

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON COERCIVE CONTROL

Recommendations from the Violence Abuse and
Mental Health Network's Lived Experience
Advisory Group



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Introduction

Coercive control describes a pattern of acts and behaviours aimed at dominating and subjugating others through the systematic erosion of their autonomy and freedom. It encompasses a range of behaviours including manipulation, isolating individuals from support networks, restricting financial resources, and using threats, assaults, humiliation, or intimidation to harm, punish, or frighten others. The tactics used can be subtle and difficult to identify, and can vary across relationships.

Research on coercive control is needed for several reasons. Firstly, its recognition as a distinct form of abuse is relatively recent, requiring further investigation of its prevalence, impacts, and dynamics across populations and contexts. Additionally, there is a lack of evidence on the consequences of coercive control on individuals' mental health and wellbeing and on its societal implications. Furthermore, as laws and policies evolve to address coercive control, research is needed to inform effective interventions and



support mechanisms, whilst also enhancing prevention strategies within communities and institutions. A 2021 Home Office review of the coercive and controlling behaviour offence found that coercive and controlling behaviour offences recorded by the police has increased from 4,246 in 2016/17 to 24,856 [1]. Nevertheless more than 85% of all reported cases ended due to evidential difficulties, including where survivors have withdrawn from the process, highlighting that evidencing coercive and controlling behaviour remains a challenge for police and prosecutors.

Survivors' involvement in identifying research priorities for coercive control is crucial to ensuring future research aligns with real-world needs. Therefore, in 2023 the Violence Abuse and Mental Health Network's Lived Experience Advisory Group (VAMHN LEAG) undertook a consultation to determine priorities for future research on coercive control.



The consultation was undertaken in partnership with the VAMHN LEAG, which comprises eight individuals with lived experience of violence and/or abuse and mental ill-health.

[1] Home Office (2021). Review of the Controlling or Coercive Behaviour Offence. London: Home Office. The 2016/17 figure is based on data received from 38 of the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales. The 2019/20 figure is based on data received from 42 of the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales.

Approach

The consultation involved a three-stage process.

1 GENERATION OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

In August 2023, we compiled a list of potential research topics by reviewing existing literature. Our goal wasn't to cover every possible research topic but to establish a starting point for LEAG members to add to and assess.

2 REFINEMENT OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

The initial list of research topics was shared with LEAG members and discussed in two online meetings held in September 2023. During these sessions, members discussed, refined, expanded, added, and removed topics.

3 RANKING OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

The revised list was transferred to an online ranking tool (Slido) and items were ranked by LEAG members in order of importance. LEAG members could complete rankings either during a video meeting or asynchronously over a two-week period in September 2023 in order to accommodate members' schedules and preferences. We subsequently refined the list further, identifying and consolidating similar or duplicate items; where this happened, the highest ranking of the merged items was maintained. The revised prioritised list was shared with LEAG members for final comments, feedback, and adjustments in October 2023.



Survivor Engagement

All VAMHN LEAG activities are led in line with the principles of the Survivors Voices Charter [2] which outlines best practice for engaging survivors. This includes:

- Creating a sense of safety to help ensure the workshops were a safe space where people could know they were free to share (or not share) about experiences.
- Running relatively small groups to enable safety and ensure that everyone had a chance to be heard.
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- Ensuring that workshops did not inadvertently replicate the dynamics of abuse and therefore cause harm, e.g., avoiding replicating any form of 'silencing' or feeling of people not having their voice heard (a characteristic of abuse).
- Being clear about the benefits of participating, including opportunities for participants to meet and connect with others with similar experiences.
- Providing various ways for people to provide feedback if they did not want to share their experiences in a group setting.
- Following up with attendees afterwards, summarising the findings and providing feedback about how the information would be used in the Network.

LEAG members were paid in line with INVOLVE guidelines, including an allowance for preparation ahead of the meetings, which lasted two hours. Pastoral support is offered to LEAG members on an ongoing basis by the VAMHN Lived Experience Involvement Coordinator, and LEAG members are regularly reminded that they can contact the Coordinator at any point to debrief or discuss concerns.



Survivor voices are integrated across all aspects of this work. However, due to the relatively small size of the LEAG, some voices will not be fully represented within this document. Whilst we have representation from (but not limited to) those who have used and/or been harmed by mental health services, Global Majority groups, the LGBTQ+ community, those who are neurodivergent, and males, the voices of Global Majority individuals, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and male survivors may be less represented than others (for example women). For more information about the LEAG, please visit our [website](#).

