



REGROUPEMENT DES MAISONS
POUR FEMMES VICTIMES
DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE

Tool 2

Correctional Services:
Detection and intervention in cases involving

Coercive control



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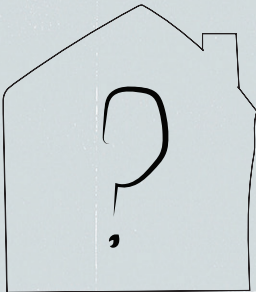
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Québec 



The Regroupement provides training on coercive control for social and legal professionals. [Contact us](#) for more information on training modules and modalities.

In accordance with the *Act respecting the Québec correctional system*, your mandate, as an employee of the correctional system, is to assess the accused or offender and care for him, both within his community and in custody. It is also your role to assess his risk to society and advise the courts.

To this end, your ability to detect the presence of coercive control is essential to:

- Help ensure the safety and sense of freedom of victims whose partners have been criminally charged;
- Adapt the procedure for handling the accused individual or offender.

**"Since the person involved
—police officer, probation officer—
is never the same, mightn't be possible
that all the pieces of the puzzle
never fall into place?"
— Coroner Jacques Ramsay¹**

The objective of this tool is to:

- > Understand why screening for coercive control is valuable to understand and assess conjugal violence;
- > Facilitate screening for and documentation of coercive control at bail, during pre-sentencing and upon sentence execution;
- > Improve your interactions with victims.

¹ Valérie Gonthier, *La victime d'un ex violent mal protégée par le système*, *Journal de Montréal*, 17 January 2022. [<https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2022/01/17/la-victime-dun-ex-violent-mal-protectee-par-le-systeme>] [Translated from French]

1 – What is coercive control?

In situations of conjugal violence, we often see only the tip of the iceberg: the blows, the yelling, and the physical abuse. Professionals may not identify violence related to coercive control, instead referring to it as relationship problems, lovers' quarrels, or conflict due to separation.

Coercive control: Looking at conjugal violence through a new lens

Coercive control refers to a series of intentional acts and strategies of violence, exploitation, humiliation, and manipulation exercised repeatedly by the abuser, with the aim of establishing and maintaining domination over the victim and continuously depriving her of her rights.

It's an insidious and gradual exertion of control over the victim; a form of violence that doesn't necessarily involve blows or visible marks. An abuser who exerts coercive control seeks to make the victim dependent, in particular by isolating her from all support, depriving her of her independence and controlling her behaviour by imposing rules.

The offender's strategies tend to adapt and evolve as limits are set by the victim or the justice system. It's important to bear in mind that abusers' desire for control can drive them to hurt and dominate their victim, despite court orders and conditions.

To learn more about coercive control, here are **three key documents**²:

- Understanding Coercive Control
- Manifestations of Coercive Control, with Examples
- Coercive Control: Predictor of Homicidal Risk

² Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale (RMFVVC), Coercive Control Toolbox, 2022.
© Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale. [<https://maisons-femmes.gc.ca/campagnes-de-sensibilisation/improving-justice-system-practices-to-increase-the-safety-of-women-who-are-victims-of-intimate-partner-violence/>]

2 – Why screen for coercive control during an assessment?

Coercive control does not only occur outside of the courtroom or correctional facility.

By identifying coercive control, we can get an up-to-date and holistic assessment of the context of conjugal violence, allowing us to evaluate the risk and protective factors, and ultimately understand the victim's position vis-à-vis their situation.

Taken in isolation, certain behaviours may not seem that alarming. We can only identify the pattern of at-risk behaviours and build a safety net around the victim by looking at all the information as a whole—from the offender, the victim, and the social and legal professionals involved.

In practical terms, the correctional system benefits from coercive control being assessed at different points in the pre- and post-sentencing:

- The court's decision can take the information into account at the bail stage. In Quebec, since June 7, 2023, coercive control has been added to the list of factors to be considered by all prosecutors.³
- Risk factors are more easily identified.
- There is better follow-up with the offender in the community.
- The information can help determine the appropriate management and supervision needs for the offender.
- The victim, accused or offender can be guided toward appropriate resources.

³ VIO-1 Violence conjugale, DPCP, Québec, 2023 [https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/org/dpcp/PDF/directives/DIR_VIO-1_DPCP.pdf]

3 – The need to look beyond the surface: Is there a victim archetype?

Victims can have extremely varied and mixed reactions,⁴ including:

- Anger, aggressiveness or lack of fear;
- Fear of violence escalating if legal action is taken;
- Desire not to act against or leave the partner;
- Escape into drug or alcohol abuse.

These reactions can be strategies victims use to protect themselves from the abuser.

