

## Public Understanding of Coercive Control

Susan Lagdon, Julie-Ann Jordan, Ciaran Shannon, Mark Tully and Cherie Armour

### What's this about?

Domestic abuse is defined in the 2016 Northern Ireland Government Strategy *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland* as 'threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former partner or family member'. During 2020, there were 31,848 domestic abuse incidents recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). This is one of the highest 12-month figures recorded since the data series began in 2004/5. The number of domestic violence crimes (which are recorded differently than incidents) has also increased, particularly regarding 'Harassment (including malicious communications)'.

The focus of this Research Update is on coercive control, a form of domestic abuse also known as emotional or psychological abuse; indirect abuse; or emotional torture. It has been cited as one of the worst types of abuse to experience within an intimate relationship, and is the most difficult type of violence to evidence and report (Lagdon, Armour and Stringer, 2015). This type of abuse is characterised by a pattern of behaviour which aims to intimidate, threaten and humiliate a person or restrict a person's liberty (e.g. isolating a person from friends and family; taking control over aspects of everyday life such as where a person can go and who they can see; repeatedly putting a person down; or

making threats and intimidating a person to frighten them). Coercive control is well recognised as having a significant impact on victim mental health, with research suggesting that this type of behaviour is associated with future violence (Lagdon, Armour and Stringer, 2014; Stark and Hester, 2019).

During 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive introduced the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill which has now passed its final stages in becoming law. The Bill means that domestic abuse offences in Northern Ireland will no longer be limited to acts of physical violence and makes coercive control an offence. The new offence is intended to better reflect the experience of domestic abuse victims by emphasising the importance of power and control in abusive relationships (Killean, 2020), as well as to improve the criminal justice response which holds perpetrators accountable for all patterns of harmful and abusive behaviour. This legislation is a significant step forward for Northern Ireland and brings it in line with the rest of the UK and Ireland.

This offence is expected to be operational within Northern Ireland by the end of 2021. 'A body of work is taking place to ensure that the necessary system and process changes are in place, that training is provided to police and public prosecutors and that the public is also aware of the new offence' (Department of Justice, 2021). To address the need for evidence-based knowledge to improve public awareness and victim

responding to coercive control, a module of questions was included in the 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey with the aim of capturing baseline measurable data on public understanding of coercive control within intimate relationships.

### What did we do?

The NILT questions were based on the findings of a consultation with relevant stakeholders (e.g. Northern Health and Social Care Trust; Adult Mental Health and Children services; Causeway Women's Aid; Barnardo's NI; Nexus NI; and Department of Justice NI). The survey module consisted of different relationship scenarios followed by related questions. Each scenario described a type of coercive control within intimate heterosexual relationships: obvious coercive control (scenario 1) and less obvious coercive control (scenario 2). These were further adjusted to present the victim as either male or female. Half of the sample (Group A) were presented with scenario 1 and 2 with a male perpetrator and female victim. For the other half (Group B), in scenarios 1 and 2 the perpetrator was female and the victim was male. Figure 1 presents excerpts of the scenarios that were displayed. Respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement to 10 statements covering attitudes towards: coercive and controlling behaviours; victims of coercive control; talking about coercive control; and whether coercive control is a crime.

## Attitudes towards behaviours

All participants were asked if they had heard of the term coercive control and if they understood what this term meant. Sixty-three per cent of participants indicated that they had heard of the term coercive control and understood its meaning, with the remaining respondents indicating that they had heard the term but did not know what this means (20%) or that they had not heard of the term coercive control at all (16%). A higher proportion of respondents aged between 18-24 years indicated that they were unsure of what coercive control means or had not heard of the term at all, with a general trend of older age groups both having heard the term and knowing what it means (Figure 2).

Figure 3 presents the proportion of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the 10 statements presented for: 1) obvious coercive control – female victim; 2) obvious coercive control – male victim; 3) less obvious coercive control – female victim; and 4) less obvious coercive control – male victim.

