Psychology grad continues research into intimate partner violence

Edmonton—Carissa Toop has been fascinated with the darker side of the human mind for about as long as she can remember. “Even in junior high I wanted to understand people, especially people whom I couldn’t relate to,” says Toop. So true crime books always topped her Christmas list, and when it came time to choose a post-secondary path, psychology just made sense.

Toop’s longstanding interest in offender populations and mental health issues would eventually lead to an honours research project that would have her working alongside one of the most sophisticated integrated law enforcement teams in Alberta. “The literature on intimate partner violence, or domestic violence focuses on figuring out the different types of offenders, what their personality traits are and the presence of mental illness, but no one has actually looked at assessing the level of risk associated with each group and comparing it with the different types of offenders,” explains Toop.

After a lengthy security check that involved a three-hour interview, Toop spent last summer compiling data to look at intimate partner violence through a new lens. From a desk at Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams’ (ALERT’s) Integrated Threat and Risk Centre (I-TRAC), she read through and coded 105 intimate-partner domestic violence case files, and then used the data to look at two types of offenders, proactive and reactive, and their risk to reoffend.

Toop found that proactive offenders, those who plan their violence rather act violently out of anger, have a higher risk to reoffend. Now, Toop is looking beyond risk, and accessing the I-TRAC databases to collect data and investigate whether offenders actually did reoffend.

“I didn’t even see myself doing research when I started my program, but now I’m extending work on this project beyond my degree because I’m so invested in finding out the results,” says Toop. “I never expected that I would be involved in a project that had so many meaningful implications and could make such a difference in the way people look at a group of offenders.”

Toop plans on working as a research assistant for a year, and taking a break from her studies while she puts together her grad school applications.