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Coercive control cases have doubled – but police still miss patterns of this domestic abuse

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Evidence of long term coercive control can be hard for the police to collect. from www.shutterstock.com

Double the number of cases of controlling or coercive behaviour in intimate relationships were recorded in the UK in 2017-18 than in the previous year. The offence became a crime in England and Wales in December 2015, but its early implementation was shaky, with very few crimes of coercive control recorded and even fewer successfully prosecuted.

Now new figures released by the Office for National Statistics revealed 9,052 offences of coercive control were recorded, up from 4,246 in 2016-17. The new ONS figures could suggest that police officers' understanding and identification of this offence has improved. However, our research highlights ongoing issues with police responses to coercive control that go beyond problems associated with identifying and recording the offence.

Patterns missed

When we looked at a random sample of 116 other domestic abuse-related crimes, we found that 87% of these could also have been recorded by the police as as part of the web of abuse that could constitute coercive control. This meant there was evidence of repeat victimisation, a pattern of abusive behaviour and of victim witness statements. These figures suggest there are still considerable opportunities being missed to identify repeated patterns of abusive behaviour that could be prosecuted under the coercive control offence.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of problems in the police response to this form of domestic abuse. A recent Home Office report suggested that nobody is charged in nine out of ten crimes. So even though there have been improvements to police crime recording practices, responding, investigating and solving cases effectively remains a pertinent issue.

Our research identified that just 16% of coercive control cases (over an 18-month period) resulted in a charge, which is particularly low when compared with other domestic abuse-related offences. For example, we found that 32% of domestic actual bodily harm cases were charged.

We've also highlighted further issues with the investigative process. In particular, securing evidence of coercive control was a problem for police officers, with many cases resulting in no further action due to "evidential difficulties". This is reflective of a broader pattern in domestic abuse cases: new Home Office data on crime outcomes shows that 69% of unsolved domestic abuse-related offences had "evidential difficulties". This is almost three times the proportion of offences that were not domestic related.

Outcomes for domestic abuse-related offences

	Year ending March 2017	Year ending March 2018
Evidential difficulties (victim does not support action)	41%	48%
Evidential difficulties (suspect identified; victim supports action)	24%	22%
Charged/Summoned	18%	15%
Offences not yet assigned an outcome	6%	6%
Out-of_court (formal and informal)	6%	4%
Investigation complete - no suspect identified	2%	2%
Other	3%	4%

The Home Office figures also show that the issue of victims declining to prosecute or retracting their statement continues to be a significant issue in all types of domestic abuse, as expected. This can be a common response for victims of domestic and other forms of abuse because of the fear of not being believed or of what the perpetrator may do as a consequence.

Read more: Why it's so hard to prosecute cases of coercive or controlling behaviour

However, in our research, retraction of this sort was slightly less common in coercive control cases compared to other domestic abuse-related crimes. This suggests that collecting evidence of the offence is the more problematic issue for police officers.

The prevalence of evidence issues may well be a reflection of the difficulties faced by officers in demonstrating experiences of sustained patterns of coercive control within the statements made by victims. Our research found persistent examples of officers investigating “incidents”, such as assault, as isolated events rather than possibly illustrative of a web of abusive behaviour, as outlined in the coercive control legislation.

Train the police

The coercive control offence has been subject to critique – both conceptually and in terms of its implications for how such victimisation is recorded and understood more broadly in the UK.

An increase in the number of coercive control crimes does not necessarily equate to better police understanding and response to this more recent offence. Officers require further opportunities to learn about the harms and risk of coercive control, and how to effectively respond and investigate this offence.

Ongoing austerity measures, persistent budget cuts to policing and a consequent lack of resources carry significant implications for victims of domestic abuse and the capacity for police to respond effectively. Recent reports also suggest that the police are failing to record thousands of domestic abuse crimes. Although the potential reasons for this are unclear, there is still more work to be done in identifying and recording such abusive behaviour.

Local and national level investment is required in areas such as police training and resourcing to ensure that victims are supported and safe, and that police officers are equipped to deliver a more effective response.