The Role of Private Security in Supporting Police Responses to Domestic Violence

Report to the Australian Security Industry Association Limited

Tim Prenzler & Lauren Fardell
University of the Sunshine Coast

February 2016
Executive Summary

Domestic violence is a socially complex crime that is a major cause of stress, disruption, financial hardship, injury, illness and death for Australian women. Children and men also suffer from this type of abuse. Recently in Australia there has been a renewed and high profile campaign from governments, non-government organisations and social commentators for solutions to this devastating and costly crime.

This report reviews key dimensions of the problem internationally and in Australia, including the prevalence of domestic violence, impacts on victims and associated costs. The literature on prevention is also reviewed. The report then provides a set of case studies of prevention-oriented partnership-based initiatives involving the private security industry. These comprise shelter security, home security, GPS tracking of offenders, and mobile personal duress alarms linked to police.

Available research evidence shows that a variety of responses can contribute to reductions in domestic violence. These include increased arrests by police (under certain circumstances), correctional-based treatment programs, protection orders, and integrated support and advocacy services. However, the yields from these initiatives generally fall well short of an adequate system of protection. Criminal justice responses are often very limited in their capacity to close the opportunity structure for domestic violence and provide adequate protection for victims in their everyday lives. While these diverse approaches need to be optimised, along with any promising primary prevention initiatives (such as education), there is clearly large scope for additional strategies, especially in the area of situational prevention.

This report canvassed evidence regarding the potential role of private security in helping to reduce the number of repeat domestic violence incidents, especially in supporting police responses. The study was unable to identify case studies or other sources involving full experimental designs showing clear evidence of large positive effects. Nonetheless, a number of systematic evaluations were identified, involving a variety of data, which provided strong evidence of the potential benefits of security applications.

Security systems, including hardware and alarms, have a crucial role to play in ensuring domestic violence shelters are safe from attack. Shelters have been widely adopted as a practical emergency response to violence. For many victims, shelters provide a crucial first step towards a new life free from abuse. Women and children who are eligible to access scarce accommodation in shelters are considered to be at extreme high risk of repeat and elevated violence given that they have just escaped the control of the offender. In that regard, shelters require high quality security, including professionally developed security plans, regular risk assessments and system tests, layered security from the perimeter inwards, security hardware, and state-of-the-art back-to-base alarm and CCTV systems. At the same time, effective security needs to be blended with features that allow for privacy, access and comfort. The literature on shelters also shows that effectiveness needs to be considered from a long-range perspective. Security planning is an essential component of all transitional plans for life post-shelter.

The present study also identified some evidence for the potential benefits of GPS tracking of persons on bail for domestic violence charges. Commercial security services are typically engaged to supply and maintain GPS equipment, and they can provide training and monitoring. There would appear to be a potential deterrent effect, and an enhanced intervention capability, from tracking. Linkages to police or other forms of response and enforcement can optimise the deterrent effect and allow for rapid intervention when violations occur. In theory, GPS tracking could be extended to persons who have had an intervention order imposed on them and/or a good behaviour bond. At the same time, GPS tracking has major limitations. It is offender-centred rather than victim-centred. Victims can be left ill-informed by programs, including not being informed of violations of exclusion zones. Most importantly, the systems appear to be
limited in their capacity to identify violations that involve an imminent threat to the safety of a woman or her children. GPS tracking, on present evidence, appears more as a useful tool for the bureaucratic management of suspects and offenders rather than a strongly prevention-oriented program. Nonetheless, GPS systems could serve as useful additions to forms of victim-centred prevention programs.

One example of a victim-centred program with some good evidence behind it is home security enhancement. The strongest evidence for this comes from the evaluations of the UK Staying Put program and the New Zealand safe@home program. A major advantage of home security programs is that they allow all victims, including children, to stay together in their home, as opposed to extended reliance on emergency and alternative accommodation. In theory, residential security packages also provide better situational protection in the home from violations of protection orders than is possible under the zonal GPS tracking systems. Optimal systems include back-to-base alarms.

