

Young People's Understanding of Coercive Control

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What's this about?

Experiences of domestic violence or abuse are not limited to adult relationships. Increasing evidence has demonstrated that a significant proportion of young people can, and do, experience harm within their own intimate relationships (Barter et al., 2017). Domestic abuse is defined in the 2016 Northern Ireland Government Strategy - *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland* - as 'threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former partner or family member'.

Research has shown that young people are exposed to similar forms of violence and abuse as those described by adult victims (Korkmaz, Överlien and Lagerlöf, 2020), as well as other forms of abuse related to increasing use of technology and media (Patton et al., 2014). The negative outcomes associated with these experiences for young people include significant mental health consequences as well as increased risk of future victimisation (Barter and Stanley, 2016). Much of the existing youth-related research has concentrated on female experiences of dating violence, with less focus on male victims, in turn generating less evidence.

This Research Update is focused on coercive control, a form of domestic

abuse also known as emotional or psychological abuse, indirect abuse, or emotional torture. This is characterised by a pattern of behaviour which aims to intimidate, threaten and humiliate a person or restrict a person's liberty (e.g., isolating a person from friends and family; taking control over aspects of everyday life such as where a person can go and who they can see; monitoring or controlling social media accounts; repeatedly putting a person down; or making threats and intimidating a person to frighten them).

During 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive introduced the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill which has now passed its final stages in becoming law. The Bill means that domestic abuse offences in Northern Ireland will no longer be limited to acts of physical violence and makes coercive control an offence. This better reflects the experience of domestic abuse victims, and also should improve the criminal justice response which holds perpetrators accountable for all patterns of harmful and abusive behaviour. This offence is expected to be operational within Northern Ireland by the end of 2021 and recognises those under 18 years of age (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2021/2/enacted>).

To address the need for evidence-based knowledge to improve public awareness and victim responding to coercive control, a module of questions was included in the 2020-21 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey of 16 year olds,

with the aim of capturing data on young people's understanding of coercive control within intimate relationships.

What did we do?

The YLT survey questions were based on the findings of a consultation with relevant stakeholders (e.g. Northern Health and Social Care Trust; Adult Mental Health and Children services; Causeway Women's Aid; Barnardo's NI; Nexus NI; and Department of Justice NI). The survey module included a scenario describing coercive control within an intimate heterosexual relationship. Half of the sample (Group A) were presented with scenario 1, with a male perpetrator and female victim. The other half of the sample (Group B) were presented with scenario 2: a female perpetrator and a male victim. Figure 1 presents excerpts of the scenarios. After reading the scenario, respondents were instructed to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement to ten statements covering attitudes towards: coercive and controlling behaviours; victims of coercive control; talking about coercive control; and whether coercive control is a crime.

Attitudes towards behaviours

All participants were asked if they had heard of the term coercive control and if they understood what this term meant. Sixty per cent of the young people who took part in the survey indicated that they had not heard of the term coercive control and did not know what this means. One quarter of respondents indicated

that they had heard of the term but did not know its meaning (24%). Therefore, only 16 per cent indicated that they had heard of the term and understood its meaning. A lower proportion of female respondents (13%) said that they knew what coercive control means, whilst males (19%) were more likely to have heard the term and know what it means.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the ten statements, presented separately for the scenario with a female victim, and the scenario with a male victim.

Figure 1: Example taken from scenarios

**Coercive Control -
Female Victim**

(Group A - Scenario 1)

