



# WHO IS THE VICTIM?

**Identifying victims and perpetrators  
in cases of coercive control**

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# Headline Findings

## Quantitative data

- Of the 2320 recorded coercive control offences in our partner force from 2019–2021 inclusive, there were 306 instances of an arrest. Arrests increased year on year: 65 in 2019; 88 in 2020, and 133 in 2021.
- The victim was recorded as female in 2085 out of 2320 incidents (89.9%).
- Coercive and controlling behaviour was recorded as the primary offence (the most serious and substantive offence) in 2248 cases (96.8%).
- Risk assessments were conducted in 2055 (88%) cases. Out of these, 612 (29.78%) were high risk, 824 (40%) were medium and 617 (30%) were standard risk. High risk gradings were more common when there was an arrest (58%) compared to non-arrest (25%).
- The most common outcome for these cases over this time period was outcome 16, (where there are evidential difficulties with the victim not supporting further action). This was the outcome in 1477 cases (63%). The second most common outcome was outcome 15, (where there is insufficient evidence to progress a case which is supported by the victim). This was the outcome in 522 cases (22%).

## Case file analysis

Fifty-eight cases (a random sample of arrest and non-arrest cases) were examined in detail. Out of these cases:

- 55 included some form of positive action and in 43 cases, more than one type of positive action was put into place.
- In 5 cases, the aggravating factors of drugs and alcohol were present for the suspect. These cases were less likely to result in positive police action.
- The nature of the evidence provided by the victim, especially in relation to details of the abuse, appeared to have an impact upon Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision making.
- There were five cases in which the male had called the police suggesting that the woman had harmed them or committed criminal damage. In all these cases, the female was still recorded as the victim.

## Victim-survivor interviews

- All 10 participants' stories indicate how perpetrators manipulate the criminal justice system (system abuse) to further entrap them.
- Four victim-survivors also highlighted how notions of the ideal victim, alongside potential system abuse, might have impacted on the decision-making process of police officers in their cases.
- Five participants raised questions about how they were perceived by the police because they had either fought back or resisted their partner in some way.
- Six talked of the presence of alcohol in their case, which they believed had contributed to no further action being taken.
- Five victim-survivors expressed concerns that the police officers they had had contact with had failed to consider the 'bigger picture' and had just focused on the immediate incident.
- Five also expressed the view that their experiences would not encourage them to report their experiences to the police in the future.

## Police interviews

- Out of the 13 interviews, 12 discussed the importance of safeguarding and providing positive action.
- Several officers discussed the challenges posed for them in using the DASH risk assessment framework as an appropriate tool for capturing experiences of coercive and controlling behaviour.
- Eight of our respondents talked of the importance of 'digging deeper': the need to look beyond the immediate incident and to take time to understand the wider context in which the incident had occurred.
- Eight respondents recognised the potential for misidentifying the primary aggressor.

# Background and rationale for this project.

Domestic abuse (DA) is a key priority for all UK based police forces with the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) adding emphasis to this. However, the gender-neutral assumptions underpinning this Act and other existing DA legislation stands in stark contrast to the extensive evidence base highlighting the gendered nature of domestic abuse (Stark, 2007; Dobash and Dobash, 2015). This gender-neutral approach to the law has particular significance for coercive control which has been evidenced as a highly gendered crime (see inter alia Stark, 2007; Barlow et al, 2020; Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

Police officers are required to respond to DA in this difficult legal context which can create various challenges. To be specific, when gendered understandings of DA and coercive control are not explicit in official legislation, identifying the primary perpetrator and victim can be rendered more difficult, particularly as perpetrators of coercive control can be highly manipulative in presenting the circumstances of their behaviour. Elsewhere this has been found to lead to dual arrests (Tolmie, 2018), the misidentification of the primary perpetrator (Reeves, 2021), and/or the denial of victim status for women. The potential of such outcomes has been found to have implications for marginalised women, women of colour, and migrant women (Nancarrow, 2019, Graca, 2021). These issues are particularly pertinent in coercive control cases, where physical evidence may not always be evident, and the identification of victim and perpetrator is often reliant on the testimony of those present at the time. Work on the misidentification of the primary perpetrator and dual arrests has been conducted in other jurisdictions, such as the US and Australia but there is limited work of this kind in England and Wales (Reeves 2021). Furthermore, there is no empirical work which considers these issues in relation to coercive control and how officers gather evidence to support their decisions on who the victim is, and any subsequent actions taken. This project endeavoured to address this gap in knowledge in support of the key N8 PRP priorities of understanding the operationalisation of vulnerability, victim engagement and support. The project was framed by the following questions:

1. How are the victim and perpetrator identified by police officers in coercive control cases? When the victim and perpetrator are identified, what informs the actions taken (or not) by police officers?
2. How do victim/ survivors feel about the ways in which victims and perpetrators are identified during the police frontline response? If they have been (in)correctly identified as a victim/perpetrator how did that impact upon their subsequent engagement in the investigation process? How might the process of victim identification be improved, if at all?

# Project Design

The project used mixed methods and involved four stages:

- Quantitative data relating to domestic abuse incidents was gathered covering 2019-2022.
- A deep dive analysis of 58 coercive control case files
- 10 interviews with victim-survivors ranging from 1 to 2 hours in length.
- 13 interviews with police officers of varying ranks and engagement with domestic abuse.

The purpose of this four-stage approach was to ensure that as far as possible, the qualitative data gathered could be appropriately situated and made sense of against the backcloth of quantitative data. The quantitative data was gathered to provide a bigger picture of the emergent policing response trends evident in the partner force in relation to the offence of coercive control.

It should be noted that this project was faced with a number of challenges in the data gathering process. For example, the establishment of data sharing agreements took longer than anticipated delaying the start of the project by 2 months; ethical approval also took longer than anticipated because of the volume of work going through the University of Liverpool's ethics procedure; vetting for the research assistant became caught up in the national backlog; and there were additional challenges in recruiting participants for the interview stages of the project. This was a problem in recruiting both victim-survivors and police officers though for different reasons. Operational requirements impacted upon the availability and recruitment of police officers for interview, with victim-survivor support services suggesting to us that there was evidence of a general saturation effect on securing victim-survivors' engagement with research.