The other example of victim-centred protection with good evidentiary support is personal mobile duress alarms, as demonstrated in the UK Merseyside project and the Bsafe program in Australia. Bsafe-type programs offer all-round security inside and outside the home, in that alarm activation and response are immediately available to the victim at all times and places. The pendants are waterproof and can be carried around the neck, on the wrist, in a bag or kept by the bedside. Activation is instantaneous with the press of a button. Pendants are operational within a residential boundary and the mobile format creates a much wider safety zone. Either or both types of alarms are provided on the basis of a formal risk assessment, associated with a protection order that entails confiscation of weapons and legally mandates the offender maintain a safe distance from the target and not engage in a range of threatening or harassing behaviours. As with home security, residentially-based duress alarms allow persons covered by protection orders to stay together in the family home; while mobile duress alarms allow much greater freedom of movement than is possible under a stand-alone home security system or zonal GPS tracking system. This makes it much easier for victims to continue in employment and maintain networks of family and friends. Personal alarms also provide a security alternative if landlords reject requests for security upgrades.

In terms of crime prevention theory – specifically routine activity theory – home security and duress alarms reduce the window of opportunity for repeat domestic violence provided to a ‘motivated offender’ through the ‘absence of capable guardians’ (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 589). From the perspective of situational crime prevention, the significant advantage of residential security and mobile personal alarms is that they are inserted into the immediate location in which a crime might occur. From an offender’s perspective, they ‘increase the effort’, ‘increase the risks’ and ‘reduce the rewards’ associated with breaches of protection orders (Cornish & Clarke, 2003, p. 90). They do this by ‘extending guardianship’ and ‘strengthening formal surveillance’. Duress alarms serve to deter offending through the increased probability of a quick response by police. When deterrence fails, the enhanced response capability also allows for a more rapid intervention to stop the violence or harassment continuing, thereby reducing the levels of harm. From a situational prevention perspective, systems also enhance ‘rule setting’, and help to ‘reduce provocations’ and ‘remove excuses’ (e.g., in relation to peer pressure to offend) (Cornish & Clarke, 2003, p. 90). Theoretically, deterrence will be greatly enhanced by offenders being informed of the system. Overall, alarms add a high-tech capacity, and greater effectiveness, to the traditional model of deterrence and incapacitation through police rapid response to calls for assistance. This approach is consistent with a number of highly successful public-private crime prevention partnerships on record.

One question that follows from this is whether personal alarm systems preclude the need for home security. High levels of home security can be achieved through target hardening alone. However, penetration of security hardware can go undetected until it is too late. Optimal
conventional security therefore normally involves a monitored alarm. Alarm systems normally require verification via a landline phone or mobile phone, and this can involve delays and confusion. More advanced verification technology through live feed CCTV can provide a partial correction to that problem. Overall, however, personal alarm systems solve this problem through instant activation and instant opening of communication channels. At the same time, when security breaches occur, the effectiveness of alarms is dependent on the quality of the response. Even the best police responses are likely to involve several minutes before officers are on site. Domestic violence alarm activations also need to go into the police triage system, so that responses may go into a queue with prioritisation of more serious cases according to call centre assessments. The whole system is still dependent on police resources, rostering, and the personal commitment of managers and staff.

It would seem then that the best answer to the question about the relative merits of home security and personal alarms is found in the risk management process, including financial cost-benefit calculations. Security enhancements of any kind should be designed on a negotiated basis with the victim, taking all evidence of possible threats into account. Given the often persistent and diverse forms of threats applied to domestic violence victims by offenders, it is likely that a combination of home security improvements and personal alarm services within a coordinated program will be optimal in many cases. (One intermediate measure involves placing home security client information on the police emergency call system database.) Two examples of at least partial integration of home security and personal duress alarms are the Bradford Staying Put Project in the UK and the Staying Home Leaving Violence Program in New South Wales.

The evaluation studies reviewed in this report indicated strongly that the best way to optimise domestic violence risk management processes is through the work of a dedicated program coordinator. This is also consistent with a number of documented successful crime prevention partnerships. The coordinator liaises in a personal and direct way with victims, and develops an integrated risk profile based on information from the victim and other sources such as police and health practitioners. Employment of a coordinator ensures a skilled professional approach to the task, and contributes to program focus and accountability. The coordinator also contributes to program success through liaising with all stakeholders, including police, thereby facilitating their support. The efficiency and effectiveness of the program is also likely to be maximised through stakeholder involvement in a steering committee managed by the coordinator. Stakeholders include police and private security services. The latter usually includes alarm supply and monitoring companies and/or security hardware installers. This part of the partnership arrangement will in most cases by organised on a commercial contract basis. Nonetheless, goodwill and communication are also essential, and there appears to be a strong case for private providers to be members of steering committees.

