



## Multi-Agency Practitioner Briefing – Coercive Control

### The current Home Office definition of domestic abuse is:

"Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners **or** family members, regardless of gender or sexuality."

**Controlling behaviour** is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

**Coercive behaviour** is a continuing act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

### Legislation

The offence of Coercive Control came into force on 29th December 2015 as part of The Serious Crime Act 2015. The new offence closes a gap in the law around patterns of controlling or coercive behaviour in an ongoing relationship between intimate partners or family members. The offence carries a maximum sentence of 5 years' imprisonment.

### Definition

Coercive control involves the use of abusive behaviours used frequently in daily interactions to gain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner and is not gender specific. Physical and sexual violence are typically used only occasionally to reinforce and add power to the abuse when the emotional tactics are not achieving the desired goals.

To be classed as coercive control the following need to be the case:

- On at least two occasions the victim has feared that violence will be used against them
- They have felt serious alarm or distress and it has had a substantial effect on their usual day to day activities, or serious psychological impact
- It has caused them to change the way in which they live e.g. the way in which they socialise, do household chores or how they care for their children
- There is related deterioration in their physical or mental health
- The perpetrator should know or "ought to have known" that the behaviour would have a serious effect on the victim
- As a result of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, control and coercion can now apply after a relationship has ended, acknowledging that abusers will often seek to continue this abusive behaviour to control and coerce a victim even after the end of a relationship.

Although physical violence is more overt, behaviours involved in coercive control are even more emotionally harmful. These sometimes-subtle behaviours are more difficult to detect and prove. Coercive control is central to the definition of intimate partner violence. Such control creates an ongoing sense of fear and the victim adapts their behaviour to survive.

## Behaviours used by perpetrators

- Intimidation (e.g., threatening looks and gestures)
- Controlling or tracking movements
- Emotional abuse (e.g. excessive criticism and humiliation or controlling appearance and food consumption)
- Isolation (e.g., limiting or creating barriers for contact with family and friends)
- Minimizing or denying the abuse or blaming the victim for the behaviour
- Threatening to take or hurt children or involve them in the abuse (e.g. used to monitor the victim's whereabouts)
- Controlling or preventing sleep
- Controlling social media use
- Using social privilege, such as patriarchy, racism, homophobia, or other forms of oppression
- Coercion and threats
- Economic abuse (e.g., controlling or limiting access to finances/resources)
- Setting rules for the victim to abide by which may be changed arbitrarily
- 'Gaslighting', distorting a person's sense of their own reality such that they question their own perceptions

## Forms of abuse in which coercion and control may exist

- **Intimate terrorism** is defined as a relationship in which one partner is the primary aggressor and is both violent and controlling
- **Mutual violent control** exists where both partners are physically violent and use coercive control
- **Common couple violence** exists where both partners use violence but not coercive control
- **Violent resistance** is where physical violence is perpetrated by the partner who has historically been the victim. This violence is perpetrated in response to the violence and controlling behaviour of the primary aggressor

## Coercion and control in familial/care environments

It is important to remember that behaviours associated with coercion and control are not limited to relationships between intimate partners and may be present in other relationships such as between siblings, parents and their children, or an adult and their carer. When an adult is reliant on another person for their care and support it can become very difficult for them or for others around them to recognise the behaviour as coercion and control. There are also other factors for practitioners to consider in relation to the adult who is being controlled as they could be afraid of the care relationship being removed or altered by reporting this behaviour or by accepting help from agencies.

A Derbyshire Safeguarding Adult Review, SAR18A, highlighted that there were features of coercion and control between a mother and her adult daughter. The mother was a full-time carer for her daughter and there was evidence that the mother had isolated her daughter, limited her access to fluids and denied her access to services. For many years the daughter's views were not heard by practitioners. It became accepted that mother always answered questions on her daughter's behalf. Mother employed a number of strategies to keep agencies away which indicated the presence of, 'disguised compliance'; this is when a person gives the appearance of co-operating with services to avoid raising suspicions. Disguised compliance can be closely linked with coercion and control.

A summary of learning from Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) 2014 – 18 identified that agencies needed to exercise professional curiosity when dealing with domestic abuse, particularly in cases of coercion and control, that staff need training to recognise it and be aware that perpetrators are adept in exercising control and may seek to control and manipulate professionals it is important for professionals to remain neutral and not endorse abusive behaviour by language or actions.

A Derbyshire Domestic Homicide Review, RDCNH 19, identified complexities within families and the roll of carers within those families coping alone to support an individual with mental health and or substance misuse whose condition may be exerting control over a household which is not recognised. Whilst carers play a key role in an individual's care, those providing care will not always identify themselves as Carers. They may not be aware of how they can contribute information nor of what support they can receive. Agencies need to 'Think Family' and be attuned to identifying hidden carers and reach out to support and involve carers in the individual's care.

## Gathering evidence

Coercive control can be reported to the police even if the victim does not have any other evidence. The victim's statement itself is evidence in the case. The police will investigate any reports of coercive control and gather evidence. Victims may be able to help the police by providing copies of:

- Emails, screen shots and social media messages
- Text messages
- Voicemail recordings
- Photographs of injuries
- Photographs of damage to property
- Bank statements
- Keeping a diary of day to day experiences
- Medical and financial records
- CCTV
- Witness testimony

## References

- [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship – statutory guidance framework December 2015 \(Home Office\)](#)
- [Interpersonal Violence: Coercive Control \(What-When-How.com\)](#)
- [Domestic abuse: staff guidance \(Safer Derbyshire\)](#)
- [Derbyshire Safeguarding Adults Board SAR18A Learning Brief](#)
- [Domestic Homicide Review RDCNH 19 Learning Brief](#)
- [Derbyshire Safeguarding Adult Board website](#)
- Derbyshire Safeguarding Adults Board on [Twitter \(@DerbyshireSAB\)](#)
- Derbyshire Safeguarding Adults Board on [Facebook \(@DerbyshireSAB\)](#)
- [Safer Derbyshire](#) website

## Practice and reflection

- Thinking about cases you have worked with previously or currently, what examples can you think of that involve coercive control?
- What do you need to consider for effective risk management in cases involving coercive control?
- How would a multi-agency approach assist in managing cases where coercive control features?
- What support can be offered to victims experiencing coercive control?