[2] Perôt C, Chevous J; Survivors Voices Research Group. 2018. Turning Pain into Power: A charter for organisations engaging abuse survivors in projects, research & service development. Accessed 6 May 2021 <http://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Survivors-Charter-Final-V1-for-Piloting-Oct-2018.pdf>

Findings

The final priorities were organised into eight overarching themes. The top two priorities per theme are listed below in order as ranked by those with lived experience, the themes are not ranked in any particular order.

THEME	PRIORITY	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
UNDERSTANDING, DEFINING AND MEASURING COERCIVE CONTROL	Improved public awareness of what coercive control is	When people understand what coercive control is, they may be more likely to identify it and get help or be able to support someone experiencing this kind of abuse. With better awareness, society can create a more supportive environment for survivors.
	Better understanding of who is impacted by coercive control (including stigmas and stereotypes)	Alongside work to improve public understanding of what coercive control is, we need a better understanding of who is affected by coercive control. This research is needed to help challenge misperceptions about who is affected by coercive control, to make sure that everyone who is affected can access appropriate support, and to see if some groups face more barriers to support.
MENTAL/ PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS	Better understanding of the impacts of coercive control on mental health and how this differs to other forms of abuse	Knowledge is lacking on whether and how coercive control impacts mental health differently than other abusive behaviours. Developing a greater understanding of this would help improve support, by enabling support systems to be tailored to address specific needs.
	Understanding the long term mental and physical impacts of experiencing coercive control	Looking beyond the immediate effects of coercive control to understand how this form of abuse can affect mental and physical health over a prolonged period would inform the development of more comprehensive support systems in order to promote the long-term health and wellbeing of survivors.

THEME	PRIORITY	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
<p>ECONOMIC</p>	<p>Better understanding of how economic abuse is used for the purposes of coercive control (including how both withholding or overusing finances can be used as a route to control)</p>	<p>Economic abuse is employed as a means of coercive control. By understanding the methods by which finances are used to exert control, we can develop more effective support systems and interventions to assist survivors of economic abuse. This understanding is vital in providing targeted help that addresses the financial aspects of coercive control, empowering survivors to regain financial independence and security.</p>
	<p>Mapping and improved public awareness of the support available for economic abuse (gaps, services etc)</p>	<p>Mapping what support is available for people experiencing economic abuse is essential and includes identifying any gaps or deficiencies in services. By mapping these resources (e.g., companies and charities that provide or support consumers with loans, credit, direct debits, financial accounts etc., such as banks, building societies, credit lenders, catalogue companies, online companies, supermarkets, phone companies, PayPal, charities and helplines) we can highlight areas where support services may be lacking or inaccessible.</p> <p>Improving public awareness ensures that survivors are aware of the available assistance, such as financial counselling or legal aid, and can access these services easily. Ultimately, enhancing awareness and support for economic abuse aids in providing survivors with the necessary tools and resources to break free from financial manipulation and regain control over their economic well-being.</p>
<p>TECHNOLOGY</p>	<p>Greater knowledge about how old, new, and evolving technology is used to control/humiliate/shame people in the context of coercive control</p>	<p>Understanding how technology is employed to control, humiliate, or shame individuals within coercive control dynamics involves studying how abusers might use smartphones, social media, or other devices to monitor, harass, or manipulate their victims. By exploring these methods, we can develop better ways to recognize and address these digital forms of abuse, ensuring that support systems and interventions keep pace with evolving technology. This research is vital in safeguarding individuals against digital coercion, aiming to empower both survivors and support providers</p>
	<p>Mapping of current laws around device use, apps to protect people, and gaps in knowledge</p>	<p>Empowering both survivors and support providers</p>

