

## EVIDENCE-INFORMED INTERVENTION FOR PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE: LESSONS FROM THE FAMILY DRUG AND ALCOHOL COURTS

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### Introduction

Domestic abuse is one of the most significant issues leading to children's services involvement and intervention (Cleaver *et al.*, 2011). When there are allegations of domestic abuse, efforts are made to address safety concerns by referring those responsible for abusive behaviours to perpetrator intervention groups and programmes. However, the dominant models of domestic abuse intervention programmes in the UK lack a strong evidence base: many who enrol become disengaged and drop out, and rates of repeat violence and recidivism are high (Stephens-Lewis *et al.*, 2021).

In 2021, the Home Office called for research into the drivers of domestic abuse and implications for intervention. The Centre for Justice Innovation partnered with the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) – a multidisciplinary, non-adversarial approach to care proceedings for parents with substance misuse issues – to see what could be learned from the FDAC practitioners' experiences of working with domestic abuse. Whilst not a specialist domestic abuse service, the high co-occurrence with substance misuse means that many FDAC families are also affected by domestic abuse. FDAC has been shown to increase the likelihood of children remaining at home and reduce the risk of returning to court (Harwin *et al.*, 2016). However, there has yet to be any specific evaluation of how domestic abuse perpetrators present, engage and progress within FDAC. FDAC brings a trauma-informed perspective to understanding parental difficulties, and as such it was anticipated that studying domestic abuse within FDAC would also shine a light on the inter-relationships between trauma, substance misuse and domestic abuse perpetration.

The research consisted of: (1) a rapid evidence review, exploring the relationships between trauma, substance misuse and domestic abuse perpetration; and (2) interviews with FDAC practitioners and judges exploring their approach to working with domestic abuse perpetrators and their perceptions of the relationships between trauma, substance misuse and domestic abuse perpetration.

### Methodology

*Rapid evidence review:* The rapid evidence review covered articles mentioning substance use, trauma and domestic abuse perpetration from 2001 to 2022. Of note, was the significant increase in publications over this period, suggesting growing interest in these overlapping issues. Due to the limited scope of the review, only systematic review, meta-analytic studies or commentary articles were included. A total of 84 articles were reviewed in depth and a synthesis of the findings was carried out to identify key themes and recommendations for practice.

*Interviews:* Researchers also conducted interviews at four FDAC sites between December 2021 and April 2022. The sample comprised four judges, four team

managers, two clinical leads and ten practitioners. Practitioners had varying specialisms, including social work, probation, mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Of those with domestic abuse specialism, four worked primarily with perpetrators and six with victim-survivors. All judges heard both FDAC and non-FDAC public law proceedings. Interviews were semi-structured and responses were transcribed and coded. The final analysis identified key themes emerging across all sites and highlighted any notable differences.

### **The FDAC approach to care proceedings**

The FDAC model is an alternative problem-solving approach to care proceedings, in which parents are invited to engage with the court and a multi-disciplinary team of professionals to try to address their substance use and other related issues. Parents attend regular non-lawyer hearings with a specially trained judge, where they are encouraged to discuss openly their progress and challenges. Alongside this, the multi-disciplinary team assesses the parents' needs and facilitates their engagement in a tailored intervention plan. All those with parental responsibility, whether using substances or not, are invited to engage in the programme in order to promote the best outcomes for the children. The goal of the intervention is to motivate parents to make changes, whilst also providing the court with a real-time assessment of the parents' progress to inform decision-making (Bambrough *et al.*, 2014).

### **Findings**

The rapid evidence review and the FDAC interviews yielded a rich array of information. Practitioners and judges perceived domestic abuse to be highly prevalent within the FDAC caseload and observed a full spectrum of domestic abuse presentations. Notably, there was remarkable concordance between the perspective of the FDAC professionals and the current evidence base regarding the roles that trauma and substance use play in domestic abuse perpetration, despite the literature review and interviews being carried out largely separately. Moreover, the interdisciplinary, individualised, trauma-informed approaches that the FDAC practitioners endorsed were highly consistent with those emerging from the literature.

The full findings of both the rapid evidence review and the FDAC interviews are detailed in the full report (Webb *et al.*, 2023). In this summary article, we will set out the key findings from the FDAC interviews and then explore the areas of concordance between FDAC practitioners' perspectives and the themes which emerged from the rapid evidence review.

### **Key themes from FDAC interviews**

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