The present review found that home security and personal alarms offer a promising security-based response for reducing domestic violence in a way that empowers victims and provides tangible and immediate protection. In terms of the wide range of intervention options introduced for domestic violence, security-based methods are the least detached and least abstract for victims and their children. Home security and personal alarms can be seen and felt and managed in the everyday circumstances of people’s lives: in the place where they most want to be safe – their home – but also in the wider and essential world of work, education, shopping and recreation. In addition to evidence of real reductions in threatening behavior and reoffending, these interventions appear to contribute to enormous improvements in feelings of safety, providing a liberating effect in reducing or eliminating psychological stress and fear.

One of the perplexing aspects of the recent and ongoing crisis in Australia around domestic violence is the lack of attention to, and lack of government support for, home security and duress alarm programs. This might in part be an effect of the lack of strict scientific
evidence. However, the available evidence associated with these programs would suggest that there is a strong case for all victims to have access to these forms of protection as part of a citizen’s entitlement to safety (Towns, 2014). Available cost-benefit data also appear to make a powerful case for these alternatives, or additions, to conventional responses.

At the same time, the incomplete but highly promising nature of the evidence means that better research should be the subject of immediate government support. The strongest public policy outcome from the present review therefore involves support for substantive pilot projects in a range of settings around Australia. Adequate funding needs to be made available for either home security or personal alarm projects, or preferably a combination of both, that include adequate resources for evaluation components – including appropriate comparison groups, multiple impact measures and long-term follow up periods.

Overall then, the available evidence indicates that interventions to reduce domestic violence need to occur across a number of domains. One of these involves private security support for police and domestic violence service agencies, especially in the areas of shelter security, home security and personal alarms. Security-based approaches have a large, and largely untapped, role to play in significantly reducing the opportunity for offending – mainly in terms of breaches of protection orders – across a range of settings inside the home and in the wider community. Optimal conditions for success include a coordinated program, a dedicated coordinator, and involvement of all stakeholder groups (including police and private security) within a risk-based system that gives maximum control to women. Mobile personal duress alarms stand out in terms of all-round security. At the same time, the best prospect for a security-based approach to reducing repeat offending over the long-term, and the one that gives greatest control to women, is a combination of a home security program and a duress alarm program.
Background

This report was prepared for the Australian Security Industry Association Limited (www.asial.com.au) by Professor Tim Prenzler and Ms Lauren Fardell. The report was funded by ASIAL with a view to identifying real-world examples of successful contributions from private security to efforts to reduce domestic violence, focusing on security industry support for police-based initiatives. The researchers were also asked to enlarge on the implications for improved practice in this area. The study was initiated as part of a larger program of research assessing the public benefits of private security in terms of crime prevention and support for police, including the contributions of public-private crime prevention partnerships (www.asial.com.au/resources/research-and-statistics). The researchers were given a free hand to follow the evidence trail and draw their own conclusions from the available evidence. Questions about the research process and findings should be directed to Professor Prenzler at tprenzler@usc.edu.au or (07) 5456 5264.

About the Authors

Tim Prenzler is a Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast and an Adjunct Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University. He teaches courses in policing, crime prevention, security management, and criminal justice ethics. His research interests include crime and corruption prevention, police and security officer safety, and gender in policing. His books include Civilian Oversight of Police: Advancing Accountability in Law Enforcement (2016, Taylor & Francis, with Garth den Heyer), Contemporary Police Practice (2015, Oxford University Press, with Jacki Drew), 100 Years of Women Police in Australia (2015, Australian Academic Press), Professional Practice in Crime Prevention and Security Management (2014, Australian Academic Press), Understanding and Preventing Corruption (2013, Palgrave, with Adam Graycar); and Police Corruption: Preventing Misconduct and Maintaining Integrity (2009, Taylor & Francis). He was the recipient of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology Adam Sutton Crime Prevention Research Award in 2013 and 2015.

Lauren Fardell works as a Research Associate at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She has a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice from Griffith University. Previously, she worked as a Probation & Parole Officer for Queensland Corrective Services.

Acknowledgements

The authors are responsible for all content in this report. At the same time, we would like to thank the following people for advice and assistance: Bryan de Caires, Kirsty Jagger, Rachael Mackay and Jill Proudfoot.