Such difficulties notwithstanding those who did participate in this project provided some valuable insights in sharing their views and experiences. In what follows these are discussed in more depth.

# Responding to Coercive Control: Quantitative Data Overview

## Recorded data

The partner force provided data on recorded cases of coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) over a 3 year period, 2019 to 2021. There was also 9 months of data for 2022. In the time frame of 3 years and 9 months, the findings show that the recorded rate for CCB has risen each year during the studies time frame, from 647 in 2019, to 731 in 2020, up to 811 in 2021 (see Table 1). This is in concert with the findings of Brennan and Myhill (2022) and the data of the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2019; 2020; 2021).

This data was analysed in relation to several factors: sex of victims/survivors, proportion of CCB recorded as primary or secondary offence, risk level, number of those resulting in a charge (arrested), and amount of type 15 and type 16 outcomes. Table 2 presents an overview of this data.

## Key messages:

- Out of the 2320 recorded offences, there was 306 instances where an arrest took place. The number of arrests increased as follows: 65 in 2019; 88 in 2020, and 133 in 2021.
- Out of 306 cases where an arrest took place and sex was recorded, the vast majority (296) were female victims, 6 were male victims and 1 was other. There were 176 cases where an associated victim was recorded. 82 of these were

females and 90 were male. All were under the age of 16 and it is likely they are the children of either the suspect and/or primary victim.

- Out of the 2014 cases where an arrest did not take place and sex was recorded, most (1816) were female victims, 166 were male victims and 1 was other. There were 929 associated victims, who were mainly female (859), 50 were male.
- Irrespective of if an arrest took place or not, most suspects were male (297 and 1721 respectively), and a small proportion (8 and 67 respectively) were female.
- Most primary victims when an arrest took place were White British (n 205). The next highest group was Pakistani (n19), then any other Asian background (n9), any other white background (n8); Indian (n6), any other mixed heritage background (n2); any other ethnic group (n2); African (1); Bangladeshi (n1); Chinese (n1) White and black Caribbean (n1); and White Irish (n1). Suspects were also mainly White British (n297) and Pakistani was the next highest group (n 30).

## Coercive control as the primary offence

Out of the 306 cases where an arrest took place, CCB was recorded as the primary offence in 284 cases. Out of these, 31 cases were recorded as CCB only. The rest (253) also

Table One: Recorded CCB 2019 – 2021; from partner force

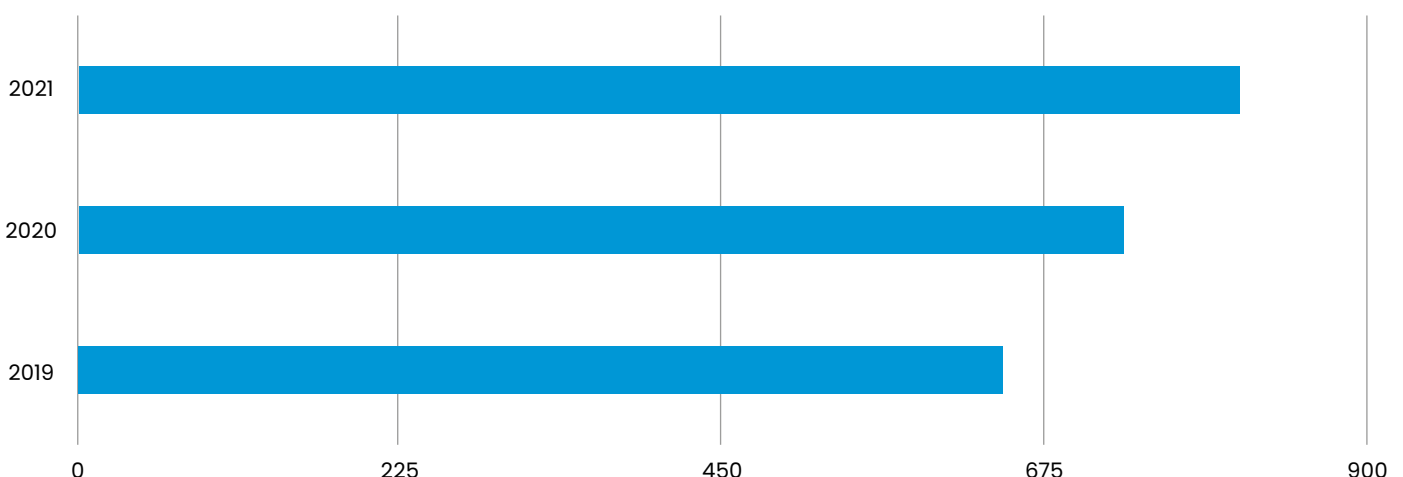
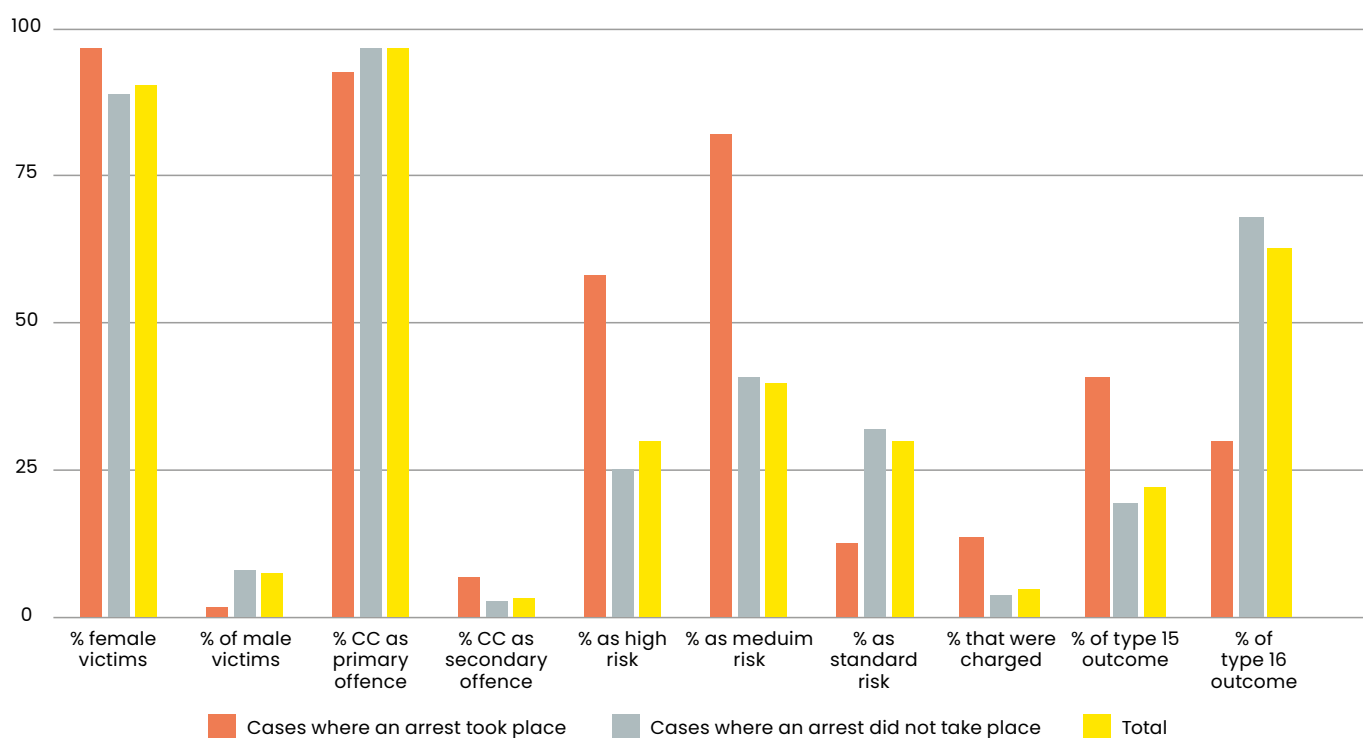