THEME	PRIORITY	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
		<p>with the knowledge needed to navigate these modern forms of abuse more effectively.</p> <p>Mapping the existing laws related to device usage, protective apps, and gaps in knowledge is essential in helping identify legal loopholes or shortcomings in the protection of individuals experiencing technology-enabled coercive control. By understanding the strengths and limitations of current legal frameworks and available protective technologies, we can advocate for necessary legal reforms and the development of more effective digital tools to enhance the safety and security of those vulnerable to coercive control tactics. Ultimately, this knowledge aids in fostering a more resilient and responsive legal and technological landscape to counter technology-enabled coercive control.</p>
<p>THE JUSTICE SYSTEM</p>	<p>Understanding the barriers to seeking justice for survivors of coercive control</p>	<p>Barriers to justice might include fear of retaliation, a fear of stigma, lack of evidence, or scepticism from authorities: this requires further study in the context of coercive control. Understanding these barriers helps in creating more supportive legal pathways that address survivors' needs, ensuring they feel safer and more empowered to seek justice. By identifying and mitigating these obstacles, we can work towards a legal system that better serves survivors of coercive control, fostering an environment where seeking justice becomes more accessible and less daunting.</p> <p>Additionally, gaining insight into survivors' preferences and support needs regarding prosecution—whether they find it important, effective, or prefer alternative outcomes such as community or restorative justice orders—is essential. Such research would aim to understand survivors' desires and feelings towards legal actions, determining if they perceive prosecution as a meaningful form of justice or if they seek alternative resolutions. Survivors' wishes and needs in relation to these alternative resolutions</p>
	<p>Greater understanding of survivors' wishes in relation to prosecution: is it important, is it effective, and what are survivors' wishes and support needs in terms of custodial/community sentencing and case sensitive restorative justice orders etc.</p>	

THEME	PRIORITY	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
		<p>should also be explored, with dedicated support from experienced services.</p> <p>By honouring survivors' wishes and preferences, legal systems can adapt to better meet their needs, offering a range of options that align with survivors' goals for resolution and recovery. This understanding is pivotal in tailoring legal responses that prioritise survivors' well-being and autonomy, ensuring that justice systems are responsive and supportive of survivors' choices and needs, rather than being driven by the perpetrator.</p>
<p>ACROSS THE LIFECOURSE AND ACROSS COMMUNITIES</p>	<p>Improving provider understanding of how coercive control varies in different contexts and in relation to protected characteristics.</p>	<p>Coercive control may manifest differently across diverse contexts due to social, cultural, or systemic factors. Understanding and improving awareness of these variations is essential to offering more inclusive and tailored assistance, ensuring that survivors from different backgrounds receive culturally sensitive and effective support. By acknowledging these differences, providers can adapt their approaches to better address the diverse needs and experiences of individuals facing coercive control, fostering more accessible and empathetic support services.</p> <p>Furthermore, gaining deeper knowledge about how coercive control operates within familial relationships is essential. By studying these dynamics, support providers can better recognize and intervene in cases where family members exert coercive control. Understanding these nuances aids in developing strategies that help both survivors and families navigate these complex dynamics, offering tailored support and interventions that preserve familial relationships while ensuring the safety and autonomy of individuals experiencing coercive control within family contexts.</p>
	<p>Greater knowledge of how coercive control is used within and impacts on families (e.g. parent on children, or children on parents etc, step-parents, grandparents, siblings, carers etc.).</p>	
<p>RECOVERY</p>	<p>Knowledge about and access to effective, quality support after the immediate crisis phase</p>	<p>Having access to effective, evidence-based support after the immediate crisis phase is crucial for survivors of coercive control. This means</p>

THEME	PRIORITY	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
	Evidence for support/programs for rebuilding life and self after experiencing coercive control	ensuring that survivors have ongoing help and resources beyond the initial emergency situations. It's about providing continued support to help survivors cope with the aftermath, deal with any lasting effects, and rebuild their lives. This support could include counselling, community resources, or practical assistance, aiming to help survivors regain their confidence and stability after experiencing coercive control.
PERPETRATION AND PREVENTION	Mapping the educational needs of perpetrators and potential perpetrators	Addressing perpetration is crucial to ending abuse, with education important in challenging harmful beliefs, promoting healthy relationships, and fostering cultures that value respect and equality. Work is needed to map the effective components of education programmes aimed at addressing coercive control.
	Greater understanding of educational needs of young people and new parents to prevent coercive control	Similarly, gaining a deeper understanding of what's needed to educate young people and new parents to prevent coercive control is essential. This involves recognizing the knowledge, resources, and approaches required to equip young individuals and new parents with the tools to recognize and avoid coercive behaviours in relationships. By focusing on education and prevention at an early stage, we can instil values of mutual respect, healthy communication, and empathy, thereby creating a foundation for healthier relationships and reducing the likelihood of coercive control in future generations. This understanding helps in developing targeted educational initiatives that empower young people and new parents to build respectful, non-coercive relationships from the outset.

Reflections and Impact

This consultation aims to direct the future work of the VAMHN, including the work of the LEAG, for example through the development of workshops and other activities that address key priorities identified by the group. Survivor involvement is central to the ethos of VAMHN, which aims to facilitate active co-production with those who have lived experience of violence, abuse, and mental health problems, within the constraints of the larger systematic context.