In addition, the victim's perception of the violence they have suffered may be altered. This can look like:

- Feelings of shame or guilt that cause her to downplay the severity of the violence;
- Delay in reporting violence (for fear of rejection by community, lack of confidence in legal authorities, etc.);
- Submission to manipulation and pressure from the abuser, family, friends, or network;
- Acceptance of or downplaying the severity of controlling behaviours, sometimes due to socialization or cultural norms;
- Loyalty or a feeling of indebtedness to the abuser.

⁴ Government of Canada, *HELP Toolkit: Identifying and Responding to Family Violence for Family Law Legal Advisers*.

The effects of violence and related trauma can make communication difficult. For example, a victim may have difficulty:

- Concentrating on what you're saying;
- Providing consistent information (contradictory information, omissions);
- Processing and assimilating the information you provide;
- Organizing her thoughts and remembering dates;
- Recalling specific details of experiences, or the chronology of events;
- Providing the information you need;
- Making decisions;
- Having realistic expectations of outcomes (due to her dissatisfaction with the system);
- Accepting the different stages of the process: she may provide very short answers to get things over with, or say what she thinks others want to hear.



– Checklist to assess the risk of future violence

The following information can help you better understand the situation and conduct a risk assessment that will inform the appropriate action to take to prevent the accused or offender from re-offending.

“Most of the information on lived violence that can predict spousal homicide comes from the victim. So, it is important to pick up their story and add them to the topic of the perpetrator.”

— Dobash et Dobash, 2012

The following three-part table summarizes the risk factors associated with an increased likelihood of future violence in a context of conjugal violence, including post-separation violence.⁵ It can be used throughout the pre- and post-sentencing process, and can complement the various assessments conducted within the correctional system.

Rather than a formal assessment tool, this checklist helps identify the specific risks related to conjugal violence. The victim's perceptions are a central part of this work and are to be considered alongside the account of the accused or offender. Other sources of information (interviewers, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.) can be useful to complete an overall portrait of the situation.



⁵ Drawn from the *Intimate Partner Violence Risk Factor Summary* developed by British Columbia police force, and the Vigie VC grid used in Quebec, developed by the Carrefour sécurité en violence conjugale (CSVC).

RISK FACTORS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Recent separation or threat of separation, accumulated losses	<p>In the last 12 months, did any of the following occur:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation; • Presence of a new partner; • Loss of child custody; • Sale of the home; • Job loss; • Finalization of divorce; • Receipt or service of legal documents; • Victim's return to work; • Disagreement over whether or not to continue a pregnancy; • Shift in intent, etc. 	<p>V + A/O</p>
Escalation of violence	<p>Is there an escalation in the frequency or severity of violence against the victim, family members, another person, or family pet?</p> <p>Escalation can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More frequent calls; • Intensification of existing controlling behaviour; • Shift from verbal abuse to threats; • Shift from verbal to physical violence; • Intensification of physical violence. 	<p>V</p>

RISK FACTORS IN THE RELATIONSHIP (cont'd)

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Has the accused or offender threatened to kill or injure the victim? → Have there been any threats to kill or harm children, a family member, another person, or a family pet? → Has he made veiled threats in a letter, email, or text message? → Have there been any threats of suicide? 	V
Coercive and controlling behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Is there a pattern of controlling and coercive behaviours on the part of the accused or offender, i.e., a series of repeated and intentional strategies or acts of violence? <p>Manifestations of control can change over time and may be very subtle: veiled threats, attempts to contact the victim through third parties, intimidation, manipulation through correspondence, etc.</p>	V



RISK FACTORS IN THE RELATIONSHIP (cont'd)

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Coercive and controlling behaviours	<p>In reference to, but not limited to, the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manifestations of sexual or other jealousy, or signs of obsessive or possessive behaviour; • Isolation of the victim by controlling or limiting her activities or contact with others; • Withdrawal, restriction or monitoring the use of a vehicle, telephone, clothing, medication, or any other resource; • Monitoring everyday life; • Monitoring the victim in person or through technological means (e.g., cameras, tracking apps, phone, or social media); • Imposition of rules, curfews, schedules; • Threats of consequences for non-compliance (e.g., violence, self-harm, harm to others or pets, destruction of property, non-consensual publication of intimate images); • Stalking (persistent following, surveillance, incessant and unwanted communication with the victim or previous partner); • Persistence of the offender's behaviour after a police charge or warning. 	V

RISK FACTORS RELATED TO THE VICTIM

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Perception of personal safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Does the victim believe that the accused or offender could hurt or kill her, or her children? → Does the victim believe that he will disobey his conditions of release, or restraining order? 	V
Perception of the probability of future violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Does the victim believe the violence will escalate? → Does the victim fear future violence if the offender is released? 	V
Victim's vulnerable areas	<p>Are there factors that increase the risk to the victim, including the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation or marginalization (e.g., remote, rural or Indigenous community, language barrier, literacy, cognitive or physical impairment, advanced age, pregnancy or working in the sex industry); • Physical or mental health problems, alcohol or substance abuse; • Pregnancy; • Insufficient community support or unsafe living conditions (e.g., poverty, financial dependence, homelessness, inadequate housing and lack of transportation); • Victim's background (Indigenous, immigrant or refugee); • Potential cultural barriers to safety (e.g., fear of seeking help, shame, religious beliefs, distrust of police, threats from family or community, intergenerational trauma, gender inequality or social isolation). 	V