In the obvious coercive control scenarios, regardless of perpetrator or victim gender, the overwhelming majority (97-98%) of respondents agreed that the *behaviour was domestic abuse*. For less obvious coercive control, a lower proportion of participants believed that domestic abuse had occurred, and this was particularly the case when the victim was male (69% for male and 87% for female victims).

Across all ‘victim gender’ and ‘coercive control type’ scenarios, only a small proportion of respondents believed the behaviour described is *commonplace within relationships*, especially when the coercive control was more obvious. Agreement that the *behaviour is commonplace* did not vary by victim gender in the obvious coercive control scenarios (13-15%) but was slightly higher when the victim was male (26%) as opposed to female (21%) in the less obvious coercive control scenarios.

More than nine in ten (93-96%) respondents felt there was a future risk of *physical harm* in the obvious coercive control scenarios, and agreement levels were only marginally smaller when the

Figure 1: Example taken from scenarios

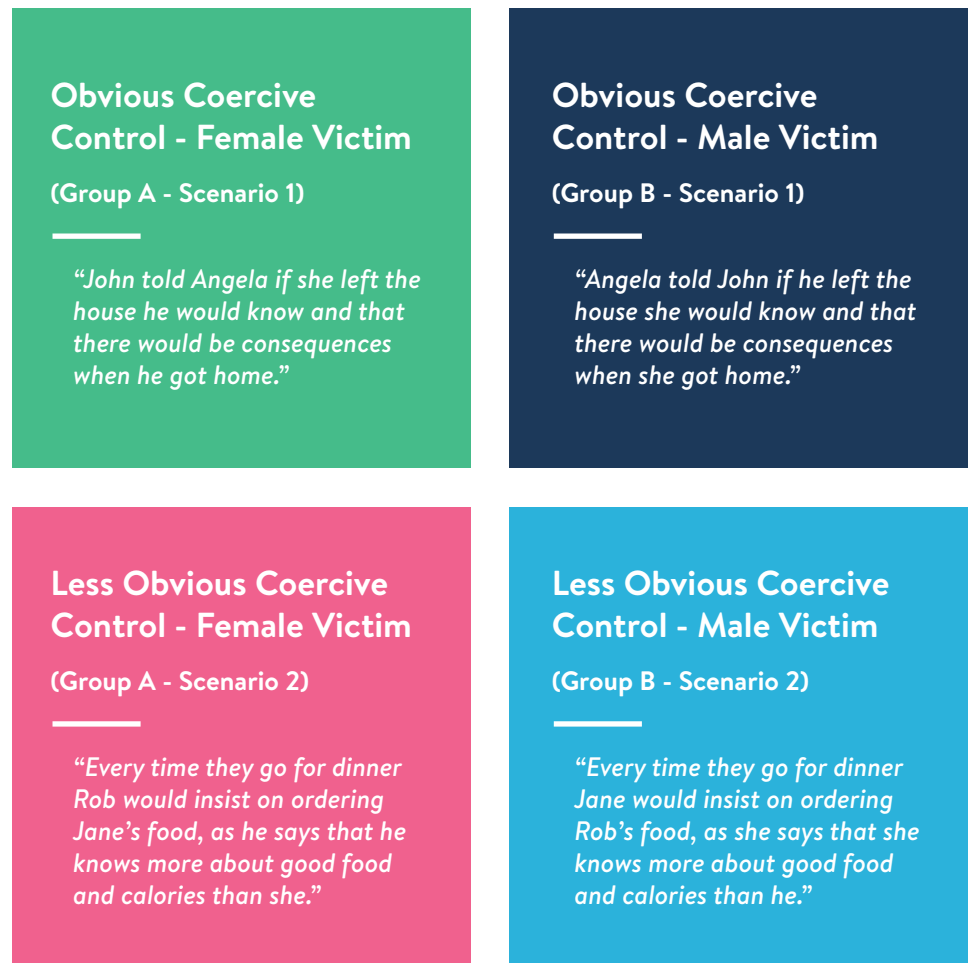
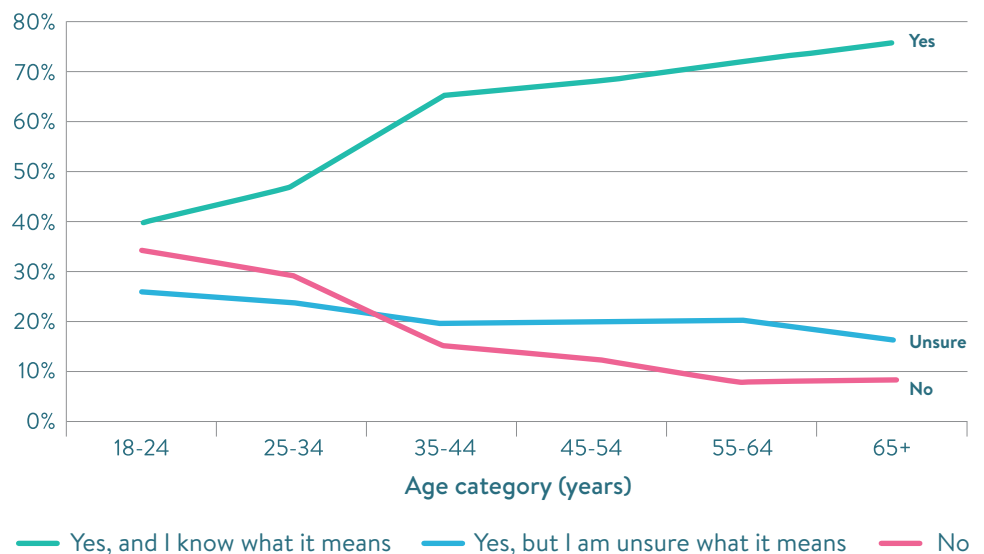