We hope the consultation inspires other researchers interested in developing research priorities based on the experiences of survivors. Researchers using this consultation document to plan future research should be mindful that the VAMHN LEAG is not fully representative of the wider population of survivors of violence, abuse, and mental health problems.

Appendix 1: Full list of potential research topics

All potential research topics identified and considered are listed below. Within each theme, research topics are listed in order of priority, as determined and ranked by VAMHN LEAG members.

THEME	PRIORITY
UNDERSTANDING, DEFINING AND MEASURING COERCIVE CONTROL	Improved public awareness of what coercive control (CC) is
	Better understanding of who is impacted by CC (including stigmas and stereotypes)
	Better and more widely accepted definitions of CC
	Better understanding of differences between different demographics and different cultural contexts
	Increased integration of terms that are being used in popular discourse into CC definitions (eg. narcissistic abuse, gaslighting etc.)
	Better understanding of the role of power in CC
	Better understanding of the premeditated nature and techniques used for CC, and how CC works
	Improved education of professionals - improvement in taking CC abuse seriously
	Improving measuring tools for assessment of CC
	Better understanding generational trauma from CC
	Better understanding of different contexts in which coercive control occurs
	Reduction of stigmas and taboos

THEME	PRIORITY
	Better public understanding of why knowledge about CC matters
	More understanding of the impacts on a child's behaviour when viewing CC in parental relationships
	Wider public aware of issues of male privilege and societies role in enabling CC
MENTAL/ PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS	Better understanding of the impacts of coercive control on mental health and how this differs to other forms of abuse
	Understanding the long term mental and physical impacts of experiencing coercive control
	Greater understanding the link between CC and trauma
	More research and recognition of complex-ptsd as an outcome of CC
	Better understanding of impact of exposure to CC over a long period of time
	Greater understanding of the misdiagnosis of BPD/Bipolar in people who have experienced CC / lack of useful diagnosis given for those who have experienced CC
	More understanding of how CC impacts views of the self (self-esteem, erasure of perspectives and values)
	Better access to MH support specific to CC recovery
	More research and awareness of gaslighting and manipulation and how this impacts mental health
	Better understanding of the physical health impacts of experiencing CC
	Better training for professionals to identify and support recovery needs of survivors of CC
	Improved knowledge about what interventions work to improve mental health in relation to CC

	Impacts on wider life due to experiencing CC - for example the impacts on credit ratings, how MH diagnoses impacts driving and insurance etc
	Greater understanding of how health care systems can be used by perpetrators for control
	The intersect between mental capacity and CC (e.g. in cases of dementia)
ECONOMIC	Better understanding of how economic abuse is used for the purposes of coercive control (including how both withholding or overusing finances can be used as a route to control)
	Mapping and improved public awareness of the support available for economic abuse (gaps, services etc)
	Changing public attitudes towards economic abuse used for CC
	Greater understanding of how systems can support victim-survivors without increasing risk
	Understanding how current economic systems enable CC
	Greater understanding of cultural aspects related to economic abuse - e.g. family in another country
	Identifying the postcode lottery - of services and support - funding arrangement. Plus environment access to support routes (for example do you have internet access, are you in a rural area with no bus access etc)
	Use of children within financial controls / financial manipulation of family (e.g. buying gifts, or using finances to support them in different ways/lack of making maintenance payments)
	How evidence from systems can be better used to evidence abuse (e.g. banking trails) and how financial organisations can take responsibility for detecting and preventing abuse (Changes needed in banking (e.g. lack of private spaces to say 'no I don't want to do this', triggers of frequent payments etc))
	Economic abuse in the context of trafficking victim-survivors
	(mis)use of banking, benefit and social security systems to enable CC
	Use of finances to shame someone (e.g. paying for meals publicly) / financial humiliation

THEME	PRIORITY
	Awareness of what next steps of financial abuse might be as systems change
	How changes in public awareness might have both positive and negative impacts on economic abuse e.g., awareness of how to remove people from mortgages etc - (e.g. removing someone not paying from account/not being removed from account when you are paying)
TECHNOLOGY	Greater knowledge about how old, new, and evolving technology is used to control/humiliate/shame people in the context of coercive control
	Mapping of current laws around device use, apps to protect people, and gaps in knowledge
	Greater public awareness of technology facilitated CC
	Greater public knowledge of resources for support
	Greater knowledge on how digital illiteracy can enable CC
	Mapping of gaps about what we don't know - generational gaps / technology literacy / volume of tech options out there
	Greater understanding of companies roles in retaining evidence of technological abuse
	Mapping training needs around technology facilitated abuse
	Greater understanding of how password control and other systems may be used as a form of abuse through limiting freedoms
	Knowledge of how the dark web could be used to enable abuse (pictures, sold etc)
	Knowledge of how cat-fishing can be used to facilitate abuse
	Greater understanding of the use of AI - and how to develop it to use helpfully
THE JUSTICE SYSTEM	Understanding the barriers to seeking justice for survivors of coercive control

