

Identification, reporting and associated investigations

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Identification and reporting

Receiving the report

First-hand reporting by a victim or witness is the most common way for the police to receive domestic abuse information. Third-party reports could also be made by a concerned member of the public or service provider, such as a general practitioner (GP). The majority of domestic abuse incidents are reported via calls to the police and, to a lesser extent, through visits to the police station or contact with operational officers, for example an apparent public order incident witnessed by officers on patrol. Forces could consider recommending the use of the [Police.uk online domestic abuse reporting tool](#).

All reports of domestic abuse should be recorded in accordance with the [National Standard for Incident Recording \(NSIR\)](#) and, where necessary, the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) (contained in the Home Office [Home Office counting rules for recorded crime](#)). Accurate recording of domestic abuse incidents is essential to identify patterns of behaviour and coercive control, as well as to correctly fulfil requests under the [domestic violence disclosure scheme \(DVDS\)](#). Under-recording or downgrading incidents is dangerous because it can give a false intelligence picture.

Forces should ensure they have effective processes to check that domestic incidents which have been recorded on command and control systems transfer onto incident and crime recording systems in accordance with incident and crime recording rules.

Accurate recording means:

- correctly identifying the incident as domestic abuse and applying a domestic incident NSIR closing code
- recording any criminal offences in accordance with the NCRS
- being alert to additional offences coming to light during the risk assessment process – these must also be recorded, and more serious offences given precedence over any less serious offences that have occurred during the current incident, in accordance with the NCRS
- reclassifying in accordance with the HO Counting Rules if new information emerges as to the nature of the offences
- not under-recording or reclassifying for the sake of convenience or to influence crime figures, for example choosing to record repeated text messages as malicious communications rather than harassment to avoid recording a notifiable offence, or recording an incident as antisocial behaviour or a civil dispute between ex-partners
- consistently recording equality data, for example gender, ethnicity or disability, for both victims and perpetrators, as these are key to providing appropriate support and understanding patterns of abuse

Receipt of a report of domestic abuse is the beginning of the investigation. Officers and police staff should establish as much detail as possible to ensure an effective investigation and accurate risk assessment.

A victim or witness making a report of domestic abuse might not identify it as such. Therefore, officers and police staff need to ask relevant questions to identify reports clearly as domestic abuse. Even where a case is not clear-cut, the overriding consideration must always be to identify risk and initiate the appropriate response.

The information that should be requested when taking an initial report of domestic abuse is detailed in [Checklist: Information gathering](#).

Officers should carefully consider the history when responding to and investigating a report. An incident may not meet a specific offence threshold but may still form part of a pattern of behaviour amounting to controlling or coercive behaviour or stalking.

Referrals from other agencies

Police may be alerted to domestic abuse cases through contact with other agencies, services or multi-agency arrangements, for example [MARAC](#). This could be a documented or verbal referral, or where an agency is providing domestic abuse information as part of an information-sharing process.

Partner agencies may have IT-based information referral and tracking systems to analyse information relating to domestic abuse. When a referral is received from another agency, it should be recorded and investigated according to local information-sharing protocols. Risk identification processes should be instigated as soon as possible after receiving a referral. In domestic abuse cases there should be a well-recognised and auditable process in place to enable partner agencies to make the appropriate contact with the police to facilitate referrals and information sharing.

Police forces should ensure that their IT systems have the capability to record information from partner agencies, decisions made and subsequent action taken, thereby creating an effective audit process. For further information see [APP on information management](#).

If a referral indicates that a crime has been committed, in accordance with the [NCRS](#), supervisors should ensure that the incident is investigated and a crime report is completed. Incidents not identified as a crime should be retained in police records for future information.

Identifying information and intelligence about domestic abuse

Domestic abuse information and intelligence must be identified, assessed, retained and properly stored, no matter what the source. Intelligence should be entered onto the appropriate local and national intelligence systems in line with [APP on information management](#). Failure to record and use such information could significantly reduce the effectiveness of the police response.