Table Two: Overview of data from partner force



included a type of harassment (n8), and assault without injury (common assault and battery) (n3) or non-crimes. Non crimes included domestic abuse investigation (n 243), vulnerable child (n 40), vulnerable adult (15), honour-based investigation or abuse (n3) and hate due to sexual orientation (n 1). Sometimes these crossed over and thus some records would include, for example, both vulnerable adult and vulnerable child.

In the 2014 cases where an arrest did not take place, 1964 were cases where coercive control was recorded as the primary offence. Out of these, 1398 cases were recorded as coercive control only. The rest (n 623) also included a type of harassment (64), arson and criminal damage (n6), sending letters with intent to cause distress or anxiety (n 4), assault without injury (n 4), assault with injury (6), threats to destroy or damage property (n 2), threats to kill (n 1), fraud and forgery (n 1), theft (n 1) and threat or possession with intent to commit criminal damage (n 1). Non crimes were also recorded as intersecting, including domestic abuse investigation (n 1722), honour-based abuse or investigation, including forced marriage (n 19), hate disability (n 2), mental health investigation (n 1).

**Coercive control as the secondary offence**

Out of the 306 cases where an arrest took place there was 22 cases where CCB was not recorded as the primary offence. In these cases the most common primary offence was different types of harassment (n 12), then assaults with injury (n 4), rape (n 2), threats to kill (2) and the lowest was assault with intent to cause serious harm (n 1) and assault without injury (n 1) or non-crimes. Non crimes included domestic abuse investigation (n 32), vulnerable child, or child at risk (n 3), and vulnerable adult (n 4).

In the 2014 cases where an arrest did not take place, there was 57 cases where coercive control was not recorded as the primary offence. The most common primary offence was different types of harassment (n 37), then arson and criminal damage (n8), assault without injury (n 6), assault with injury (n3), financial and fraud investigation (n 3), stalking involving fear of violence (n 3), rape (n 2), other criminal damage (n1), threats to kill (n 1), theft (n1).

**Risk assessment**

From the 306 cases where an arrest took place, a DASH risk assessment was undertaken in most cases (n 283 or 92%). Out of these, there was 165 (58%) cases where a high risk had been identified, 82 (28.9%) cases where medium risk was given, and 36 (12.7%) cases which were graded as standard risk. For the 2021 cases that did not lead to an arrest there was 1772 risk assessments carried out. From these there was 447 (25%) high risk, 742 (41%) medium risk and 581 (32%) standard risk, and 2 (0.11%) where no apparent risk was identified. The total of number of risk assessments carried out across both sets of data was 2055 (88%). Out of these, 612 (29.78%) were high risk, 824 (40%) were medium and 617 (30%) were standard risk. The data suggests that most cases (irrespective of arrest) were graded as medium risk.

**Case Outcomes**

Each crime is accompanied by an 'outcome' which describes how it was resolved. During the period of this study, crimes could result in one of 22 separate outcomes (Home Office, 2021). Of particular relevance to this study are the outcomes in which the victim does (type 15) and does not (type 16) support further police action. In the 305 cases where an

arrest took place, the most common outcome was type 15 (n125 or 40.9%), followed by type 16 (n93 or 30%). Out of the 2014 cases where an arrest did not take place, the most common outcome was type 16 (n1384 or 68%), followed by type 15 (n 397 or 19.6%).

### Case File Analysis

A random sample of arrest and non-arrest cases of CCB (58 cases in total) were subjected to deeper analysis in which the following themes were identified.

