first 12 months of statewide implementation (1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016). A brief explanation of the DVSAT process is presented in the next section to provide context for the presentation of these data.

Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT)

The DVSAT is administered to all victims of a domestic violence related incident attended by NSW police. Attending police officers use the DVSAT to assess the degree of risk of future harm for female and male victims in both intimate and non-intimate relationships. Police enter the DVSAT data into the NSW Police Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) and these data are then automatically uploaded to the CRP to facilitate case coordination and service provision for victims.

The DVSAT consists of 30 questions and is divided into two parts: Part A and Part B. Part A is used only for victims in intimate relationships and contains 25 questions relating to any current or historical violence towards the victim; the relationship between the victim and the partner; the background of the partner; children of the victim or partner and any history of sexual assault (see Table 2 for full list of questions). Police record the victim's response to each question with either 'yes', 'no', 'refused to answer' or 'unknown'. Part B is completed for victims in intimate and non-intimate relationships and contains information to assist the officer in making a 'professional judgment' as to whether a victim is 'at threat' or 'at serious threat'. These questions relate to how fearful a victim is of the person of interest, if the victim has expressed any further concerns about the person of interest, if there are children involved in the domestic violence incident and if there are any additional factors that lead the officer to believe a victim is at threat or at serious threat (see Table 2 for list of questions).

Victims are classified as 'at serious threat' if they answer 'yes' to 12 or more of the DVSAT questions (for intimate victims) or if an officer's professional judgment leads them to believe the victim is 'at serious threat' (for non-intimate victims and intimate victims with a DVSAT score of less than 12) (NSW Government, 2014, Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool Guide). Victims who are at serious threat are subsequently referred, through the LCP, to a Safety Action Meeting (SAM) in the *Safer Pathway* trial sites or the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS) in all other areas.

Method

Data for this brief were obtained from two sources. The primary source of data was the Central Referral Point (CRP) database, which is maintained by Victim Services NSW. CRP data contains details on all victim referrals made by police, including socio-demographic information about the victim and information concerning the DV event. In order to obtain DVSAT responses, CRP referral data were linked to COPS data held by the Bureau

of Crime Statistics and Research using the event number and first and last name of the person of interest (POI). Although an event may be linked to more than one incident, only one set of DVSAT responses was available for each event number. If a victim had more than one event recorded in the CRP, each event number had a separate DVSAT record. Descriptive analysis of the DVSAT data was collated including the proportion of 'yes', 'no', 'refused' or 'unknown' responses for each question, and the number or score of 'yes' responses for each victim as well as the number of 'refused' or 'unknown' responses for intimate and non-intimate victims.

Results

The following section details DVSAT responses for all victims who were referred to the CRP from July 2015 to June 2016 (n=121,225 events). Just over 4% (n=5,368) of the events did not link to a DVSAT record in COPS and in approximately 1 in 10 events, responses were missing to all DVSAT items. This means that, of a total 121,225 events in the sample used for this study, 85% (n=102,605) of cases had valid DVSAT responses.

Table 1. Number of Domestic Violence Safety Action Tool (DVSAT) assessments administered by NSW Police July 2015- June 2016

	n	%
Total DVSATs administered to DV victims	102,605	84.6
Missing all (29 questions) DVSAT responses	13,252	10.9
Missing (CRP records that did not link to COPS records)	5,368	4.4
Total events	121,225	100.0

Table 2 shows the 25 questions asked of victims of intimate partner domestic violence incidents in Part A of the DVSAT and the corresponding responses given by victims for each question. Questions that recorded a higher proportion of 'yes' responses include;

- (1) has your partner ever used physical violence against you (35.6%),
- (2) has there been a recent separation (in the last 12 months) or is one imminent (35.1%),
- (3) is your partner jealous or controlling of you (33.2%) and
- (4) does your partner have a problem with substance abuse such as alcohol/drugs (30.5%).