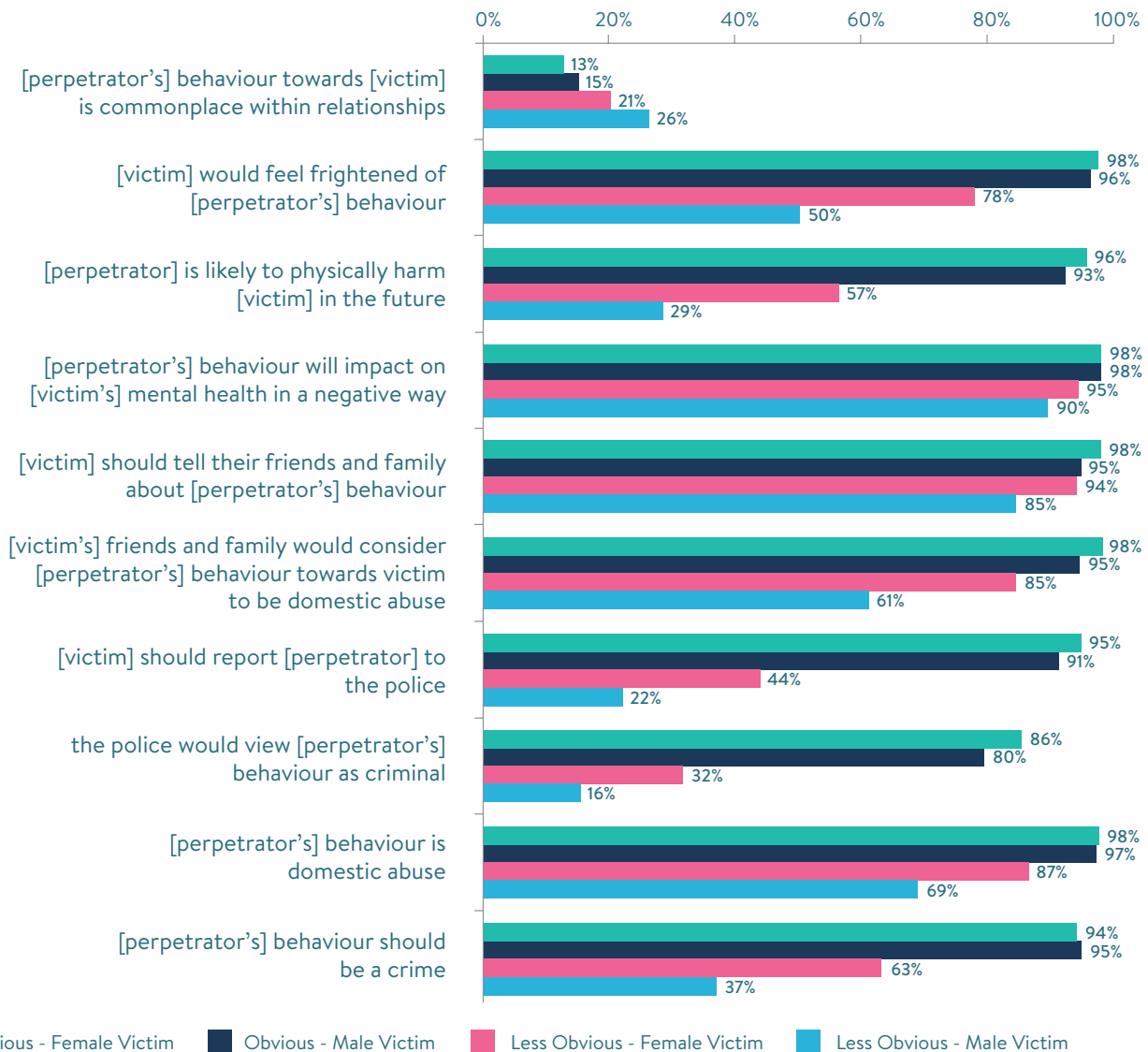
Figure 2: Awareness of coercive control, by age group