Police officers should use domestic abuse intelligence to:

- identify risk factors associated with victims, children and suspects
- identify and target persistent offenders or to support repeat victims
- identify any links with other criminals and other criminal behaviour
- indicate potential further information on local and national computer systems
- make links with child abuse intelligence and other related investigations

- monitor the accuracy of domestic abuse intelligence data
- produce statistical information
- share information with partner agencies, where appropriate
- comply with the [DVDS](#)

Domestic abuse intelligence should be disseminated to police personnel who need it.

See [domestic abuse and the intelligence process](#) for further discussion of the use of domestic abuse intelligence.

Potential associated investigations

The links between an investigation into another offence and associated offences of domestic abuse might not always be apparent. Investigations into the following types of offending should identify domestic abuse as a possible line of enquiry.

Child abuse investigations

There are significant associations between domestic abuse and child abuse. In households where domestic abuse is present, children may also be abused. Figures provided in Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA, now SafeLives) suggest that direct harm to the child may occur in over half of cases where children are exposed to domestic abuse. Similarly, in households where there is child abuse, domestic abuse may be present. Children witnessing domestic abuse are exposed to harm and risk and may be victims in their own right. [Section 31\(9\) of the Children Act 1989](#) defines the notion of harm as including, for example, impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another.

Exposure of children to domestic abuse may amount to an offence of child neglect, requiring investigation and potential arrest of both parents. It may be appropriate to agree a sequence of arrests so that the children are not left without at least one parent at any time, or it could be more appropriate to focus on the primary perpetrator of the neglect. This depends on the particular circumstances of the case and officers should seek advice from supervisors.

In child abuse investigations, the welfare of the child is paramount. Failing to identify and fully investigate the domestic abuse element of any child abuse could result in failure to safeguard both child and adult victims.

Officers should look out for indicators of domestic abuse when investigating child abuse. Similarly, they should be alert to potential concerns relating to children in a household where domestic abuse is perpetrated.

Guidance on the actions to follow if officers suspect child abuse can be found [APP on child abuse](#).

Honour-based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation

Officers should consider whether identified children might be at risk of honour-based abuse (HBA) including forced marriage (FM) and female genital mutilation (FGM). In cases where HBA, FM or FGM is reported, suspected or feared, officers should take appropriate steps to identify particular risks, protective factors and sources of support. HBA, FM and FGM relating to minors are child abuse and should be treated as the crimes they are, regardless of concerns about community impact.

Officers may also come across evidence to suggest that domestic abuse which has already occurred is honour-based in nature.

Where this is suspected:

- officers and staff should take immediate steps to make the victim and any potential victims safe
- officers should ensure that victims are offered sources of support from outside their family and community as members of either may pose a continued risk to the victim
- custody officers should closely monitor detainee contact with other family members if HBA is suspected
- suspected HBA must be central to any risk assessment and safety plan

See also:

- [APP on FM and HBA](#)
- [APP on FGM](#)

Vulnerable adult abuse investigation

Section 42 of the Care Act 2014 provides that where a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect that an adult in its area (whether or not ordinarily resident there):

- has needs for care and support, whether or not that is provided by the local authority
- is experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect and
- as a result of those needs is unable to protect him or herself from either the risk of, or the experience of, abuse or neglect

they must make whatever enquiries are necessary to decide what action, if any, is required and, if so, by whom. A section 42 enquiry may result in a referral to the police for further investigation.

The Department of Health and Social Care and Home Office (2023) conducted the **safe care at home review**. This showed that elements of the relationship between vulnerable adults and their carers place them at risk of abuse. These include victims' dependence on carers, the trust they place in carers, the manipulation they experience and the gradual and systematic grooming strategies which some perpetrators employ.

Victims may feel unable to report the abuse as the abuser may be their only way of communicating with the community. They may feel dependent on the perpetrator for care and support and feel uncertain as to how they would be supported and cared for without the perpetrator.

Whatever the origin of the domestic abuse investigation, where it concerns suspected abuse by a familial carer, officers should consider that the case may be domestic abuse from the outset. There may be other instances where it is only as a result of investigation that the domestic abuse link is identified. For example, an investigation into possible neglect in a care home may reveal that a family member is wrongly withholding funds from the vulnerable adult, amounting to financial abuse (defined in **section 42(3)** of the Act) which is domestic in nature.

Officers should look out for signs of other manifestations of domestic abuse when investigating vulnerable adult abuse in a household. They should also be alert to concerns relating to vulnerable adults in a household where domestic abuse is perpetrated.