#### Positive action

Out of the 58 cases analysed, most (n=55) included some form of positive action. Examples of 'positive action' included charge (32), suspect being placed in police custody (3), non-molestation order (3), changing locks (4), vulnerable DV markers on address (6) and panic alarm installation (2). There were also referrals to Independent Domestic Violence Advisor services (27), MARAC (13), health services (14) and education services when children were present (9). Often (n=43) more than one type of positive action was put into place. When victim-survivors did not want to pursue a prosecution, non-criminal justice positive action, such as applying for restraining orders or Domestic Violence Protection Orders, were put in place. This suggests that the frontline officer is prioritising safeguarding and positive action in cases of coercive control.

#### Drugs and alcohol as aggravating factors

In 5 cases, aggravating factors were identified as the presence of drugs and alcohol for the suspect. The case file analysis suggests that while the perpetrator's intoxication seemed not to have impacted on police decision making, the victim's intoxication did have an influence. These cases were less likely to result in positive police action. The victim-survivor interviews also raised this (see below).

#### Coercive controlling behaviour and prosecution

The chance of a successful prosecution for CCB did not seem to impact on any positive action taken by the police at the partner force, but the nature of the evidence provided by the victim-survivor did seem to impact upon Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision making. When analysing the CPS outcome files on the cases which led to a charge, a common theme was the extent to which the victim could provide specific details (including dates of abuse) in support of the charge. This is difficult to provide for coercive and controlling behaviour, where particular dates or incidents cannot always be identified. In addition, the behaviour of the victim and perpetrator at the time the incident occurred also seems to have impacted on the CPS decision-making process. For example, if the victim-survivor or perpetrator were angry or aggressive during the police call out, or if either party was under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

#### Misidentification of the primary aggressor

The case file data suggests females are not necessarily arrested or misidentified as a perpetrator when a male accuses them of violence. There were five examples of cases where the male called the police, suggesting that the woman had harmed them or committed criminal damage. In all these cases, after further investigation the female was still

recorded as the victim and male as the perpetrator, with appropriate safeguarding put in place for the victim-survivor. This suggests that officers are increasingly aware of the manipulative tactics of coercive and controlling behaviour (supported in our interviews with police officers). However, identifying the primary perpetrator was acknowledged as a potential issue by the police officers interviewed as part of this study and was experienced by some of the victim-survivors interviewed. This is discussed further below.



# Listening to Victim-Survivors

Ten victim-survivors who all identified as female, had experienced a policing response from our partner force and received support from local domestic abuse support services participated in this project. They were recruited with the assistance of local support services and the interviews were conducted in the place and by the method chosen by the participants themselves with their ongoing safety in mind. Four main themes emerged from these interviews; their experience of systems abuse, their experience of not meeting with ideal conceptions of victimhood; the presence of alcohol and the impact this had on their contact with the police, and their views of the role that an incident-led approach by the police had on them leading to a loss of faith in the police. Importantly these themes were rarely isolated from each other. For all of these victim-survivors, their experiences illustrate the complex ways in which these different issues overlap and inform each other. They are presented separately here as a heuristic device only.

## Systems abuse

All 10 participants stories indicate how perpetrators manipulate the criminal justice system (system abuse) to further entrap them. For example, participant 7 stated *“He called the police on me, but this was all part of his plan. To make me out to be the bad one”*. She goes on to discuss how he held her against the wall by her throat on this one occasion and then a few hours later, the police turned up at the door. It then became clear he had called the police on her. She says

*“I just couldn’t believe it. I just went absolutely silent. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. I was so desperate to speak, say something, but the only way I can describe it is I was shell shocked. They were asking me stuff, but I had nothing to say. She went onto say ‘He thought he had won, knew that he had got in there first with the police. He would say things like ‘what will you do now? The police will never believe you’, and I just thought he was right”*

Likewise, participant 4 said,

*“I will be honest and say there was actually a few times when I thought he’s won the police over as well, they think I am the abuser. You know, he made things up, switched things around on me, made me look aggressive. The neighbours called a few times and this definitely happened then. But they just said go your separate ways tonight, let the alcohol go out of your system and that...”*

Later she goes on to say:

*“You know when they come out to me earlier in the year, I had a massive lump on my head where he had pushed me and they just didn’t really do anything. And this is because I had had a drink and he had made out I had done it myself and I had been in a ‘crazy rage’ and they just believed what he said”*

For this participant, as for a number of other victim-survivors interviewed, the inter-play between the presence of alcohol and their experience of control, manipulation and how they were viewed as victims, as stated above, were frequently intertwined.

## Ideal victimhood.

Four victims highlighted how notions of the ideal victim, alongside potential system abuse, might have impacted on the decision-making process of police officers in their cases. For these victim-survivors no action was taken by the police suggesting to them that they had not been recognised as the victim. For instance participant 2 reports how she was hysterical when the police arrived, either because she was ‘terrified’ or because the perpetrator had called the police on her:

*“I think because from the off I didn’t act like your typical victim, they instantly didn’t see me that way. You know the times when they did come out, I was either hysterical because I didn’t call them and I was terrified of what he may do, or angry because he called them on me when he was the one who had been violent, or when I did call, I felt like they had already made up their mind it was just an argument or we were both to blame”*

Fighting back was also discussed by participant 5:

*“And I think a lot of that is because of the type of person I am. I would fight back, I would resist, but it was only ever to react to what he did to me. His violence to me was repeated, it was purposeful, he wanted to hurt me, there was malice and evil there. But yeah, I think the type of person I am meant that the police never really saw what I was going through as coercive control. I think they thought we were both as bad as each other. Like I say, because I was either quiet and didn’t say anything if they blindsided me, or I was angry when they turned up as I just didn’t want them there, I think they just had an idea of who I was in their head and it wasn’t a victim. So I think that influenced everything really”*

Further participant 2 recalls;