RISK FACTORS RELATED TO THE ACCUSED OR OFFENDER

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
History of violence (other than conjugal violence)	→ Does the accused or offender have a history of threats, intimidation, violence, strangulation, sexual assault, or criminal harassment?	A/C
History of conjugal violence	→ Is there a history or pattern of coercive control, stalking, violence, threats, or other abuse in the current or previous intimate relationship?	A/C
Court orders or breach of conditions	→ Is the accused or offender currently the subject of a court order? → Has the offender ever broken a court order?	A/C
Alcohol and other drugs	→ Was/is the accused or offender using alcohol or drugs? → Does he have a recent history of substance abuse? → What substances did he use? How often? → Does he become angry, jealous, or violent when he consumes alcohol or other drugs? → Does he exhibit other addictive behaviours that cause stress in the relationship (e.g., compulsive gambling)?	A/C
Financial instability	→ Is the accused or offender in financial difficulty? → Have there been any recent changes in employment?	A/C

RISK FACTORS RELATED TO THE ACCUSED OR OFFENDER (cont'd)

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Mental health disorders	<p>→ Is there any evidence that the accused or offender may be suffering from depression or another mental health disorder?</p> <p>→ Is there an official diagnosis (e.g., depression or psychosis)?</p> <p>→ If so, is he currently undergoing treatment (medication, therapy, etc.)?</p> <p>→ Have there been any recent changes to his medication?</p>	A/C
Suicidal ideation	<p>→ Did the accused or offender mention suicide or threaten/attempt suicide (self-harm)?</p> <p>→ If so, when and how?</p>	A/C
Use of words that condone or tolerate violence	<p>Does the accused or offender display attitudes or beliefs indicating his support or tolerance of violence? This may look like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having behaviours that stem from them being "a man's right" or privilege, which reflect patriarchal attitudes or support men's domination over women; • Forcefully downplaying or denying the severity of violence; • Normalization of violence (due to intergenerational trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, post-traumatic shock [from a survivor of war], etc.); • Blaming the victim or approving the use of violence to control her. 	A/C

RISK FACTORS RELATED TO THE ACCUSED OR OFFENDER (cont'd)

Factors to consider	Elements to observe	Source of information V (victim) or A (accused) / O (offender)
Rigidity of thought and behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Does the abuser show a lack of regret or repentance for his abuse of power? → Does he exhibit lack of empathy for what the victim is feeling? → Did the abuser's behaviour persist despite being charged or warned by the police? → Is the abuser possessive, obsessive, excessively jealous, insulting, hateful, perverse? → Did he fail to respect the boundaries set by the victim or by civil protection orders, conditions of a peace bond, etc.? 	A/C



5 – Waiver of Confidentiality

In accordance with the *Act respecting access to documents held by public bodies and the protection of personal information*,⁶ personal information may be disclosed without consent "... where there is reasonable cause to believe that a serious risk of death or of serious bodily injury ... threatens the person or group and where the nature of the threat generates a sense of urgency." Only information needed by the victim or those who can help ensure her safety should be disclosed.

3 Criteria
to keep in mind when considering
waiving confidentiality:

1
There does NOT
have to be imminent
danger, serious risk
is enough

2
It is NOT necessary
to be certain that
the offender will
carry out the act

3
Serious injury = physical or psychological
injuries that significantly impair physical
integrity, health or well-being

Moreover, the victim's perceptions of her current situation are essential to risk assessment—but the victim's lack of fear does not mean that there is no danger.

⁶ *Act respecting Access to documents held by public bodies and the protection of personal information*, Québec, 2023, [<https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/A-2.1>]

6 – Attitudes and interpersonal skills to adopt when interviewing a victim

Communication with an alleged victim of conjugal violence is essential to ensure that you have all the information you need to produce an assessment, whether at the bail stage, during pre-sentencing, or when convicted offenders are taken into custody.

Even if you don't have a mandate to provide support or counselling, encouraging, listening, and having a respectful attitude are key to communicating with the victim.