Questions that had a lower proportion of 'yes' responses include;

- (1) has your partner ever harmed or killed a family pet or threatened to do so (2.8%),
- (2) does your partner have access to firearms or prohibited weapons (2.8%) and
- (3) has your partner ever been arrested for sexual assault (0.8%).

Table 2. Domestic Violence Safety Action Tool (DVSAT) responses to Part A - Intimate victims only

			% of intimate victims with non-missing DVSAT (n=61,539)				
			Yes	No	Refused	Unknown	Total
<i>Violence towards client</i>	1	Has your partner ever threatened to harm or kill you?	26.1	54.6	11.7	7.7	100.0
	2	Has your partner ever used physical violence against you?	35.6	45.8	11.5	7.1	100.0
	3	Has your partner ever choked, strangled or suffocated you or attempted?	10.8	69.5	11.7	8.0	100.0
	4	Has your partner ever threatened or assaulted you with any weapon (including knives and/or other objects)?	8.8	71.6	11.7	8.0	100.0
	5	Has your partner ever harmed or killed a family pet or threatened to do so?	2.8	77.5	11.6	8.1	100.0
	6	Has your partner ever been charged with breaching an ADVO?	11.7	67.8	10.8	9.7	100.0
<i>Relationship between client and partner</i>	7	Is your partner jealous towards or controlling of you?	33.2	46.4	11.6	8.8	100.0
	8	Is the violence or controlling behaviour becoming worse or more frequent?	26.8	52.8	11.7	8.8	100.0
	9	Has your partner stalked, constantly harassed or text/emailed you?	19.9	60.1	11.7	8.3	100.0
	10	Does your partner control your access to money?	7.7	72.4	11.7	8.2	100.0
	11	Has there been a recent separation (in the last 12 months) or is one imminent?	35.1	46.5	11.2	7.2	100.0
<i>Background of partner</i>	12	Does your partner or the relationship have financial difficulties?	19.6	57.8	11.6	11.0	100.0
	13	Is your partner unemployed?	27.9	50.3	11.4	10.4	100.0
	14	Does your partner have mental health problems (including undiagnosed conditions) and/or depression?	23.5	51.8	11.5	13.2	100.0
	15	Does your partner have a problem with substance abuse such as alcohol or drugs?	30.5	47.9	11.4	10.2	100.0
	16	Has your partner ever threatened or attempted suicide?	14.2	63.0	11.6	11.1	100.0
	17	Is your partner currently on bail or parole, or has served a time of imprisonment or has recently been released from custody in relation to offences of violence?	14.4	65.3	10.9	9.4	100.0
	18	Does your partner have access to firearms or prohibited weapons?	2.8	77.2	11.0	9.1	100.0
<i>Children</i>	19	Are you pregnant and/or do you have children who are less than 12 months apart in age?	7.1	76.2	10.4	6.4	100.0
	20	Has your partner ever threatened or used physical violence toward you while you were pregnant?	6.5	74.9	10.9	7.7	100.0
	21	Has your partner ever harmed or threatened to harm your children?	3.7	77.5	11.4	7.4	100.0
	22	Is there any conflict between you and your partner regarding child contact or residency issues and/or current Family Court proceedings?	8.9	73.0	11.2	6.9	100.0
	23	Are there children from a previous relationship present in the household?	10.4	72.3	10.9	6.3	100.0
<i>Sexual assault</i>	24	Has your partner ever done things to you, of a sexual nature, that made you feel bad or physically hurt you?	3.5	76.0	12.0	8.5	100.0
	25	Has your partner ever been arrested for sexual assault?	0.8	79.0	11.5	8.7	100.0

The proportion of 'refused to answer' responses is relatively consistent for all questions. This indicates that it was more likely for a victim to refuse to answer all DVSAT items rather than refusing certain questions. A similar pattern emerges for 'unknown' responses; the exception being questions relating to the perpetrators background where there was a slightly higher proportion of 'unknown' responses given (e.g. for qu. 14, does your partner have mental health problems (including undiagnosed conditions) and/or depression 13.2% of victims responded unknown).

