

MARACS and preventing domestic violence

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

How can social care, working with other agencies, best prevent and reduce domestic violence between couples?

A danger some adults face is violence from someone within the home. In Manchester, in order to prevent serious violence or death from domestic violence, a number of organisations (such as the police, social care and health) meet regularly to discuss different people who are at risk. These meetings are known as Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs). The conferences identify a range of services to be offered to people at risk to help them remain safe. In Manchester there are about 100 cases discussed each month.

The MARAC approach was first introduced in 2003 in Cardiff, but is now in common use in England and Wales. This makes it important to understand how well the different organisations are working together, how effective they are in protecting adults at risk, and whether/how the MARACs approach could be improved. In particular, it is important to identify and improve the role of social care agencies and workers in working with other organisations in MARACs to reduce the risks of domestic violence.

Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA) estimates that each high risk domestic violence case costs the taxpayer £20,000 with a total cost of £60 million a year.

This project

- will identify and assess the effectiveness of social care's contribution to the development of MARACs and the protection of adults facing domestic violence, using Manchester as a case study.

It aims to

- describe the contribution of social care agencies to the Manchester MARACs
- evaluate their effectiveness in supporting those at risk, taking the perspective of MARAC representatives and those who have been subject to MARAC procedures
- put forward proposals for the effective and proportionate input of social care into MARAC
- determine potential areas for the future development of the Manchester MARAC and national training in social care around the issue of domestic violence.

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

The role of adult social care in the prevention of domestic violence and abuse within intimate familial relations has received much less attention than that of children's social care and protection. However, this is likely to change following the death of Mary Russell, aged 81, at the hand of her 88-year-old husband. The resulting Serious Case Review reported a lack of knowledge and understanding by agencies in relation to domestic violence in older age.

The government is also consulting on the English definition of domestic violence, and is considering the Welsh government's expansion of the term to include coercive control and the violence perpetrated by a son, daughter or any other person who has a close or blood relationship with the victim/survivor. Regardless of whether or not this amendment to the current definition is made, the debate highlights the link between domestic violence and other aspects of adult abuse and the safeguarding of vulnerable adults.

A key local response to the risk of domestic violence has been the introduction of MARACs (see Box). The MARAC is a multi-agency meeting which has the safety of high risk victims of domestic abuse as its focus. These individuals are identified by use of the CAADA-DASH Risk Indicator Checklist, which includes questions such as: "Has the current incident resulted in injury?"; "Has (...) ever used weapons or objects to hurt you?"; and "Are you very frightened?". The MARAC then provides a forum for key statutory and voluntary agencies – including police, social care and health – to share information about cases, develop a plan to manage risk, protect the public, safeguard children and vulnerable adults and manage perpetrators.

MARACs complement and run parallel to statutory risk management/public protection arrangements provision such as the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), as set out in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 to manage the most serious violent and sexual offenders, and also statutory safeguarding provisions for children and vulnerable adults.

The aims of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARACs)

The first MARAC was established in Cardiff in 2003 as part of a response designed to improve services to victims of domestic abuse, working alongside the Specialist Domestic Violence Courts.

MARACs have since been introduced across England and Wales and at present there are in the region of 250 MARACs in existence.

The aims of a MARAC are:

- to prevent homicide/protect victims and children
- to ensure accountability for perpetrators
- to improve multi-agency work
- to provide access to support in a timely way.

MARACs began in Greater Manchester in January 2006. Each police division holds a monthly MARAC meeting and from April 2010 to March 2011 a total of 949 cases were discussed. Referrals must meet the criteria of 14 ticks out of a possible 24 on the Risk Indicator Checklist, three police call outs within the previous month, or professional judgement that referral is needed. Around 16 different agencies attend each MARAC meeting including: police, probation, health, social care, drugs services and alcohol services, accident and emergency, midwifery, housing, children services, education, Women's Aid, independent domestic violence advisors, Victim Support and the Fire Service. Currently not attending are mental health services and representation from LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) or BME (black and minority ethnic) groups.

Manchester's MARAC strategy focuses on children and young people. This leaves a gap in the strategy concerning adult social care, which this project aims to address.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

STAGE 1: Literature review

Initial assessments of the literature suggest that the effectiveness of the MARAC process has

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received little attention and that adult service user perspectives are missing from accounts that do exist.

A structured literature review will be undertaken on the topic of coordinated community responses to domestic violence. This will cover the effectiveness of MARACs, processes, implementation of assessment methods, and the experiences and perceptions of service users. It will also identify gaps in the evidence base.

