

Fact sheet 1: Information on coercion and control

This fact sheet is adapted from Section 2 of the New South Wales Government's *Coercive control discussion paper*.¹⁴⁹

What is coercive control?

Coercive control in domestic and family violence (DFV) contexts describes patterns of abusive behaviour designed to exercise domination and control over the other party to a relationship. It is often a process that happens slowly over time and can be nuanced in nature, making it difficult to identify. It can include a range of abusive behaviours — physical, psychological, emotional or financial — the cumulative effect of which over time robs victim-survivors of their autonomy and independence as an individual.¹⁴⁹

The work of Evan Stark, who originated the concept of coercive control, provides a general typology of this behaviour, identifying four key aspects: violence, intimidation (including threats, surveillance, degradation, withholding money), isolation and control (principally through the micro-regulation of everyday behaviours, and the institution of rules).¹⁵⁰

This can extend to a wide range of behaviours, including but not limited to the following:

- deprivation of liberty and autonomy, such as preventing one person from leaving the house at all or requiring them to get permission for any movement beyond the household
- isolating an individual from friends, family and wider society. This could be done through deprivation of liberty, manipulation by suggesting that friends and family are not in fact supportive, or the use of the victim's social media to drive away family and friends
- withholding or controlling access to resources, including money. This can extend from direct demands that all income of the victim be provided to the perpetrator, as well as denying the victim a say in the management of joint property, or using their property without their consent. This can also include the imposition of restrictions on the victim's access to education, employment and training opportunities

- psychological control and manipulation, including by making the other person question their memory of events and agreements (that is, gaslighting), or threatening self-harm or suicide
- stalking and intimidation, including through technological means such as installing tracking software or apps
- physical assault or threats of physical assault. Beyond physical assault of the victim, this can also include things such as the destruction of property or harming animals to set an example or to inspire fear for one's individual safety. Threats can also be made against friends or family
- sexual assault, including non-consensual intercourse or sexual touching. This may also involve the use of image-based abuse, such as threats to share intimate images against the victim's wishes
- reproductive coercion, such as forcing the victim to become pregnant or denying birth control, or demanding an abortion
- threatening to take the victim's children away, to send them into care or to institute court proceedings to deny the victim access to the children.

Cases in Australia and internationally illustrate this mixture of abusive behaviours that are deployed specifically to undermine an individual and to keep them under control. In Queensland, the murder of Hannah Clarke and her children by Rowan Baxter in February 2020 reportedly revealed a significant pattern of control and coercion, in which the perpetrator used recording devices to monitor Hannah's conversations, controlled what she wore (for example by preventing her from wearing shorts or a bikini at the beach), and isolated her from her family. Reporting also noted that this was coupled with sexual violence. Even when they separated, Baxter continued to track and monitor Hannah's actions and movements, and sought to control her through their children, including kidnapping one

149 McMahon M and McGorrrery P (2020) 'Criminalising coercive control: an introduction', in McMahon M and McGorrrery P (eds) Springer, Singapore, doi:10.1007/978-981-15-0653-6_1.

150 Stark (2009) *Coercive control: how men entrap women in personal life*, Oxford University Press, USA.

of them, which he claimed was punishment for her leaving him.

One of the challenges in defining coercive control is that the relevant behaviours are deeply contextual. The triggers of fear and intimidation that enable control may be so frequent and subtle they are not evident from the outside of the relationship.¹⁵¹

Additionally, the demarcation between coercive and controlling behaviours on the one hand and voluntary choices in a relationship on the other may be difficult to determine. For example, one indicator of coercive control may be that one individual controls the finances of the household. In some relationships, this could be indicative of a pattern of oppression or exploitation, whereas in others it could indicate a consensual position between the individuals.

In terms of its impacts, coercive control has been referred to as ‘intimate terrorism’.¹⁵² It has been reported that many victim-survivors describe it as the ‘worst part’ of domestic and family violence — more impactful and traumatic than physical violence, and more difficult to recover from.¹⁵³ Coercive control may also be described as a condition of entrapment that renders its victim hostage-like in the harms it inflicts on their dignity, liberty, autonomy and personhood as well as to their physical and psychological integrity.¹⁵⁴

Coercive control is a significant predictor of intimate partner homicide. The NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (DVDRT) has identified evidence of sometimes long histories of other forms of coercive and controlling behaviours in the majority of cases it has reviewed. The DVDRT noted that in 111 of the 112

(99%) intimate partner domestic violence homicides that occurred in NSW between 10 March 2008 and 30 June 2016 that it had reviewed, the relationship was characterised by the abuser’s use of coercive and controlling behaviours towards the victim.¹⁵⁵ It noted the complexities that can arise in such cases with perpetrators going to extreme lengths to control their victim and avoid detection, and the varying ability of a victim or those close to them to identify what was being experienced as domestic and family violence.¹⁵⁶

The findings of the DVDRT are further supported by academic research, where empirical studies have linked the presence of coercive control with the eventual intimate partner homicide.¹⁵⁷ This broadly aligns with wider research on predictive factors for intimate partner homicide, which includes the realisation by a perpetrator that they have lost control over the relationship or over their partner.¹⁵⁸

It is also important to acknowledge the evidence that coercive control or intimate terrorism, much like domestic and family violence more generally, is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men.¹⁵⁹

This is not to imply that victims and perpetrators do not encompass all gender identities and relationship types. However, sociological research points to clear trends in coercive control, particularly in intimate partner relationships, as being mapped to the definition and regulation of individuals in line with gendered power dynamics.¹⁶⁰

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- 152 Elmhirst S (31 October 2019) ‘‘Intimate terrorism’’: how an abusive relationship led a young woman to kill her partner’, *The Guardian*, accessed 29 November 2021.
- 153 Gleeson H (19 November 2019) ‘Coercive control: The ‘worst part’ of domestic abuse is not a crime in Australia. But should it be?’, *ABC News*, accessed 29 November 2021; McGorrey P and McMahon M (30 April 2019) ‘It’s time ‘coercive control’ was made illegal in Australia’, *The Conversation*, accessed 29 November 2021.
- 154 Stark (2009) *Coercive control: how men entrap women in personal life*, Oxford University Press, USA, p 15.
- 155 NSW Government (2020) *NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Report 2017–2019*, NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, NSW Government, p 154.
- 156 NSW Government (2020) *NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Report 2017–2019*, NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, NSW Government, p 68–69.
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- 158 Johnson H, Eriksson L, Mazerolle P and Wortley R (2017) ‘Intimate femicide: the role of coercive control’, *Feminist Criminology*, 14(1) 3–23 doi:10.1177/1557085117701574; Juodis M (2014) ‘A comparison of domestic and non-domestic homicides: Further evidence for distinct dynamics and heterogeneity of domestic homicide perpetrators’, *Journal of Family Violence*, 29(3) 299–313, doi:10.1007/s10896-014-9583-8.
- 159 Johnson M (2008) *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*, Northeastern University Press, Boston; Stark (2009) *Coercive control: how men entrap women in personal life*, Oxford University Press, USA.
- 160 Johnson M (2008) *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*, Northeastern University Press, Boston; Stark (2009) *Coercive control: how men entrap women in personal life*, Oxford University Press, USA.