

Project Bright Light

Transforming the police response to domestic abuse

Background

Recent high-profile reports have identified persistent failings in the policing response to domestic abuse, including inadequate investigations, inconsistent risk assessments, and poor attitudes among officers.¹ The policing workforce is not equipped to deal effectively with the scale of demand from domestic abuse. The result has been called a "postcode lottery"² with insufficient safeguarding, including of children, and most cases finalised without a perpetrator being held to account for their behaviour. Despite numerous initiatives to tackle the high volume and harm of domestic abuse, the criminal justice system is still failing victim-survivors.

Project Bright Light³ was launched in response to these concerns. It involved a rapid research collaboration between Avon and Somerset police in England and a cross-institutional team of academics⁴, many of whom pioneered the landmark Operation Soteria approach to rape and serious sexual offences.⁵

The project undertook a thematic root-and-branch review of the police response to domestic abuse within one force. What it found revealed **significant and systemic national issues**, in part driven by the statutory definition of domestic abuse⁶ and crime recording practices, which have consequences for all police forces across England and Wales. This short briefing outlines key findings that have national implications, with academic publications to follow.⁷

Methods

The research was conducted between January and May 2025 and was grounded in the methodological framework established by Operation Soteria.⁸ The research team applied a framework of six interconnected pillars: investigation and safeguarding; disruption and deterrence; victim-centred response; learning, development and officer wellbeing; data; and digital evidence. Each pillar adopted methods and data collection suited to its specific focus, employing a mixed-methods approach including interviews, focus groups, case file analysis, document review, and direct observation.

Key findings

- 1. The statutory definition of domestic abuse is too broad for effective operational policing.** The definition covers a wide range of relationship types and behaviours, all of which receive the same crime recording, flagging, risk assessment and police processes. For example, a one-off incident between cousins at a wedding is treated and responded to with the same tools and tactics as an ex-partner who has used coercive and controlling behaviour for a decade. This undermines using a police response suited to the relationship and case context, resulting in less effective deterrence, misdirected police resources, and inadequate responses to victim-survivors. Different types of domestic abuse require different and tailored responses.
- 2. Multiple factors are impacting on levels of recorded domestic abuse cases.** Limited understanding of domestic abuse and miscategorisation of different relationship types means that some cases are being flagged as domestic abuse within police data when they do not align with the statutory definition (e.g., they are perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers). Current practices result in police recording additional offences disclosed through other processes (e.g., risk assessment or MARAC),⁹ which victim-survivors might not have chosen to officially report to police as offences, limiting opportunities for investigation. Multiple offences that make up a single domestic abuse event are ‘crimed’ separately, fragmenting the response against those involved, including children. Although a significant minority of intimate partner violence cases are recognised by police as counter allegations made by primary (often male) perpetrators, they still become part of the police data as victims, with real victim-survivors (often female) listed as suspects. Consequently, national police data distorts both the nature of the problem and police responses to it.
- 3. Existing police structures cannot cope with current levels of demand.** The increasing volume of cases flagged as domestic abuse, particularly complex course of conduct offences, alongside on-going challenges due to budget constraints, recruitment and retention issues, means that police systems struggle to allocate and follow up cases appropriately. A substantial proportion of cases are considered too complex or high-risk for patrol officers to effectively manage, but not serious enough to be allocated to detectives in CID. Consequently, a high volume of complex work stays with patrol, without officers being provided with the necessary training, time or resources to investigate them properly. This structural mismatch results in inconsistent and inappropriate responses to victim-survivors, missed opportunities for disruption and deterrence, and negative impacts from ill-equipped patrol officers feeling overwhelmed.
- 4. The risk assessment process is not fit for purpose.** Aligning with findings from previous research and reports,¹⁰ we also found that contrary to their intended purpose, risk assessments were seen as an outcome in and of themselves, often deployed as a mechanistic ‘tick box’ exercise. There is little consideration of the

victim's voice, or the suspect's wider history, patterns of harm, or ongoing risk. In addition, domestic abuse risk assessment tools were designed for intimate partner violence but are being used in family violence cases for which they are not appropriate. Such an approach to assessing risk undermines the effective safeguarding of victim-survivors and the proactive investigation of suspects.

- 5. Intimate partner violence is still responded to as a series of isolated incidents rather than as patterns of abuse.** The statutory definition states that domestic abuse can be any incident or course of conduct. This conflicts with established understandings that most intimate partner violence takes place within a wider pattern of coercive control and discourages officers from taking the approach necessary to build cases around patterns. This is compounded by incident recording and case management systems that make it difficult for officers to obtain promptly a comprehensive overview of the suspect's history in relation to this victim-survivor. These challenges result in unnecessary duplication of work, as well as increasing officer workloads and limiting effective safeguarding and intervention efforts. The overall police response remains one of incidentalism.¹¹

National policy recommendations

These findings suggest there are systemic issues affecting the national police response to domestic abuse, driven by the scope of the statutory definition, crime recording practices, and the structure and resourcing of policing. There are several recommendations for national policy that flow from this.