STAGE 2: Analysis of MARAC data

CAADA and Manchester MARAC collect data during the course of their work which will be made available for analysis. The project will use this material to compile statistics on who refers to MARACs, who attends MARACs, and the characteristics/variables of domestic violence cases.

However, under national reporting requirements the data that Manchester MARACs hold is limited to: number of referrals by ethnicity (limited categories), gender, referral agency and post-code/locality of case. They also hold information on repeat referrals and re-referrals (revised concerns with old or closed cases, such as perpetrators being released from custody). They do not categorise cases by age, disability or any potential health or social care needs. As part of its work, this project intends to highlight the need for more detailed MARACs reporting data.

STAGE 3: Qualitative interviews

A sample of 20 service users (families/individuals) who have been through the MARAC system will be interviewed, selected from one month's referrals and chosen to ensure the perspectives of different groups are represented.

Issues to be explored include:

- individuals' feelings about their involvement in the process
- their experiences of support resulting from a MARAC referral
- what changes have occurred as a result of the MARAC referral
- what worked well and what could be done

differently to improve matters.

Interviews with service users will be repeated after six months, offering a more reflective opportunity to consider the process and any progress in their protection/safety.

A set of interview questions for agency representatives including attending, non-attending and potentially attending agencies (e.g. LGBTI, BME, voluntary, community and refugee groups) will be developed, based on findings from the statistical data and key research objectives. Around 20 semi-structured interviews will explore:

- barriers to attendance at MARACs
- services that can be offered to MARAC subjects
- changes that have occurred in practice through attending MARAC
- the role of social care in supporting adults who face domestic violence.

STAGE 4: Data analysis

From an analysis of the project's data, the team aims to identify the contribution of social care to MARACs in Manchester and evaluate their effectiveness from the perspective of MARAC subjects and agencies.

The research will then identify proposals for the input of social care into MARACs and potential areas for the future development of the Manchester MARAC, which could have implications nationally. Findings will also consider national training for social care workers and others in conjunction with CAADA.

Project publications

A multi-method approach to knowledge transfer will be undertaken including: a launch event of the findings with Manchester MARAC agency representatives, regional social and health care agencies in the statutory, voluntary, independent and private sectors; an accessible full report and executive summary; discussion with CAADA on potential training needs and the best way of circulating the executive summary and promoting its findings and recommendations to all MARACs in England; presentations to relevant conferences, professional; and peer reviewed journal articles.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

The project addresses the question: how can social care, perhaps linked with other organisations, best prevent and reduce domestic violence between intimate partners? For practitioners this is an area of some uncertainty and the research aims to raise awareness of this issue and clarify proportionate and effective social care input.

This research aims to identify issues which need to be addressed to improve knowledge of, and responses to, situations where other care needs alongside domestic violence are present. It should provide evidence for senior social care managers on their agencies' commitment and role in MARAC, how this relates to adult safeguarding procedures and what workforce training may be required. This will involve, in part, MARAC subjects and agencies identifying what they view as the role of social care and how this could be made more effective in this under-developed field of practice.

It will also be of relevance to people with care needs who are suffering, or know someone who is suffering, domestic violence as it will identify the procedures used by the police, health and social care statutory and voluntary agencies in seeking to manage high risk cases.

The Research Team

The Manchester Metropolitan University project team has considerable research experience in qualitative and quantitative approaches and the involvement of service users in research.

Hugh McLaughlin, Professor of Social Work at the Department of Social Work and Social Change, will be responsible for strategic project and budget management, and quality assurance of the reports. He will participate in the development and analysis of semi-structured questionnaires and undertake interviews where appropriate while also leading on the knowledge transfer plan.

Rachel Robbins, a Senior Lecturer, will lead on developing the research instruments, data analysis and share the report writing. She, along with the other research team members will undertake interviews with MARAC subjects and agency representatives.

Claire Bellamy, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, is an ex MARAC conference chair and will take responsibility for the involvement of ex-MARAC subjects in the construction of the interview schedules and contributions to the data analysis and final report.

Dr Concetta Banks, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, will lead on the literature review and contribute to data collection and analysis.

Project title:

To identify, and assess the effectiveness of, social care's, contribution to the development of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) and the protection of adults facing domestic violence

Timescale:

1 July 2012 to
31 March 2014

Budget:

£73,881

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