Here are some considerations to keep in mind when interacting with a victim:

- Do everything in your power to put her at ease: welcome her, listen to her, take the time to reassure her, give her time to think and reflect;
- Be aware of your personal and professional limitations. Rely on resources that specialize in conjugal violence. They can provide invaluable assistance to the victim while supporting you as you take care of the victim's psychosocial well-being;
- In a situation where the victim appears to be in distress or wishes to express herself concerning issues outside the scope of the assessment, immediately refer or put her in touch with a specialized resource by initiating a three-way call with a shelter, SOS violence conjugale or a CAVAC;
- Explain that you are consulting various people and sources of information to determine the best way to deal with the offender while ensuring her safety and, if applicable, that of her children;
- Tell her that you need to know her point of view, and that the information will be treated confidentially (within the limits of the *Act respecting access to documents held by public bodies and the protection of personal information*);

- Let her know that she doesn't have to cooperate if she doesn't want to get involved in the assessment process, and that if she does, she can withdraw at any time;
- Mention that she doesn't have to answer if she doesn't know the answer to a question;
- Let her express herself in her own words, in her own way, and at her own pace;
- Help her express her feelings by validating and accepting her reactions, emotions and sensations. Validate her healing journey and her short-, medium-, and long-term reactions;
- Believe what the victim tells you, because they are her experiences and perception. Explain that it's not her fault and that the abuser is entirely responsible for his actions;
- Be aware of the relationship of authority that comes with your position and try to close the power gap by making her feel at ease. For example, encourage informal verbal exchanges, use your first name, etc.;
- Use accessible language that does not infantilize her;
- Avoid using the label "conjugal violence," which many victims don't identify with. Instead, talk about "control," "violence";
- Explain your role as a correctional system worker and define the goals and limits of your communications;
- Explain the general process of a correctional sentence, including the fact that possible early release from being detained does not occur without a request from the offender, an evaluation of their situation, and possibly the imposition of conditions;



- Inform the victim about the final release procedure after completion of 2/3 of the sentence;
- Mention, if applicable, the conditions of an order that concerns her, since this information is public;
- Refer victims seeking explanations about sentences of six months or more to the Commission québécoise des libérations conditionnelles (CQLC);
- Check her understanding of the questions asked, and regularly ask her if she has any questions;
- If English is not her first language, do everything you can to help her communicate in her native language. Use a professional interpreter who is familiar with issues surrounding conjugal violence. Even if the victim understands the host country's language, she may miss certain subtleties, and the stakes are too high. Contact the nearest women's shelter for a referral to an interpreter.
- Share as much information and resources as possible with the victim, but respect her decisions.



7 – How to start the conversation and support a victim's safety

It's normal not to know what to say when speaking with a victim of conjugal violence. It can be difficult to know how to respond to her distress, hesitations, and feelings of helplessness. But the way you talk to victims of conjugal violence can make a big difference and inspire them to continue sharing what they have experienced or are experiencing.

1. A few ways to get the conversation started:

"It takes a lot of courage to overcome what you've been through."

"It's normal that you need to talk about it, there are resources out there that can support you."

"It's normal that you still have fears, would you like me to give you the contact information of a resource or for us to reach out to it together?"

"If you're not ready to make that call today, are you okay with me giving you the contact information of resources that can help you?"

2. A few ways to validate the victim's experience and help her feel safer:

"Violence is not about losing of control, but about taking of control."

"You're not responsible for his violence."

"You're the best positioned to judge the situation and decide what needs to be done."

"It's physically and mentally exhausting to live under this kind of stress."

"I'm really glad you're telling me about it."

"Your partner had no right to do that, it's against the law."

"You're allowed to have a different perception than your partner."

"No matter the situation, your partner shouldn't have acted that way toward you."

"Many people would have reacted the same way you did in that situation."

"It's normal that you gave your partner the benefit of the doubt and hoped that things would improve."

"It's a complex situation and I understand you're having trouble seeing it clearly."

"You made the right decisions with the information you had. You couldn't have known everything you know now."

"Do you have people who support you? There are resources to help you if you feel the need."



Resources for the victim

SOS violence conjugale

 1 800 363-9010  438-601-1211


 <https://sosviolenceconjugale.ca/en>

Women's shelters

Shelter workers can provide:

- Immediate, punctual, and confidential telephone support, depending on the victim's needs;
- External services (for non-shelter residents) including counselling, coaching and advocacy to help her reclaim power over her life, developing safety plans, applying for social assistance, finding housing, medical or administrative procedures, immigration applications, etc.;
- Shelter;
- Specialized services for children, so that they too can receive the support they need.

Remember, victims don't have to leave their partner to access shelter services.

 <https://maisons-femmes.qc.ca/besoin-daide/> (in French)
<https://fmhf.ca/maisons-dhebergement-membres/> (in French)

Resources for Victims (cont'd)

CAVAC

(Support centres for victims of crime /
Centres d'aide aux victimes d'actes
criminels)

Front-line services are available to victims of crime and their families, as well as to witnesses of crime. CAVAC assistance is available whether or not the perpetrator of the crime has been identified, arrested, prosecuted, or convicted.



1 866 532-2822



<https://cavac.qc.ca/en/>

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