victim was male as opposed to female. For less obvious coercive control, the difference was more stark, with a greater

proportion believing there was *risk of physical harm* for the female victim (57%) compared to the male victim (29%).

**Figure 3: Attitudes towards coercive control scenarios (% agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement)**



## Attitudes towards victims

Most NILT respondents (96% and over) agreed that for the obvious cases of coercive control, both male and female victims *would feel frightened* of their partner's behaviour. In comparison, a much more marked victim gender difference was apparent in the less obvious coercive control scenario (78% for female victims compared with 50% for male victims).

At least nine in ten respondents felt the victim's *mental health* would be impacted in a negative way, and this applied across all four scenarios examined. When the abuse was obvious, agreement that *mental health* would be affected did not vary by gender. However, when the abuse was less obvious, fewer felt male victims would suffer *mental health* repercussions

than female victims (5 percentage points less for males).

## Talking about coercive control

The majority of NILT respondents (95% and over) agreed that for the obvious coercive control scenarios the victim should *tell their friends and family about their partner's behaviour and that friends and family would consider the behaviour to be domestic abuse*. Agreement levels with these statements were only slightly lower for male victims compared to female victims. In the less obvious coercive control scenarios, for male victims, fewer felt that *friends and family should be told* (94% for females compared with 85% for males) or that friends and family would consider it to be abuse (85% for females and 61% for males).

## Coercive control is a crime

Most respondents agreed that a victim of obvious coercive control *should report the behaviour to the police* (over 90%), that the *police would view the behaviour as criminal* (80% and over) and that the *behaviour should be viewed as a crime* (94% and over). For all three statements, agreement varied minimally for the male and female victim scenarios. When the abuse was less obvious, a more prominent victim gender effect was evident for the proportions who thought *they should report the behaviour to the police* (44% for females and 22% for males) the *police would view the behaviour as criminal* (32% for females compared with 16% for males), and *behaviour should be viewed as a crime* (63% for females and 37% for males).

## Discussion

The experience of domestic abuse is seldom the result of an isolated incident. Coercive control as a form of domestic abuse generally becomes apparent when associated behaviours develop into a pattern over time, by which stage the importance of identifying the early 'minor' acts of coercion and control have become clear (Stark, 2012). This type of abuse is often hidden in plain sight, with consequences devastating victims and lasting years after the abuse has ended.

The analysis within this Research Update indicates that while some respondents are aware of the term coercive control, a significant number do not know what this means and are therefore unlikely to recognise the signs of this type of abuse beyond obvious and blatant acts

of harmful behaviour. Our results show that male victims of coercive control are perceived as being at lower risk of harm, possibly due to gender biases in what behaviours are considered acceptable in relationships. While it is well understood that women are at greater risk of victimisation, this should not deter efforts to ensure there is appropriate awareness of risk amongst the wider public and access to support for all victims regardless of their personal demographics.