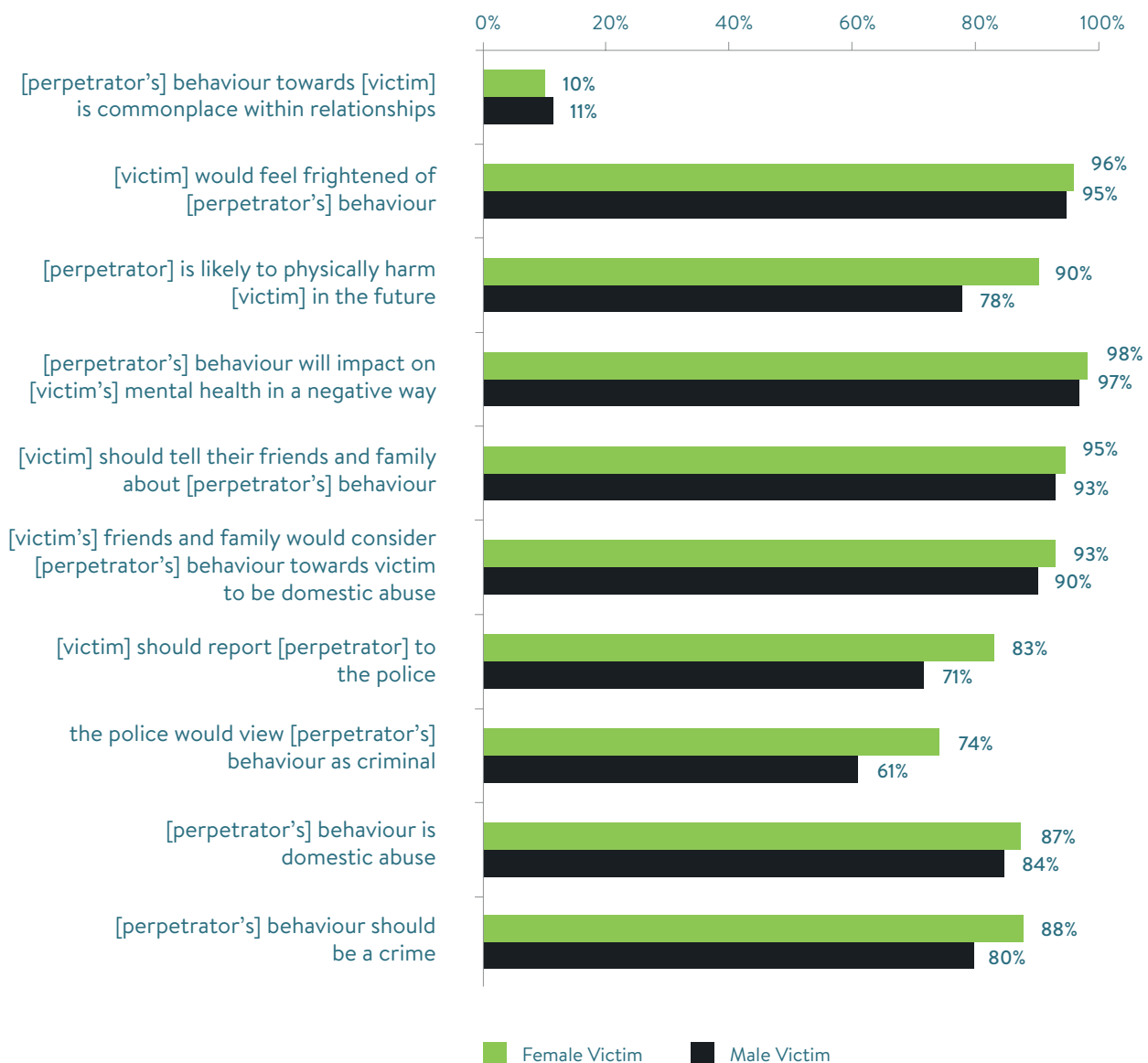
“John would tell Stephanie that she is stupid and not pretty, none of the other boys at school would even like her that way, she is lucky John does.”

**Coercive Control -
Male Victim**

(Group B - Scenario 2)

“Stacy asked Andrew for some pictures of himself a few months ago, now when Andrew doesn’t want to do something with or for Stacy, she says she will send the pictures to his family and friends.”

Figure 2: Attitudes towards coercive control scenarios (% agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement)



For both the male and female victim scenarios, only a small proportion of respondents believed the behaviour described *is commonplace within relationships* (10-11%). A high proportion of young people agreed that the behaviour was domestic abuse with similar levels of agreement in response to scenarios depicting both male and female victims (84% and 87% respectively).

Nine in ten young people (90%) felt there was a future risk of *physical harm* after reviewing the coercive control scenario when the victim was female. The level of agreement was considerably lower when the victim was portrayed as male (78%).

Most young people (95% and over) agreed that the male and female victims

would feel frightened of their partner's behaviour and that the victim's *mental health* would be impacted in a negative way (97% and over).

Talking about coercive control

The vast majority of young people agreed that female or male victims should *tell their friends and family about their partner's behaviour* (93-95%). The level of agreement was also very high when asked if *friends and family would consider the behaviour to be domestic abuse*, albeit it was marginally lower when the victim was male (90%) compared to female (93%).