Table 3 shows the questions relating to a police officer's professional judgement of the threat level of a victim as detailed in Part B of the DVSAT. This section is completed for all intimate and non-intimate domestic violence victims. For

Question 26, how fearful is the victim of the person of interest, 62% of victims were judged as not afraid, 32% as afraid, 3% were terrified and 3% were unable/unwilling to answer. Table 3 also shows that 35% of victims expressed concerns and nearly one-third (30.6%) of incidents where a DVSAT was administered there were children present at or witnesses to the event (where children were present they were sighted and checked on in 88% of cases).

Table 4 presents the total number of 'yes', 'refused' and 'missing' responses for intimate DVSAT questions and the number of 'yes' responses for non-intimate DVSAT questions. There was a total of 61,561 DVSATs administered to intimate DV victims and 41,045 DVSATs administered to non-intimate victims. Around one in ten (n=6,753) intimate victims recorded a DVSAT score of

Table 3. Domestic Violence Safety Action Tool (DVSAT) responses to Part B

		% of all victims (intimate and non-intimate) with non-missing DVSAT (n=102,605)		
			n	%
26	How fearful is the victim of the person of interest (POI)?	Not afraid	63,825	62.2
		Afraid	32,476	31.7
		Terrified	2,909	2.8
		Unable/unwilling to answer	3,395	3.3
27	Does the victim express concerns?	Yes	35,669	34.8
		No	66,936	65.2
28	Were there children present or witnessed the incident?	Yes	31,393	30.6
		No	71,212	69.4
29	If so (children present), did you sight them and check on their welfare?	Yes	27,553	87.7
		No	3,840	12.2
30	Are there any additional factors or circumstances that make you believe there is a threat or serious threat to the victim or the children?	Yes	4,540	4.4
		No	98,065	95.6

Table 4. DVSAT responses by victim/POI relationship status

			n	%
Intimate	Number of 'yes' responses (of 29 DVSAT questions)	0	8,821	12.1
		1 - 11	38,858	53.4
		12 or higher	6,753	9.3
	Refused 12 or more questions		7,129	9.8
	Missing all DVSAT responses		8,187	11.2
	Missing (CRP record did not link)		3,079	4.2
Total intimate			72,827	60.1
Non-intimate	Number of 'yes' responses (of 4 DVSAT questions)	0	19,919	41.2
		1	9,524	19.7
		2	7,487	15.5
		3	3,594	7.4
		4	521	1.1
	Missing all DVSAT responses		5,064	10.5
	Missing (CRP record did not link)		2,289	4.7
Total non-intimate			48,398	39.9
Total victims			121,225	100.0

Table 5. Victim/POI relationship status by referrer risk rating

	Serious Threat		At Threat		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Intimate	15,899	21.8	56,928	78.2	72,827	100.0
Non-intimate	6,243	12.9	42,155	87.1	48,398	100.0

Table 6. DVSAT responses by referrer risk rating – intimate victims only

Number of 'yes' responses (of 29 DVSAT questions)	Serious threat		At Threat		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0	861	9.8	7,960	90.2	8,821	100.0
1 - 11	5,782	14.9	33,076	85.1	38,858	100.0
12 or higher	4,977	73.7	1,776	26.3	6,753	100.0
Refused 12 or higher DVSAT questions	1,540	21.6	5,589	78.4	7,129	100.0
Missing all 29 DVSAT responses	2,397	29.3	5,790	70.7	8,187	100.0
Not Linked to COPS	342	11.1	2,737	88.9	3,079	100.0

12 or higher which would result in a classification of 'at serious threat'. Just over forty per cent (41.2%) of the non-intimate victims recorded zero 'yes' responses on the four DVSAT Part B questions and only 1% recorded four 'yes' responses.