Research continues to reflect on the difficulty in operationalising coercive and controlling behaviour (Stark and Hester, 2019), but the effectiveness of early intervention as a form of prevention is well understood. Knowing the signs of

a healthy relationship is an important mediator towards identifying unhealthy and harmful behaviours, as is knowing and navigating support services if they are needed. Likewise, it is imperative to have specialist training for police and advocacy services which enables them to recognise and respond to the defining features of the new offence, as well as ensuring a partnership approach which meets the needs of all victims. Current research and legislation developments have marked a critical moment for Northern Ireland and an opportunity to set the groundwork for stopping domestic violence and abuse. Awareness raising among the population should be the catalyst for change.

### Key Points:

- Over one third of respondents (36%) showed a lack of understanding of what coercive control means.
- 18-24 year olds were less likely to recognise the term coercive control and know what it means.
- For the obvious coercive control scenarios, the vast majority of respondents identified the behaviour as domestic abuse and a crime, and recognised the potential dangers such as physical violence and impact on the victims' mental health. Most people agreed that these behaviours were criminal and should be reported to the police.
- However, for the less obvious scenarios, respondents were less likely to see this behaviour as domestic abuse or a crime, and were also less likely to recognise potential dangers. This was particularly the case when the victim is male.

### Recommendations:

- It is important that the introduction of the coercive control as a criminal offence in Northern Ireland should be accompanied with a public awareness campaign focusing on what coercive control means and signposting victims and their friends and family to appropriate courses of action and sources of support.
- The current research has provided a baseline of public attitudes towards coercive control prior to any future awareness campaigns. A comparable survey post awareness campaign should be implemented to allow for future comparison.
- Access to, and delivery of supports should also be monitored to ensure successful usage of the new law. This should include independent research evaluation of police response, recording and investigation of coercive control as well as the victim/survivor experience within this.
- Given the noted lack of awareness and understanding of coercive control among younger age groups, it is important to further explore this with those under 18 years of age.
- Early educational interventions which can be embedded into the curriculum which focus on the development of both healthy and unhealthy relationships should also be considered.

## References

Department of Justice (2021). *Long welcomes new domestic abuse legislation* <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/long-welcomes-new-domestic-abuse-legislation>

Killean, R. (2020). 'A leap forward'? Critiquing the criminalisation of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 71(4), pp. 595-617

Lagdon, S., Armour, C. and Stringer, M. (2014). Adult experience of mental health outcomes as a result of intimate partner violence victimisation: a systematic review. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1)

Lagdon, S., Armour, C. and Stringer, M. (2015). *Every voice counts. Policing Response to Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Ireland*. Ulster University

Stark, E. (2012). Looking beyond domestic violence: Policing coercive control. *Journal of police crisis negotiations*, 12(2), 199-217

Stark, E. and Hester, M. (2019). Coercive Control: Update and Review. *Violence Against Women*, 25(1), pp. 81-104

---

*Dr Susan Lagdon is a Lecturer within the School of Psychology and Institute of Mental Health Sciences at Ulster University. Susan's research is focused on the impacts of domestic and sexual violence.*

*Dr Julie-Ann Jordan is a Research Psychologist based in the IMPACT Research Centre, Northern Health and Social Care Trust. She works across a range of research areas including trauma and domestic violence.*

*Dr Ciaran Shannon is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Director of the IMPACT Research Centre in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.*

*Mark Tully is Professor of Public Health in the School of Health Sciences at Ulster University. Mark is Director of the Institute of Mental Health Sciences and the Northern Ireland Public Health Research Network.*

*Cherie Armour is a Professor of Psychological Trauma and Mental Health in the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast. Cherie directs the Research Centre for Stress Trauma and Related Conditions (STARC).*

---

The research on Coercive Control was, in part, supported by funding from the Public Health Agency.

---

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2020, 1292 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)



**In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University**

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences  
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University  
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB

Tel: 028 9036 6339  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)