*"I pushed him to get him away from me, and he kind of hit into this cabinet a bit on the top of his back, and I just said if you do anything to me I will call the police. And he said I wouldn't, and I just said I will, I've had enough. Anyway, he sort of walked off into another room at first then I didn't think anything of it. Just thought he had let things cool off a bit. Anyway, after about half an hour or so, the police showed up at my house again and I was panicking thinking the neighbours had called and he would threaten me again or whatever. But they came to the door and it was clear that he had called the police about me pushing him. I was shouting again, saying I can't believe they dared come in and question me about this. They were telling me to calm down again and I was just so so angry. God knows how I must have looked, like a screaming banshee I bet. And it was weird, because I wanted to try and explain what he was like with me, but because so much of it I didn't even realise was abuse at the time, its only since I've been going to (xx) Centre that I see it as that, I couldn't really say what it was like in my relationship with him. The only thing I could try and explain was the time he tried to strangle me, so I started telling them about that. But I just didn't feel like they fully believed me. They just basically said 'look, you're telling us one thing, he's saying another, it was him that called us"*

This participant clearly took the view that her behaviour when the police were present contributed to their unwillingness to hear her point of view. Failing to meet the expectations of the 'typical' victim, as participant 2 stated, either by fighting back, being 'hysterical', shouting, or engaging in responses other than being fearful were added to when alcohol was present.

### The presence of alcohol

The presence of alcohol and its impact was mentioned by 6 victim-survivors. In their view this contributed to no action being taken against the perpetrator. For example, participant 2 told us how the perpetrator manipulated officers by using her intoxication:

*"He chucked a scarf at me and told me to hide where his hands had been and got right in my face and said 'you need to make them go away otherwise you know what will happen'. Needless to say, I was terrified by this point. So they came to the door, I answered and I must have just looked insane. I had had a drink anyway as I say, but I was just shouting saying 'why are you here', they explained a neighbour had called as they had heard loads of aggressive shouting and banging around. I said they didn't know what they were talking about, everything was fine. But then when they tried to ask more questions I just got more and more angry, telling them to go, nothing was going on. And he just stood there, calm as anything, apologising for my behaviour. Saying I was drunk and I sometimes have these kinds of episodes when I'm drunk. The male police officer that was there then basically told me to 'calm down and control myself' and eventually told him 'can you please control your partner here"*

Likewise, participant 8 describes how her intoxication prevented action in her view:

*"(...)again we had usually both been drinking so the police just basically said 'you go to a friends house' to me, he stayed at the house and basically said sleep on it until the morning. I basically just think we got this reputation as a couple that is always at each other with the police and they never really took what was going on seriously"*

Participant 6 also spoke about how alcohol prevented action:

*"So its like, because he could tell we had both been drinking it was, 'you've both been drinking, had an argument, sleep on it' but it wasn't that straight forward. It never was. alcohol was a big factor. I think when alcohol is involved, they instantly think its six of one, half a dozen of the other and just 'you go that way, you go that way', but again, for me, I was stuck in that position and I couldn't get out"*

The interplay between perpetrator manipulation, the presence of alcohol and the victim's behaviour at the time of the police response, is evident in all these reported experiences.

### An incident-based approach

Five victim-survivors expressed concerns that the police officers they had contact with failed to consider the bigger picture and just focused on the immediate incident they were presented with. For example, participant 7 said:

*"I think they just treat it like any other situation they go out to. They look at what's in front of them and not beyond that. But coercive control isn't something you can see really. It so complicated, unique to the people and involved and even though I've had lots of support in understanding what happened to me I still can't quite get my head around it, and I lived it. So a police officer chatting to you for an hour or usually less isn't going to get it are they? So I think straight away there is that difficulty of trying to explain all of this to a police officer which puts women off. Well it did me anyway, where on earth do you start? And I think there is also a reluctance to understand the harms of it. It can all sound a bit trivial can't it? Its only when you look at it all together you can start to put the pieces of the puzzle together. But are the police realistically going to do that every time? I don't think so"*

Similarly, participant 3 tells us:

*But they asked me a few questions, which I know now was some sort of risk assessment I think? Anyway, they basically asked me some questions, but they didn't really probe anything at all. Like they didn't ask me about anything else in the relationship, they didn't give me an opportunity to properly share what had been going on. They asked to see any of my injuries, but I didn't really have anything visible, as a punch in the stomach doesn't always leave an immediate bruise, but I was explaining to them that I was in pain. But also, now I know it isn't really just about that. Why wernt they asking me more about the jealousy or the shouting that had led to that point ? (...)But they never really gave me the opportunity to talk about the whole relationship, especially the last time when to me it was clear that I wanted to, I just didn't know how to explain it. So yeah, I think because of the drink and my behaviour on the times before they had come out, they just saw us as*

*both bad rather than it being one sided , which is what he actually was."*

The cumulative effect of these experiences meant that for 5 of the women we interviewed, there were consequences primarily expressed in their willingness to be involved with the police in the future.

### **Losing faith in the police.**

Five participants expressed some unwillingness to contact the police in the future based on their experiences. For example, participant 1 told us how she would have no contact with them and did not think she ever would:

*"...no I've had no more contact with them and I don't think I ever will if I can help it. They had their own idea of who we were and what this relationship was, both as bad as each other maybe and that in the end, but it wasn't and they didn't bother asking about that."*

Participant 2 told us that after being 'shut down' before she had a chance to talk because they had assumed she was the aggressor after her partner had called the police on her said:

*"I wouldn't go to the police after that, I don't want to feel like I'm stupid again, which is how they made me feel."*

Participant 3 tells us that following situations when the perpetrator 'won the police over' by 'switching things around on me, made me look aggressive', hoped she never has to contact the police again:

*"I hope I never have to contact them again. I really would never want to, as what's the point? They have done more harm than good for me. For me, the civil route has been better, the non-molestation order. Minimal involvement of the police. They just brought pain and heartache for me"*

In sum, the experiences reported here resonate much of what is already known about the difficulties for victim-survivors in their relationship with policing in particular and criminal justice processes more generally. The role that alcohol, drugs and mental health in both framing and mediating victim-survivor experiences and responses to perpetrators has been well-documented (see inter alia Gadd et al, 2019). More recently greater awareness of legal systems abuse (Douglas, 2018) especially in the context of coercive control has become increasingly apparent with the powerful impact of conceptions of ideal victim victimhood well-known (Gribaldo, 2021, Goodmark, 2023). The tensions between incident-led policing responses and the process informed experiences of women are not a new observation (see inter alia Genn, 1988). The cumulative effect of losing faith in the police is also not a new observation. However, what these testimonies strongly illustrate here is the powerful way in which all these factors interact and compound one another for the victim-survivor when faced with a manipulative perpetrator and an incident focused policing response. Importantly these experiences are not separate nor separable into individual variables but are experienced **holistically**. This observation is important to reflect upon in considering the responses of the police officers reported here.