- 1. Test the feasibility of a dual pathways approach**

Our findings suggest that the statutory definition under the Domestic Abuse Act presents multiple challenges for frontline policing that urgently need addressing. A dual pathways approach to domestic abuse could be piloted, which would enable the maintenance of the statutory definition for legal purposes alongside a more operationally functional model that tailors the police response to the differences in family violence and intimate partner violence contexts. This could also include piloting different approaches to risk assessment for the different contexts.

- 2. Explore a three-tier response model for intimate partner violence**

A national three-tier model for the intimate partner violence pathway could help address the specific challenges identified in existing policing structures. This model would utilise the resources, skills and expertise from (1) frontline response including patrol and neighbourhood policing teams, (2) local investigation hubs to coordinate the response to perpetrators and victim-survivors including children, and (3) specialist detective units for investigating the most challenging and complex cases.

- 3. Strengthen national consistency in domestic abuse case classification and flagging**

Inconsistencies between police data and the statutory definition, including the victim-suspect relationship, hinder accurate monitoring, resource planning, and safeguarding. The success of a pathways approach will require consistent classification of relationship types by frontline officers, who are supported to routinely and accurately collect data on suspects.

4. Review the learning and development offers for domestic abuse in line with the wider public protection agenda

The College of Policing, with partners, should lead on reviewing, sequencing and standardising the current training and oversight frameworks.

Broader research and consultation with multiple forces are essential to ensure that any changes made to respond to these challenges are effective and widely applicable. This should include expanding the collaborative action research approach of Project Bright Light to a wider range of forces to explore the nature and extent of the national challenges identified, as well as force-specific issues, contexts and opportunities.

¹ Centre for Women's Justice (2022) [Police perpetrated domestic abuse: Has anything really changed since the 2020 super complaint](#); His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2024) [State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2023](#).

² DA Commissioner (2025) [Shifting the scales: Transforming the criminal justice response to DA](#).

³ For more see <https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/news/2025/01/avon-and-somerset-police-launches-project-bright-light-a-new-approach-to-addressing-domestic-abuse/>

⁴ Academic teams on Bright Light - Project Lead: Katrin Hohl, City University. Pillar 1 - Investigations and safeguarding: Amanda Robinson (Lead, Cardiff University), Duncan McPhee, Bethan Davies. Pillar 2 - Disruption and deterrence: Nicole Westmarland (Lead, Durham University), Alishya Dhir. Pillar 3 - A victim-centred response: Kelly Johnson (Lead, Glasgow University), Charlotte Barlow, Michele Burman, Amy Cullen and Emily Qvist-Baudry. Pillar 4 - Learning, development and officer wellbeing: Emma Williams (Lead, Anglia Ruskin University), Richard Harding, Linda Cooper, Rachel Ward. Pillar 5 - Data: Jo Lovett (Lead, London Metropolitan University), Maria Garner, Liz Kelly, Arun Sondhi, Fiona Vera-Gray. Pillar 6 – Digital evidence: Tiggey May (Lead, Birkbeck University), Samantha Atkinson, Nicola Campbell, Emily Holtham.

⁵ See Hohl, K. and Stanko, E.A. (2024) [Policing Rape: The Way Forward](#), Taylor & Francis.

⁶ The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created, for the first time, a legal definition of domestic abuse for the UK. DA is defined in the Act as: abusive behaviour (i.e. physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, or economic abuse) between people aged 16 or over who are “personally connected” with each other. It can be “any incident or a course of conduct”.

⁷ For more information please contact Professor Katrin Hohl Katrin.Hohl@citystgeorges.ac.uk and Professor Emma Williams Emma.Williams1@aru.ac.uk.

⁸ Hohl, K. and Stanko, E.A. (2022). Five pillars: A framework for transforming the police response to rape and sexual assault. *International Criminology*, 2(3), pp.222-229.

⁹ Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference.

¹⁰ For example, see Robinson A. L., Myhill, A., Wire, J., et al. (2016). [Risk-led policing of domestic abuse and the DASH risk model](#). London: College of Policing; His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2024) *State of Policing*.

¹¹ This term was first used by Hearn, J.R. (1998). The violences of men: How men talk about and how agencies respond to men's violence to women. It was further developed by Kelly, L. and Westmarland, N. (2016). Naming and defining 'domestic violence': Lessons from research with violent men. *Feminist review*, 112(1), pp.113-127.