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Who is the victim? Identifying victims and perpetrators in cases of coercive control

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Project exploring how police identify the primary victim and perpetrator in coercive control cases.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Central Lancashire
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Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	• University of Liverpool • N8 Policing Research Partnership
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	January 2023
Date due for completion	November 2025

Research context

Police officers' identification of the primary victim and perpetrator in domestic abuse cases can be complex. Elsewhere, these complexities have been found to lead to dual arrests, the misidentification of the primary perpetrator, and/or the denial of victim status for women. The potential of such outcomes has been found to have implications for marginalised women.

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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 USA and Australia, but there is limited work of this kind in England and Wales. 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.

Aims

This project endeavours to address this gap in knowledge. Funded by the N8 Policing Research Partnership, the project is framed by the following questions:

- 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?
- 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?

Research methodology

The project uses mixed methods and involves four stages:

1. Quantitative data relating to domestic abuse incidents, gathered covering 2019–2022.
2. A deep dive analysis of 58 coercive control case files.
3. 10 interviews with victim-survivors ranging from 1 to 2 hours in length.
4. 13 interviews with police officers of varying ranks and engagement with domestic abuse.

The purpose of this four-stage approach is to ensure that as far as possible, the qualitative data gathered can be appropriately situated and made sense of against the backcloth of quantitative data. The quantitative data is 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.