# Listening to Police Officers

Five themes emerged from the interviews conducted with police officers: the role of information received from the control room, safeguarding and positive action, dissatisfaction with DASH, and what they referred to as ‘digging deeper’ in using their professional judgement. Given the overall focus of this project questions concerning the identification of the primary aggressor, this was also one of the themes emanating from the interviews. Each of these are discussed in what follows.

## Information received from the control room.

The information received from the control room by frontline officer has several elements to it. On the one hand, as police participant 6 detailed:

*“I think we are determined by the control room. So for instance, we get a call and it’s something happening but the perpetrator lives 2 miles away from the victim and isn’t at the property. So that doesn’t get an immediate response, they may get an appointment in 3 days time. This compared with he’s outside the address, he’s hit me, that will get a grade 1 response. Meant to be 15 minutes but much more than that in reality. Speaking to colleagues, we often don’t get there even in the hour. So as soon as that response is delayed, it can make arrest more difficult. And with coercive control there is criteria and that so often unless it’s a grade 1 response, we have decided in the pair that we go out to scene with that we’re not arresting. Even before we get there those decisions are usually made if we’re honest. So then we usually interview someone under caution for coercive control, so bring them in a week on Wednesday for instance for voluntary attendance under caution”*

On the other hand it is not always coercive control logged on the system and to which they are responding. Police participant 3 pointed out that the victim-survivor or her family may not have used these words when calling in:

*“It doesn’t get called in that way really. I probably say job to job they wouldn’t tell us straight away. A lot of the time they don’t see it as abuse unless its physical or mental related. If someone is going to give a statement its generally going to be there at the time. So its important to get it there and then if you can. So yeah typically its intimate relationships but it can sometimes be families like that as well. But she wouldn’t have said she was the victim of coercive control, she would have said she was*

*the victim of criminal damage, so people really don’t see it and it’s often other things that they call the police for, then its kind of us telling them what they are actually going through”*

With police participant 6 adding:

*“They usually call for something else and its later that coercive controlling behaviour comes out. So usually, when frontline are called out it isn’t coercive control we’re responded to, its something else that the control room have recorded it as or something else the victim has said. Because they don’t always see it that way either”*

And participant 4 noting;

*“It’s not usually the case that a victim calls about coercive and controlling behaviour either. Again, it’s usually something else they call about then coercive control becomes clearer as we dig more into it. So yeah, it tends to be other stuff and then we see more after a while”*

The importance of digging and/or digging deeper is discussed more fully below.

## Safeguarding and positive action.

Out of the 13 interviews, 12 mentioned safeguarding and providing positive action as important to their response to domestic abuse cases in general alongside those involving coercive control. Such positive action included a range of different responses, such as separating parties, referring people on to partner services and securing the support of an IDVA. The importance of positive action was also evidenced in the case file analysis.

Safeguarding was prioritised even in cases which did not lead to an arrest.

*“The priority is safeguarding, so this usually involves separating the parties, making sure kids are safe if there are any in the house. If appropriate, we will signpost the victim onto other services, maybe allocate them to an IDVA there and then. In coercive controlling behaviour cases, suspect is usually asked to come in for a voluntary interview as there isn’t always the evidence to arrest, so its much more about safeguarding really. Because we all hear of those domestic homicide reviews in cases like this where proper safeguarding hasn’t been put in place, so it’s important to cover ourselves really and keep everyone safe”.(police participant 10).*

The use of voluntary interviews is explained further by police participant 10.

*“9 times out of 10 with coercive control it will be a voluntary interview. Unless the victim has loads of evidence there and then and its clear there is a safeguarding risk, its hard to justify arresting in that moment for coercive control. It isn't usually that there is an immediate threat or risk with these cases. I did have one recently though where the woman had loads of evidence of texts where he was threatening to kill her, voice recordings of him being awful to her, so we were in a position to arrest then because she was clearly at risk, but she had done a lot of work to make that arrest happen in a way. Because if we're at a job for an hour or so, there is only so much we are going to get to be able to make an arrest if there isn't that evidence there to justify why we're arresting”*

As police participants 7 and 8 goes on to explain:

*“Sometimes there's no necessity to arrest if they are living separate addresses and the victims reporting control and on coercive behaviour. If the suspect say, had no previous and was on board with police and happy to speak with police, there's no reason for us to arrest if he's, if they're safeguarded in separate addresses” (participant 7)*

*“For me with coercive control, its usually about engaging individually with both parties in separate rooms. We'd basically work out what options are, but our main interest is the safeguarding at that point and it would basically be the case of if someone was saying I am being quite controlled, we think about what we can do. Alternative accommodation etc. so it isn't always about arrest at that stage. Arrest would kick in if there is an immediate physical risk to that person. So its about making sure the person is safe with coercive control, maybe bringing them in for a voluntary interview” (Participant 8)*

For police participant one, safeguarding was central to listening to what might be in the victim's best interests as articulated by them.

