

Prosecuting intimate partner sexual violence and controlling and coercive behaviour

Qualitative research exploring how the Crown Prosecution Service prosecutes sexual violence within domestic abuse.

Key details

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Police region	London
Collaboration and partnership	• College of Policing • Crown Prosecution Service
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	January 2024
Date due for completion	March 2027

Research context

Previous research conducted as part of Operation Soteria (Stanko, 2022) found that intimate partner sexual violence cases are often challenging to investigate and prosecute, despite representing a significant proportion of rape and serious sexual offence cases. While research has improved understanding of police investigations (see Wiener and others, 2025; Pullerits and others, 2026), there remains a gap in evidence about how prosecutors understand and respond to these cases, how specialist units support prosecution, and how prosecutors and the police interact throughout investigations.

The aim of the project is to explore how the Crown Prosecution Service's structures, policies and practice influence the prosecution of sexual violence committed by a current or former partner and cases involving controlling and coercive behaviour. This project will examine the factors that help or hinder successful prosecutions, including prosecutors' knowledge, understanding and attitudes, the role of specialist units and approaches to the presentation of evidence in court. It will also explore prosecutors' views of police evidence gathering and wider investigative practices and charging decisions, including the challenges associated with domestic abuse cases being 'split' and different elements charged to different timescales.

The findings of this project will contribute to the delivery of the Crown Prosecution Service's five-year Violence Against Women and Girls strategy by providing evidence to support improvements in the investigation and prosecution of sexual violence and controlling or coercive behaviour. They will also inform police policy and practice, particularly in relation to evidence gathering and investigation and charging strategies.

Research methodology

This study will use a qualitative research design to understand how the Crown Prosecution Service prosecutes cases involving controlling and coercive behaviour and sexual violence in the context of domestic abuse.

This includes:

- semi-structured interviews and focus groups with prosecutors and senior managers
- ethnographic field observations of a crown court trial

The data collected from interview transcripts, focus groups and field notes will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Data will be coded and analysed to generate themes and identify patterns, similarities and differences in participants experiences and perspectives.

Research participation

Participants are Crown Prosecution Service prosecutors and senior managers from a range of units, including Rape and Serious Sexual Offences, Crown Court and Magistrates' Court teams. They will be recruited using purposive sampling to ensure adequate representation across roles,

specialisms and CPS areas, with snowball sampling used to identify individuals with relevant experience or expertise.

Options for the five-day trial observation will be provided by a Crown Prosecution Service area based on knowledge of court listings, enabling a case to be identified that is relevant to the research aims.

References

- Stanko E (2022). 'Operation Soteria Bluestone: Year 1 report 2021-2022'. London: Home Office.
- Wiener C, Myhill A and Pullerits M. (2025). [Improving police investigation of intimate partner sexual violence: challenges and opportunities](#). Policing and Society, volume 36, issue 1, pages 40–57.
- Pullerits M, Myhill A and Wiener C. (2026). [‘It builds the bigger picture’: viewing intimate partner sexual violence investigations through the lens of coercive control](#). Policing and Society, volume 36, issue 7, pages 861–877.
- Braun V and Clarke V. (2022). 'Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide'. London: Sage.