

Resource summary – coercive control (for police, CJS, social work)

“Coercive or controlling behaviour does not relate to a single incident. It is often a purposeful pattern of incidents which takes place over time in order for one individual to exert power, control or coercion over another.” ([Home Office statutory guidance, 2015, p3](#))

“Not only is coercive control the most common context in which [women] are abused, it is also the most dangerous” ([Evan Stark, in Home office statutory guidance, 2015, p3](#))

Research and training

[Barlow’s research](#) (2019) found that police were less likely to identify scenarios involving coercive control with no physical violence as high risk, instead focusing on physical violence

- Officer suggested that they lacked knowledge and understanding of coercive control, which influenced their responses.
- Victims suggested that the police response focused on the individual event rather than the broader consequences/long term safety implications
- Victims also reported problematic responses from other agencies, highlighting that learning opportunities for coercive control should extend to other agencies as well as the police
- The training tool developed from this project was [piloted by Merseyside police](#) in June 2018 (evaluation not readily available). It is also suitable for other partner agencies to inform practice and understanding of coercive control. Designed as face to face training aid but could be adapted as a resource or library for trainers to suit requirements
- More police training is required to assist with identification of controlling and coercive behaviour, particularly where there is a lack of physical violence. When physical violence is absent, the police response is less proactive.

Research in practice has numerous informative resources which include resources relating to coercive control. Designed for ‘social workers and other health and social care practitioners to develop their knowledge and skills in working with situations of coercive control’

Resources available [here](#) include:

- Tools for professional development
- Tools for supporting effective, reflective practice
- Background reading and information
- Case studies with learning activities which can be adapted and used in your own CPD programme

Training for police [developed by Safelives](#) (Domestic Abuse Matters - in collaboration with the College of Policing and Women's Aid) is also available. Evaluations with 4 police force areas showed that after training, 95% felt very/extremely competent at understanding tactics that perpetrators demonstrate when coercively controlling victims (compared to 21% prior to training).

In 2016, the [College of Policing](#) published an evaluation of training for first responding officers that focused on coercive control and responding to domestic abuse (Wire and Myhill, 2016). This training formed part of a wider programme: Domestic Abuse (DA) Matters. The evaluation found a positive impact on some indicators of officer knowledge and understanding of coercive control, but not for others; there was no impact on officer attitudes to domestic abuse. In response to the findings of the evaluation, aspects of the training content and delivery methods were revised for further piloting and evaluation.

More recent [research \(2021\)](#) found that this training for police was associated with a 41% increase in arrest for the crime of controlling or coercive behaviour, with the increase in arrests consistent with the timing of the training. 'This study provides evidence that training entire police forces to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, including the new offence of coercive control, is effective in increasing the rate of arrest for coercive control. However, the number of coercive control arrests as a proportion of total domestic abuse arrests remains miniscule' (page 1).

Evidencing coercive control

The Serious Crime Act 2015 created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in intimate or family relationships (section 76).

- evidence/proof is needed 1) for behaviour that is continuous or repeated and 2) has a serious effect, either by making the victim fear that serious violence will be used against them, or by causing serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on their usual day to day activities.
- Understanding the link between ongoing abuse in intimate relationships and trauma is crucial in terms of evidencing and proving

Police have had difficulty identifying coercive control. This offence category introduces uncertainty in relation to an officer's typical approach to IPV and challenges their approach as responses to 'one-off incidents'. This requires re-framing of an officer's typical approach from responding and taking stock of crime 'incidents' as isolated events towards looking to a series of interrelated events and the harm that flows from these. (Barlow et al, 2020).

[Barlow et al's \(2020\)](#) research on police response to the s76 offence found that cases which did result in a charge for coercive control incorporated evidence such as previous convictions for domestic abuse, admissions of guilt, substantial physical evidence (such as criminal damage or a physical injury, the presence of surveillance technology (eg in cars or on mobile phones) and police body-worn camera footage).

Training is needed for police and court professionals on the impact of trauma upon memory processes which impacts the ability of an individual to recount an event in a coherent and sufficiently detailed way, which significantly impairs their ability to present as a credible and reliable witness

Police decisions to charge and CPS decisions to prosecute are strongly influenced by perceptions of witness credibility, either in terms of not believing the victim's account or concluding there is 'no realistic prospect of conviction' because of the way the witness will come across in court

Suggestions for evidencing

- Police body worn cameras as a further source of evidence
- Use of 999 calls
- Further police training on abusive relationships, including the impact of trauma on victims
- Police to see third party witness statements (eg from friends, family and professionals)
- Consider cases proceeding without witness testimony, or without this being the sole piece of evidence
- Use of pre-trial witness interviews – to give witnesses the opportunity to explain any apparent discrepancies or inconsistencies in their account prior to trial – this has improved crown prosecutor's perceptions of credibility ahead of trial
- Special measures for courts to mitigate the fear the complainant has about giving a live testimony – for example video recorded evidence, screens, live links – so that complainant does not have to face perpetrator in court

Contact us at Ni3 if you need assistance with training in your organisation – we may be able to help – Gill Kirkman (g.e.kirkman@hud.ac.uk) or Jo Hulley (j.hulley@hud.ac.uk)