*“We try and do let a lot of intervention with people now because rather than escalating the situation, So if you can say that you know, you might actually spot this element of controlling the cohesive behaviour and actually you're making them more isolated because police have dealt with it in a way of which they wouldn't have wanted it to be dealt with. So now they won't ring the police again in because it can make things 10 times worse. So we do try to take account what the victim wants. And how they want things to be addressed”*

### **Dissatisfaction with DASH risk assessment**

Several officers discussed the challenges posed for them in using the DASH risk assessment framework as an appropriate tool for capturing the experience of coercive and controlling behaviour. Police participant 1 expressed these dissatisfactions in the following way:

*“As an officer, I think the dash risk assessment is very regimented and we're meant to ask it every single question. Well, I do ask every single question and in order to try and assess risk, but sometimes you find that those questions aren't the right questions. And also it's best to*

*just have a conversation with someone to identify the risk factors because you're actively asking someone is the person following you stalking you? Sometimes we get the answer of yes.”*

*“It's sometimes asking those questions. Why are you friends and family not here? How often is it since you spoke because they're not evidently gonna come forward and say he stops me seeing my family and friends day. If we was to take away their partner and say have you got any family or friends? That's when then they say to us, well, I haven't spoken to them in ages. Well, why have you not spoken? When was the last time you went out with your friends and just asking those questions they're not gonna tell you I'm being controlled it's looking for those things like and with the money situation”*

Whilst it was evident that the DASH risk assessment could provide a door to getting further information, cynicism remained as to how useful that might prove to be for either prosecution:

*“We have to go through the DASH questionnaire which highlights things such as you know, is there any financial issues? Do you feel isolated from friends and family. Echoes towards whether there's concern enough to meet the offence of, controlling, coercive. You know, things like he doesn't like me going on nights out and he tells me he'd rather me not do that. You're never going to get a prosecution with stuff like that. So if they're the sort of things that are being answered, we don't really go down the route of doing that” (police participant 2)*

As one police participant pointed to there was value in moving 'beyond DASH'.

*“So if we go in and, you know, they mention something along lines of, you know, like he gives me £30 to do the shopping each week. But my money goes into his account or my benefit, he goes and gets my benefits. I think the police here are more attuned to thinking that's coercive controlling behaviour. Or if they mention he doesn't let me go out, I haven't got a house key. These kinds of questions can come up part of the risk assessment. Or the broader risk assessment I should say, beyond DASH” (Police participant 7).*

As participant 13 reported:

*“The number of high-risk domestic cases in (partner force) is high and I think it's because we have this perverse measure. At the end of a job it's easier to speak to somebody and then consider your options. Take those options and then as you finish your job off, as you've done your initial investigation, as a result of everything you've done right now, do I think this person is likely to get seriously hurt or killed, or do I not think there is a chance that might happen then you would assign the appropriate risk at that level instead of going in and going in high”*

Each of these participants were pointing out the complex interplay between following policy recommendations and the value of using their professional judgement: digging deeper.

### Digging deeper

Twelve of our police respondents talked of the importance of digging deeper. This term captures the need for police officers to look beyond the immediate incident and to take time to understand the wider context. All victim-survivors interviewed also highlighted the importance of this. Police participant 1 discussed this as being especially important in relation to counter-allegations made by the perpetrator.

*"I often look at it with like counter allegations as well because perpetrators are very manipulative. Very manipulative people, and they'll ring, and they will come across as the innocent party. And it's about as being wise to that and obviously. Making sure that you're checking what they're saying is actually accurate"*

The complexities that might be revealed in 'digging deeper' were highlighted by police participant 11 as follows, recognising the challenges that this approach brings.

*"So it's about seeing the bigger picture of what is going on..... You can dig in a case and see family court involvement for instance. Then all of a sudden the clouds part and it's like 'oh there is other stuff going on here' and that realisation perpetrators manipulate agencies as well. But there isn't always the time to do that digging. I'm not sure we have a grip on that"*

As police participant 10 reports, digging deeper can reveal what the victim-survivor is experiencing even though they might not have recognised those experiences as problematic.

*"To be honest, the ones that we get deployed to, it tends to be that we're not going to control coercive behaviour. It comes out when we do the risk assessment questions. And once you start digging a bit deeper and start asking questions, that's when it comes out. Because they don't usually realise either and sometimes its then realisation when we start asking questions for them, you know, what is actually going on for them"*

Further illustrated in the example provided by police participant 4;

*We just have to assess the information that is available to us when we turn up. Sometimes that can be difficult when there isn't a lot to see there and then about what's going on, then you've got your radio going for the next job and you know you've only got a certain window that you can spend with these people, so making decisions there and then can be tough when there's uncertainty. For instance, I had this one case a few months ago where I turned up, it was a neighbour who rang it in because they heard shouting and smashing next door. We got there, they both clearly had physical marks on them.. He looked fuming and she was just so difficult to understand as she didn't speak very good English, but she was clearly not wanting us there. And at face value there and then, we thought they had a fight, and the evidence that we had at our disposal all pointed in that direction. We put the safeguarding in place for both of them, he left the premises for the night. We didn't make any arrests as it was all very up in the air. But actually the more digging that was done it was clear he was incredibly controlling, she had moved here from xxxxx and was incredibly*

*isolated and he was using this to his advantage. It was really sad. But for us as first response, we can just go with initially the information they have in front of us or what they tell us. And in this case because of all of these complexities, it meant that it was all a bit cloudy I guess"*

Arguably, this commitment to digging deeper is the context in which the officers participating in this project approached understanding who the primary aggressor was in the cases they were responding to.

### Identifying the primary aggressor and the problem of misidentification.

Set in a context in which arrest has been seen to be equivalent with positive action, none of our police participants thought that arrest was very common in cases of coercive control. This is perhaps no great surprise given the overwhelming commitment to the broader framework of safeguarding in this sample of respondents. In addition when asked if misidentification of the primary aggressor was common in coercive control cases, most officers initial reaction was that it is not. However, several were able to draw upon examples of dual arrests where there had been ambiguity in who was the victim and perpetrator and that the key to avoiding this was to be 'open minded'. As participant 1 stated in response to being asked about dual arrests:

*"No, I haven't. But I know a colleague of mine is dealing with a job where she is arrested, a female for controlling and coercive behaviour when actually it turns out that this female is being controlled by the male. And so that's when the waters get really muddied. But that's what my colleagues at dealing with that because it is a difficult one to prove if there's no one else in the household and no one else is seeing these behaviours, then it is a difficult one, because if there's no outside independent witnesses and it is one word against the other. So it's trying to find that that boundary and of the offence. I think to avoid it police officers need to have a bit more of an open mind about"*