Coercive control is a crime

A high percentage of YLT respondents (83%) agreed that a female victim of coercive control *should report the behaviour to the police*, although this level of agreement was notably lower when the victim was male (71%).

The proportion of respondents who agreed that the *police would view the behaviour as criminal* was 74% in response to female victims but noticeably lower (61%) if the victim was male. That said, over 88 per cent agreed that the *behaviour should be viewed as a crime*, although again, this was slightly less when the victim was male (80%).

Discussion

The Young Life and Times Survey 2020-21 has shown that amongst young people in Northern Ireland aged 16 years old, only one in six (16%) report having heard of the term coercive control and having some understanding of its meaning. This is considerably lower than the prevalence rate of coercive control awareness found in the adult population (64%; Lagdon et al., 2021). This highlights a significant gap in the knowledge and understanding of this form of abuse as well as confirming that comprehensive healthy relationship education is not being provided among or accessed equally by young people across Northern Ireland.

Whilst many young people of this age will be involved in intimate relationships, the results cast doubt over whether young people would be able to spot the early signs of coercive control behaviours beyond obvious and deliberate acts of harm such as those described in the coercive control scenarios. The results also suggest that a higher number of females are unaware of the term and meaning of coercive control and that young men are perceived as being at

lower risk of harm. This is concerning given the increased risk of domestic violence and abuse among women and girls as well as lower reporting and help seeking among male victims.

Furthermore, a sizable minority of the young people taking part in this survey did not agree that the coercive control behaviours should be reported to the police, particularly if the victim was male. Police training should include awareness and responding to young adult relationships where coercive control has occurred, in order to break down some of the barriers to reporting. As Barter (2009) notes "*we should not assume that young people's experiences and evaluations of seriousness reflect professional ones, especially in relation to the impact of verbal and emotional abuse.*" (p.226).

Encouragingly, the analysis within this Research Update indicates that most young people agreed that the behaviours described were abusive, and that the victims of coercive control should tell their friends and family. Providing young people with the language and tools to

communicate with parents, guardians, peers and youth-focused professionals about unhealthy relationship practices will create wider pathways to support. Relatedly, bystander awareness with parents, guardians, peers and youth-focused professionals will support a readiness to respond.

The development of legislation addressing coercive control is a welcome development for Northern Ireland but much of what we currently understand about violence and abuse has been derived from the adult focused literature. Presently, we are unable to gauge the extent of this issue among young people, but what we do know is that coercive control is a feature in some young adult relationships (Barter, 2009). Researchers and policy makers continue to debate how to optimally define and respond to coercive control (Stark and Hester, 2019). The YLT survey results demonstrate that it is imperative that our dedicated preventative and intervention efforts reflect the diverse needs and experiences of young people.

Key Points:

- Most respondents (84%) reported a lack of understanding of coercive control, with only 16% of participants indicating they have heard about coercive control and understand what it means.
- A higher proportion of females were unaware of the term and meaning of coercive control.
- Young men were perceived as being at lower risk of harm following incidents of coercive control.
- YLT respondents agreed that the scenarios (whether with a male or female victim) were abusive and likely to result in negative outcomes. They also agreed coercive behaviour should be viewed as criminal, and as such, should be shared with friends and family as well as reported to police, although this view was disproportionately lower in relation to male victims.

Recommendations:

- It is important that the introduction of the coercive control as a criminal offence in Northern Ireland should be accompanied with a public awareness campaign focusing on what coercive control means and signposting victims and their friends and family to appropriate courses of action and sources of support. The increased usage of online social media as means for perpetration among young people is also an important consideration for such future awareness raising campaigns.
- The current research has provided a baseline of young people's attitudes towards coercive control prior to any future awareness campaigns. A comparable survey post awareness campaign should be implemented to allow for future comparison.
- Awareness raising should also include preventative thinking, ensuring that information about coercive control and unhealthy relationships is clear and accessible to young people. This includes representation of all types of relationships and should involve young people in its design and delivery.
- Early educational interventions which focus on the development of both healthy and unhealthy relationships should be embedded into the curriculum or delivered via informal education, and in the early phases should be robustly evaluated by appropriately trained researchers.

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. In 2020-21, 2,069 people took part. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt



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