The number of intimate and non-intimate victims by the referrer risk rating recorded in the CRP ('at serious threat' and 'at threat') is presented in Table 5. One in five intimate victims (15,899) and one in ten non-intimate victims (6,243) were classified as 'at serious threat' in the 12 months to July 2016. Focusing only on intimate victims (who complete part A of the DVSAT) Table 6 shows the number of 'yes' responses that victims gave to the DVSAT questions by their referrer risk rating. Nearly three-quarters of intimate victims with a DVSAT score of 12 or more were classified as 'at serious threat' and over 85% of intimate victims with a score less than 12 were classified as 'at threat'. However, this table also indicates that referrers are not solely relying on DVSAT scores to assess a victim's threat level. Nearly one-third of intimate victims with missing DVSAT scores, over one-fifth who refused all DVSAT items; 15% of those with 1-11 'yes' responses and 10% of victims with zero 'yes' responses were classified as 'at serious threat'.²

Summary

This brief found a very high rate of police administration of the DVSAT in the first 12 months of implementation. The DVSAT was administered to 102,605 domestic violence victims during the period July 2015 through June 2016, which equates to nearly 90% of all victim referrals recorded in the CRP (and which could be linked COPS) over the 12-month period. Only a small proportion of intimate partner victims (around one in ten) refused to answer the questions contained in Part A of the DVSAT and a similar proportion of victims did not know the answers to the questions posed. No specific DVSAT items appeared particularly problematic in this regard.

This brief also showed that there were a high number of victims classified as 'at serious threat' (n=22,142) during the

first 12 months of the DVSAT being operational in NSW. A higher proportion of victims of intimate partner violence were classified as at serious threat compared with victims of non-intimate violence (22% v 13%). Threat level was strongly related to scores on the DVSAT. Amongst victims of intimate partner violence, we found that nearly three-quarters of those with a DVSAT score of 12 or higher were classified at serious threat compared with 15% of victims with a DVSAT score of 1-11 and 10% of victims with a score of 0.

However, there was also evidence, particularly in the case of victim refusal or non-response, that referrer risk ratings were determined by factors other than DVSAT scores. One in five victims of intimate partner violence who refused to answer the DVSAT and nearly one in three intimate victims for whom no DVSAT answers were recorded were rated at serious threat of future harm. This may reflect the reliance of police upon their own 'professional judgement' or experience when assessing future threat level in situations where there is little or unreliable information supplied by the victim. But this result could also be due to 'automatic triggers' that have been built into the CRP process. Of particular note is the repeat victim trigger which resulted in all victims with three or more prior domestic violence related incidents being rated at serious threat. The repeat victim trigger was removed in December 2016 after it became clear that this process was creating a very high demand on SAMs that could not be adequately serviced. Early evidence suggests that this change has resulted in a dramatic reduction in serious threat referrals to SAMs.

Given that SAMs are extremely resource intensive for all agencies involved it is crucial that they be reserved for victims who are genuinely at high-risk. Integral to this, is validation of the DVSAT tool. To date no research has been undertaken to assess the extent to which this tool can accurately predict risk of further victimisation. The high volume of victims being assessed at serious threat independent of DVSAT scores should also continue to be closely monitored now that refinements have been made to the referral system.

Notes

1. A further 21 sites commenced in recent months – Mount Druitt, Nowra, Wyong, Blacktown, Deniliquin, Newcastle, Taree, Wollongong, South Coast, Campbelltown, Griffith, Northern Beaches, Lismore, Tamworth, Bourke, Queanbeyan, Hunter Valley and St George.
2. Note that the CRP indicated that only a very small proportion of cases were downgraded by the LCP (466 cases where referrer risk rating was serious threat were downgraded to threat). However, advice from Victim Services NSW indicated that this number is likely to be a significant underestimate of the number of downgrades as a referral could be closed on the CRP (and work continued on the LCP internal database) before it was downgraded.

References

NSW Government (2014). *Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool Guide*.