When specifically talking about misidentification participant 4 commented:

*"It wasn't really that they had been misidentified necessarily, just that we didn't have all the information we needed, so we thought they were both abusing each other if you get me. And often in these cases there can be right and wrong on both sides. Like in that case, she had ultimately hurt him as well. It can sometimes be like weighing up who is the worst in these scenarios. I don't mean that for all cases of course, but there can be that uncertainty there..... We felt really unsure what had happened, they had both been heavily drinking, or in the other case she didn't have English as her first language, so this just made it difficult. In both cases though, I felt like it left a bad taste in the woman's mouth. Particularly for the woman we had to arrest. It's sad when that happens, as its hard to think something we have done has impacted that person's experience with the police, but we just had to make the decisions with the information we had"* (police participant 4)

*"I am 100% sure this happens, because its such an underlying thing. Its so hard to detect. We had another*

*case, where a male went over to a female ex-partner's house, she lashed out at him, or so we believed, she was an alcoholic, but we had suspicions there was something else going on there with coercive control from him towards her, but we didn't have enough to go off so everything was dropped" (police participant 5)*

The complex ways in which, misidentification, the need to dig deeper, officer awareness of systems abuse in the form of manipulative perpetrators and policing responses intertwine are captured in the following:

*"And I think sometimes we can get it wrong, people getting wrongfully arrested say. Its difficult sometimes to get everything we need. We just take the steps we can to try and avoid it. But you know, its thinking are they presenting as manipulative? What can we see in those initial interactions?" (Police participant 8)*

*"...it definitely does happen. Perpetrators are manipulative people and I think we as the police need more training on how to navigate this to be honest. I think as well with coercive control because sometimes on paper it is one word against the other its bound to happen. Its bound to be the case. And we know it happens in the family court as well. I think a lot of it is down to demeanour, what information we can get on scene at the time and basically how people present themselves. I know that's tricky, as there isn't a particular way victims should behave, but if we are going to a case and that is one of 12 in any given day, the reality is we are basing on decisions on what we have available to us there and then, so sometimes we make the wrong judgements" (Police participant 9)*

*"Her husband called us and said she had assaulted him, so she was brought into custody and it came to light she was the victim of coercive controlling behaviour. Its one of those situations where it was difficult to prove. She probably needed an IDVA to do some work with her, letting her know what she was going through was coercive control. We do often get the right person who we treat as the suspect, but there is them other occasions where their obviously quite controlling and they managed to manipulate that situation to make themselves look like, look like the victim. But typically, people think its only women who can be victims, but men can be too, and sometimes that may be harder to recognise. Women can be very manipulative and put on a good show of themselves. Yeah and 9 times out of 10, don't get me wrong it's the woman who is the victim and man perpetrator, but we need to think about the other side as well" (Police participant 10)*

To summarize, the voices of these police participants speak strongly to a commitment to positive policing in relation to domestic abuse generally and coercive control in particular. This commitment is expressed by their embrace of safeguarding responses which is also supported by the data from the case file analysis discussed above. These responses also give voice to the need for the policing response to have conversations that go 'beyond DASH' and 'dig deeper' into the circumstances leading to the incident they may be responding to. It is also evident from these responses that the complex demands faced by in them in responding to coercive control can, and do, result in tensions between

what is required of them in terms of evidence in law and what the victim-survivor testimonies discussed above might expect from them. However the expressed views in respect of misidentifying the primary perpetrator suggest that the problems of misidentification are not a prescient concern. This is also borne out by the voices of the victim-survivors engaged in this project.

# Concluding Thoughts

Whilst there is further excavation of this data to be done, there are several general observations that can be made on the basis of it for the purposes of this report.

This work points to the ongoing presence of stereotypes surrounding the ideal victim and/or what real victim behaviour might look like. Both concerns were referred to by the victim-survivors who took part in this study. However, the issue of misidentification of the primary perpetrator did not emerge as an issue in the same way as it has in other jurisdictions, such as Australia (Reeves, 2021). The case file analysis and police officer testimonies talk of the need to 'dig deeper' in cases of coercive control, and officers also expressed informed awareness of the manipulative abilities of perpetrators. However, the victim-survivors interviewed highlighted issues with police officers understanding and identifying them as the primary victim, largely due to conceptions of 'ideal victimhood' and systems abuse by the perpetrator. Furthermore, victim-survivors highlighted issues with communication in the policing response. The victim-survivors interviewed in this project were not always aware of the rationale lying behind the police response to them and this might be a point of contact open for further improvement. Overall, it may be that the different findings found in this study to those found in other jurisdictions may well lie in the fact that coercive control has now been an offence for nearly 8 years and the policing responses articulated here reflects the learning processes that have been undergone during this time. That such learning has taken place is illustrated in both the quantitative and qualitative data presented in this report.



# Recommendations

This has been a small-scale study. Yet there is much to be recommended about the response to domestic abuse developed within the police force who partnered this project to be found within this report. Having said that there are several recommendations to be made on the basis of its findings.

**For policing practice:**

Clearer communication between the frontline officer and the victim-survivor on why action is taken and/or not taken would be beneficial to the victim-survivor. This may also improve their willingness to contact the police on a future occasion if needed.

There may be some value in ensuring greater awareness on the part of first responders that the way in which the victim-survivor presents themselves at the first point of contact may not be an accurate representation of what has occurred.

**For policing domestic abuse policy:**

Given the concerns raised by some of our policing respondents concerning the value of DASH in relation to high-risk cases, there is arguably a need to assess the efficacy of DARA in such cases as it is more widely introduced across England and Wales.

**For academic research**

This work points to the need for academic work focused on policing domestic abuse to take a closer and more nuanced look at positive policing and practices of safeguarding in the round and to move away from the focus on arrest and non-arrest in cases of domestic abuse and/or coercive control.

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