For further information see:

- **APP on adults at risk**
- Department of Health and Social Care (2024) **care and support statutory guidance**

- Department of Health and Social Care and Home Office [safe care at home review](#)

Stalking or harassment

Domestic abuse investigations may include stalking or harassment offences (including cyber and online stalking) and vice versa. These are common offences in the context of domestic abuse following a separation, when a victim may be at an increased risk of abuse. They can, however, also occur in current relationships, especially those characterised by [controlling or coercive behaviour](#).

The perpetrator can commit the acts directly or through the actions of people associated with them. In some investigations of stalking or harassment, the offender will not be readily obvious because the offences are committed anonymously.

Consider the mnemonic FOUR when assessing if behaviour is potentially stalking. The behaviours are:

- Fixated
- Obsessive
- Unwanted
- Repeated

Harassment may form part of stalking behaviour, so do not underestimate the potential risk of harm to the victim.

If the victim is at risk of harm, consider whether a Stalking Protection Order or interim order may be appropriate, depending on whether the criminal threshold has been met.

For further information see:

- [Advice to police responders to ensure an effective response to stalking or harassment](#)
- [APP on stalking or harassment](#)

Homicide

[Office for National Statistics](#) data show that on an average year, around half of female homicide victims are perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner, compared to less than 10% of male homicides.

When investigating a domestic homicide, officers should use intelligence sources and specialist staff who carry out domestic abuse investigation and coordination roles. Investigators should also seek information from relevant partner agencies to establish whether domestic abuse has been recorded previously.

In domestic homicide cases other considerations which might be relevant to the investigation include the possibility of **child abuse**, sexual offences, the danger posed to previous and potential future victims of domestic abuse (see **domestic violence disclosure scheme**) and existing and future child contact arrangements and agreements.

Domestic homicides committed by family members, which perpetrator(s) claim are an attempt to restore honour to a family group, are sometimes referred to as honour killings. Officers should note that concepts of honour and other cultural issues are not a defence to homicide or assault.

For further information see:

- Domestic Homicide Project's (2024) **Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides 2022-2023 Report**
- **APP on forced marriage and honour-based abuse**

Unexplained and unexpected death

An investigation into an unexplained death may reveal evidence suggestive of **controlling or coercive behaviour** or other forms of domestic abuse as background to an apparent suicide. Officers should actively consider this when attending the scene, and wherever possible run background checks on history of domestic abuse crimes and non-crime incidents at the time. Slower time investigations into the history can be done subsequently.

Where there is evidence of any offences having been committed, officers should arrest and charge accordingly.

Officers should consider whether there are ongoing risks to anyone in the remaining household, in particular children and vulnerable adults, and take appropriate steps to make those people safe.

See also:

- [Domestic Homicide Project's](#) Vulnerability Knowledge & Practice Programme Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides year one, two and three reports
- College of Policing (2023) [Categories for unexpected death investigations](#)
- CPS (2024) guidance on [Homicide: Murder, manslaughter, infanticide and causing or allowing the death or serious injury of a child or vulnerable adult](#)
- CPS (2023) guidance on [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate Family Relationship](#)
- [App on suicide and bereavement response](#)

Causing or allowing a child or vulnerable adult to die or suffer serious physical harm

[Section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 \(DVCVA\)](#) creates the offence of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult. This was extended by [the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims \(Amendment\) Act 2012 s 1](#) to also cover serious physical harm, which is defined by [the DVCVA 5\(6\)](#) as harm amounting to grievous bodily harm.

The offence provides that members of a household who have frequent contact with a child or vulnerable adult will be guilty if they themselves caused the death of that child or vulnerable adult. They will also be guilty if the following three conditions are met:

- they were aware or ought to have been aware that the victim was at significant risk of serious physical harm from a member of the household
- they failed to take reasonable steps to prevent that person coming to harm
- the person subsequently died or suffered serious physical harm from the unlawful act of a member of the household in circumstances that the defendant foresaw or ought to have foreseen

What constitutes reasonable steps will depend on the circumstances of the person (including whether they are also a victim of domestic abuse) and their relationship to the victim. The significant risk of serious physical harm is likely to be demonstrated by a history of violence towards the vulnerable person, or towards others in the same household. Only those aged 16 years or over may be guilty of the offence, unless they are the mother or father of the victim.

