



COERCIVE CONTROL: PRACTITIONER GUIDANCE

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WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL?

Controlling behaviours can be portrayed as caring acts with the control being presented as protective and loving, when in reality it is the opposite. It underpins all forms of VAWDASV where the aim is to dominate and hold power over another.

Coercive control is an act, or a pattern of acts, such as assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Coercive control creates invisible chains and a sense of fear that pervades all elements of a victim's life. It works to limit their human rights by depriving them of their liberty and reducing their ability for action.

Experts, including Evan Stark, liken coercive control to being taken hostage:

“The victim becomes captive in an unreal world created by the abuser, entrapped in a world of confusion, contradiction and fear.”¹

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF COERCIVE CONTROL?

Any behaviour that seeks to limit the choices and the freedoms of another/others displays a need for power and control over that person. The need for this power and control often leads to increasingly dangerous and violent behaviour.

Various research over the last decade; Campbell et al., 2003; Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Myhill, 2015; Stark, 2007 has shown that there is evidence that cases involving coercive control are more likely to result in serious harm, including domestic homicide, than cases that involve discrete acts of physical violence.²

Because of these risks, it is important that consideration of any modified behaviour in the presence of another, or any changes in behaviour because of the influence of another, is taken seriously and responded to consistently.

WHO IS AFFECTED BY COERCIVE CONTROL?

Anyone can be affected by coercive control. It can affect all age groups and can affect both men and women. However, like many other forms of abuse women are disproportionately affected. It is also important to note the significant impact that living with coercive control has on children and young people.

¹ Women's Aid Website <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/coercive-control/>

²<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260516675464#:~:text=There%20is%20evidence%20that%20>
[0](#)

There were 41,626 offences of coercive control recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2022. This is compared with 33,954 in the year ending March 2021 and 24,856 in the year ending March 2020. The rise in coercive control offences over recent years may be attributed to improvements made by the police in recognising incidents of coercive control and using the [law](#) accordingly.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseprevalenceandtrendsenlandandwales/yearendingmarch2022>

For more information on the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour and the criminal justice outcomes for the offence see Prosecution and conviction outcomes.³

CASE STUDY

We know within Cwm Taf Morgannwg that the occurrences of domestic homicides reveal to us the pervasive and often allusive nature of coercive control. An example from a recent Adult Practice Review follows;

Adult J, a young woman in her early thirties, had complex needs arising from past trauma, mental illness and polysubstance misuse. Adult J was difficult to engage and was also selective about which services she communicated with.

Adult J began a relationship with G who also had mental health issues and misused substances. G was on probation at the time because of a conviction of Common Assault of an ex-partner. A condition of his probation was that he should disclose if he entered another intimate relationship. A Clare's Law disclosure was made by South Wales Police to Adult J about the history of G.

It is clear that G was physically abusive towards Adult J and also coercively controlling of her. He kept her away from support services and possible sources of help by answering her phone and accompanying her to appointments. However, apart from when he physically attacked her and she needed to seek immediate help, Adult J was in denial about G's behaviour, saying they were both as bad as each other and then describing him as her carer, and that she could not do without him.

Coercive control is insidious, powerful, far-reaching, and difficult to challenge. Even when relationships end the risks are still present. Victims of coercive control often do not realise that they are victims, even when there is clear evidence. The Clare's Law disclosure to Adult J about G's history early on in the relationship seemed to make little difference. His influence and constant presence exacerbated the difficulties that

³ Office for National Statistics

[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseandthecriminaljusticesystemenglandandwales/november2020#:~:text=There%20were%2024%2C856%20offences%20of,G%20MP\)%20in%20the%20previous%20year.](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseandthecriminaljusticesystemenglandandwales/november2020#:~:text=There%20were%2024%2C856%20offences%20of,G%20MP)%20in%20the%20previous%20year.)

professionals had in trying to engage with her, increased the chaos in her life and impacted adversely on any motivation she may have had to make changes.

Tragically Adult J was found deceased in bed at her home address. Adult J's death was unexpected, and the cause of her death remains unclear as she was not found for some time. In the weeks leading up to her death Adult J had been seriously assaulted by G, but she did not want an injunction taken out and had determined to go to court to speak up for G.

WHAT IS THE LAW ON COERCIVE CONTROL?

Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 - Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship. Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship. Prior to the introduction of this offence, case law indicated the difficulty in proving a pattern of behaviour amounting to harassment within an intimate relationship (the Statutory Guidance cites the following cases - Curtis [2010] EWCA Crim 123 and Widdows [2011] EWCA Crim 1500).

With the introduction of the **Domestic Abuse 2021 Act (UK)** changes of emphasis have now taken effect and specifically the new Act supports the view that domestic abuse can take many forms. The legal definition now incorporates a range of abuses beyond physical violence, including emotional, coercive or controlling behaviour and economic abuse. The abuse can be behaviour consisting of a single incident or a course of conduct.

The Act extends the offence of coercive and controlling behaviour, no longer making it a requirement for abusers and victims to either still be in a relationship or to still live together. There is significant research which shows that those who leave abusive ex-partners can often face sustained or increased controlling or coercive behaviour post-separation. As a consequence, we know that victims are at a heightened risk of homicide during the period immediately following separation.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO RESPOND TO THOSE EXPERIENCING COERCIVE CONTROL?

A response to coercive control needs to be as wide and varied as the abuse itself. It needs all services, partners and agencies to have a consistent and timely response to any concerns

Awareness within all sectors and the public is needed for the traits and behaviours of coercive control to be widely known and recognised. This needs to be done via training, disseminating information and awareness raising.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS TO HELP AND SUPPORT THOSE EXPERIENCING COERCIVE CONTROL?

Notes and evidence are key when and if a case of coercive control goes through legal proceedings. It is imperative to keep notes even if the client doesn't want to pursue legal action at the time as they may wish to in the future. You can assist in this as a professional by keeping your own record of events and encouraging your client to do the same, safely. A list of helpful evidence can be found here under section 5 [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship | The Crown Prosecution Service \(cps.gov.uk\)](#).

If you are working with a client who is a perpetrator of coercive control, it is also key that you consider guidance under section 7 also. [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship | The Crown Prosecution Service \(cps.gov.uk\)](#) It is also key to remember that there are specific services for perpetrators to offering support and help with reflecting on their behaviour.

TRAINING

The complexities surrounding coercive control are vast and varied. Accessing additional training is recommended to enhance your awareness and knowledge and to provide you with additional tools to recognise coercive control and how to effectively respond.

Training on understanding perpetrators will also enable you to gain knowledge on perpetrator patterns and behaviours to support early identification of concerning behaviours. In addition to these, if you are in a forward-facing role where you work directly with people who may be victims or perpetrators of any form of VAWDASV then Ask and Act Group 2 training will also help you to know how to ask sensitive and direct questions around VAWDASV and respond effectively to any disclosures.

As a minimum we would recommend you access the following training to support your awareness and understanding of coercive control.

- Understanding DA and Coercive Control
- Understanding Risk and MARAC

SUPPORT SERVICES

When working with anyone who is experiencing coercive control, it is important to remember that you are not expected to be an expert, but to know that there are experts in this field who can work to support you and your client to get the wide range of support that they may need.

Please visit the following for a link support services:

[Domestic Abuse | Safeguarding, Cwm Taf Morgannwg \(cwmtafmorgannwgsafeguardingboard.co.uk\)](http://cwmtafmorgannwgsafeguardingboard.co.uk)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND CAMPAIGNS

WARNING – before watching these videos and resources there may be content that could be triggering for some so, please watch or share with caution.

- This video made my Scottish Women's Aid also provides a helpful overview. [\(130\) Hidden in Plain Sight - Coercive Control and Domestic Abuse - YouTube](#)
- In this video, Professor Evan Stark, forensic social worker and author of 'Coercive Control' talks to Welsh Women's Aid about how he's discovered controlling behaviour affects children and young people [\(130\) Professor Evan Stark: Coercive Control and Children - YouTube](#)
- Leslie Morgan Steiner was in "crazy love" -- that is, madly in love with a man who routinely abused her and threatened her life. [Leslie Morgan Steiner: Why domestic violence victims don't leave | TED Talk](#)
- What Social Worker's Need to Know About Coercive Control [\(128\) What Social Worker Need to Know About Coercive Control - YouTube](#)
- This is not Love, this is Control Welsh Government Campaign. [This is control | GOV.WALES](#)