THEME	PRIORITY
	Greater understanding of survivors' wishes in relation to prosecution: is it important, is it effective, and and what are survivors' wishes and support needs in terms of custodial/community sentencing and case sensitive restorative justice orders etc.
	Review of current laws (are they fit for purpose)
	Understanding of are victims treated by the legal system in relation to CC and improvements required
	Better training for police, lawyers and judges to recognise and respond to CC
	Barriers to legal support around CC
	Improving survivor understanding about what might happen within the CJS
	Greater knowledge on how race and ethnicity intersect with policing systems in relation of CC
	Greater understanding on the best way to conduct police investigations in relation to CC
	Greater understanding of the burden of evidence and how this enabled further abuse
	Greater knowledge on the police's ability to signpost to support services
	Awareness raising for jurors
	Investigating the need for dedicated courts for abuse
	Structural issues - lack of prison resources for rehabilitation, lack of resources for police to investigate etc
	Public knowledge around the use of Claire's law
	Greater understanding of perpetrators use the justice system as a weapon

THEME	PRIORITY
	Impacts for survivors in court system - e.g. how body language plays out etc
	Connection between criminal justice and social justice (prevention) and lack of sharing information - multi-agency working in this space
	Greater understanding of perpetrators use the justice system as a weapon
	Limits to be able report - e.g. many people not able to report due to time
ACROSS THE LIFECOURSE AND ACROSS COMMUNITIES	Improving provider understanding of how coercive control varies in different contexts and in relation to protected characteristics.
	Greater knowledge of how coercive control is used within and impacts on families (e.g. parent on children, or children on parents etc, step-parents, grandparents, siblings, carers etc.).
	Youth awareness and training for what is and is not normal in relationships
	Improving the lack of services for minoritised groups (e.g. male survivors)
	Language barriers for d/Deaf community and those who don't have English as first lang. Both in terms of service provision, and also perps misusing this - Power and control
	Awareness and support of CC in older populations
	Impact on wider relationships e.g. friends/family etc
	Greater understanding of the 'Bad boy/girl' appeal/desire of people to fix controlling people
	Support for youth experiencing dating violence
	CC use in other contexts - for example perpetrators limiting access to spaces such as schools, faith groups, health care etc

THEME	PRIORITY
RECOVERY	Knowledge about and access to effective, quality support after the immediate crisis phase
	Evidence for support/programs for rebuilding life and self after experiencing coercive control
	Greater knowledge on what exists to help or aid recovery and the time frame this might be needed for
	Improved understanding for survivors to recognise CC behaviours and prevent being involved in CC relationships again in the future
	Improved survivor knowledge of how to rebuild trust with the right people
	Possibilities for building on the work of the freedom programme to ensure it covers CC
	Difference in recovery for different groups of people (e.g. male survivors v female etc)
	Improved access to services like EMDR for re-traumatisation through a new experience
	Breaking down victim-blaming narratives which inhibit recovery - e.g. onus on victim-survivor rather than messages of perps looking for vulnerable people
	Improved understanding of how to recover from different types of CC - e.g. financial impacts in terms of credit score - practical as well as emotional
	Understanding the possible links between personality types (e.g. empaths) and experience of abuse - unlearning behaviours
	Social impacts on recovery - social messages intersect with CC
	PERPETRATION AND PREVENTION
Greater understanding of educational needs of young people and new parents to prevent coercive control	

THEME	PRIORITY
	Greater knowledge on how to distinguish between one off controlling/coercive behaviour and patterns of abuse
	The current use of Claire's Law in relation to CC
	Education on what the consequences of CC is e.g. being on register etc

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The Violence Abuse and Mental Health Network (VAMHN) aims to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems across the life course by addressing associated violence and abuse. To achieve this aim, it brings together experts with different ways of thinking about violence, abuse and mental health including those with lived experience, those with practice-based experience, and those with research experience. To find out more about us, go to:



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