For further information see [APP on child abuse](#).

Family annihilation

Family annihilation is a form of mass murder and occurs when the perpetrator murders their immediate family, usually their children and possibly their partner or ex-partner. This type of offender is most frequently male and may commit suicide after the event.

Research suggests that some family annihilators have a history of [controlling or coercive behaviour](#). Some, but not all, will also have a history of violence towards their partner. Events which may precede family annihilation include relationship break-up, child care disputes and financial problems.

Missing persons investigations

There is a potential link between missing persons and domestic abuse. The person reporting an individual as missing may not know about, or might not disclose, domestic abuse to the police. Identifying that the missing person is a victim of domestic abuse or child abuse, or is an offender, will have an important bearing on determining the type and level of investigation undertaken. The missing person could be the victim of a domestic homicide. It is also possible that by reporting a person as missing, an abuser could be attempting to locate a victim who has escaped from a violent situation.

Additional considerations apply where a missing person is 16 or 17 years old, as they are still considered a child.

Domestic abuse officers should be informed when a domestic abuse victim or suspect/offender is missing. Officers should use previous domestic abuse records and intelligence to assist in the investigation. They should use established links with domestic abuse service providers, such as local refuges and outreach services where appropriate, to explore whether they can assist with the investigation. Such contact should respect the confidentiality process of the service provider, and should not presume that information will be made available.

For further information see [APP on missing persons](#).

Missing person who is an alleged domestic abuse victim

When investigating missing person reports in which the missing person is, or may be, a victim of domestic abuse, including forced marriage or honour-based abuse, officers should do the following.

- Maintain victim confidentiality, as far as possible, with the victim's safety and protection being the priority at all times. If a person is traced, officers should only confirm whether or not they are safe and well. Officers should seek the full consent of the traced person before disclosing any additional information to the person reporting them as missing, or to any other person.
- Consider that a child may have run away from home to escape domestic abuse, FM, HBA or other forms of abuse that are occurring in the home. The immediate family may not reveal this information and, therefore, it is crucial that any previous history (from any available source) is considered.
- Consider that abusers may report children as missing or abducted when their partner has left and removed the children for their own safety.
- Consider that part of an abuser's strategy may be:
 - to report the victim missing to portray false concern in an attempt to cover up abuse or homicide
 - a failure or reluctance to report the victim missing to avoid the subsequent investigation
 - to seek police assistance, believing the police will disclose the whereabouts of the victim or return them to the abuser
- Use the expertise of domestic abuse officers, who will have useful contacts with refuge and domestic abuse outreach services.
- Ensure that the locations of refuges and domestic abuse outreach services are never revealed to family members attempting to trace a missing person.
- Carry out full domestic abuse checks on the missing person and those reporting spouses, partners, children or other family members as missing. Checks should include:
 - the PNC and PND
 - civil injunctions, including any order denying or restricting child contact
 - child protection and force intelligence systems
 - child protection register (in Wales), local authority children's services information on children subject to a child protection plan (in England)
 - the Violent Offender and Sex Offender Register (ViSOR)

Any investigation into a missing person where there is a suspicion of domestic abuse should include checks to determine whether there is a history of abuse. Investigations should seek evidence from police sources and partner agencies, or from the missing person's relatives or

associates, see investigative development, [sources of intelligence and evidence](#).

Missing person who is an alleged domestic abuse perpetrator

In cases where the reported missing person is, or might be, a domestic abuse suspect or offender, officers should do the following.

- Consider that a victim may be too frightened or ashamed to disclose that the missing person is an abuser. Where this is suspected, it may be useful to offer support through a partner agency.
- Ascertain whether the domestic abuse suspect or offender has threatened or attempted to commit suicide. Any threat or attempt to commit suicide should be treated seriously. Suicidal individuals should be considered as potentially homicidal and may pose a threat to the lives of the victim, child victims or others. It is not uncommon for domestic homicides to also involve the suicide of the abuser, see [family annihilation](#).
- Consider that a domestic abuse suspect or offender may have been reported missing with children. This might be as part of a contact arrangement or dispute. Child contact disputes and post-separation abuse are established risk factors for further harm and homicide.

Sex work

Abusers or family members can force victims into sex work. A procurer may be in a relationship with the person being exploited. No matter how the situation is presented, it is essential that officers clearly identify and act on the links between domestic abuse and sex work. Failure to recognise domestic abuse could have dangerous implications for the victim and any children. Being forced into sex work increases the vulnerability of the victim to further harm or homicide. Police operations addressing sex work should identify potential links between sex work and domestic abuse during the tasking and coordination process.

Where a victim is 16 or 17, child sexual exploitation may also be a factor.

See also NPCC (2024) [Sex Work National Police Guidance](#).

Sexual offences

The potential for domestic abuse cases to include sexual abuse needs to be an integral part of the earliest stages of an investigation. Sexual abuse may often form a part of domestic abuse but is rarely disclosed, particularly when other forms of abuse are the primary reasons for police

involvement. Most victims of sexual abuse find it difficult to disclose details of this, even at crisis point.

Information from partner agencies, particularly voluntary sector support services, may indicate the presence of sexual abuse. Officers should identify and act on this as appropriate.

Specially trained officers should offer domestic abuse victims the opportunity to disclose sexual abuse and access relevant support services. They should inform victims of local services such as sexual assault referral centres (SARCs), or their equivalents, and of the possible benefits of undergoing a forensic medical examination.

When sexual offences are disclosed as part of the investigation or risk identification process but were not the original reported incident, this information should be passed to the force intelligence capability and investigated.

Where a sexual offence is domestic in nature, forces should record it as both domestic abuse and sexual abuse.

Where a victim is 16 or 17, child sexual exploitation may also be a factor.

Operation Soteria is a multiyear project launched in response to the Government End-to-End Rape Review. It will introduce effective tools and techniques to ensure justice outcomes are achieved for sexual offences. [**A national operating model for responding to rape and serious sexual assault**](#) has been developed. It aims to improve policing procedures, increase charge rates and support equity across justice processes and outcomes.

To apply the principles of this model when responding to sexual offences, officers should be:

- victim centred by providing victims with the information they need so they can make decisions
- suspect focused by securing good quality evidence to ensure a full and thorough investigation can be done
- context led by considering the situation, relationship of the suspect and victim, and desires of the victim.

Related resources:

- [**APP on rape and sexual offences**](#)

- College of Policing [Briefing note: For police first responders to a report of rape or sexual assault](#)

Managing sexual offenders and violent offenders

Investigations that take place as part of the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders can relate to domestic abuse. [Multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#) offenders and potentially dangerous persons (PDPs) can have an offending background which includes domestic abuse.

Such abuse can also be uncovered during the management of offenders who have no record of such offending behaviour. For example, evidence of domestic abuse could be uncovered during a home visit to a registered sex offender (RSO). In all such cases, officers should investigate domestic abuse using this guidance. Information should be recorded and stored on appropriate police systems including the PND and ViSOR.

In some cases, domestic abuse offenders who are not managed within MAPPA or as PDPs will need to be included in force systems which manage such individuals.

Incidents that are not overtly domestic abuse

Other offences or incidents may be linked to domestic abuse, even where this is not apparent at the time of reporting. For example:

- street disturbances and public disorder such as breach of the peace
- antisocial behaviour
- neighbourhood disputes
- nuisance calls
- animal abuse or mistreatment
- criminal damage
- assaults

Information about domestic abuse may come to light in the course of criminal investigations into unrelated crimes. It may be that disclosure of abuse is made when an offender is brought into custody. Where there appears to be a background of domestic abuse, officers should be mindful that the apparently unrelated offence may have been committed in connection with abuse or as a

result of **controlling or coercive behaviour**, for example acquisitive crime committed on the instruction of a controlling partner. This should inform screening and assessment processes.

For example, where a low-level offender is a victim of domestic abuse, it may be appropriate to consider diversion schemes alongside appropriate support services. Suspected domestic abuse disclosed by an offender or suspect should be investigated as with any other victim.

Whatever the type of incident, it is essential that officers properly identify the domestic abuse element, including risk, and put the necessary processes and support services in place.

Tags

Domestic violence