

# Children and families experiencing domestic violence: Police and children's social services' responses

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Executive summary

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## Executive summary

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### Introduction

In England and Wales, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 amended the definition of significant harm provided by the Children Act 1989, adding a new category of “impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another”. Since domestic violence and children’s exposure to it represent a widespread social problem, this amendment has acted to draw a potentially large group of families within the remit of children’s social services. The growing mountain of police notifications to children’s social services of domestic violence incidents where children are involved and the pressures that this has created have been noted by a range of commentators in the UK, North America and Australia.

The notification system has emerged against what is acknowledged to be a background of fragmented services for children and families experiencing domestic violence, and represents an attempt to improve communication and coordination between universal and highly targeted services. This research examined both the notification process itself and the subsequent service pathways followed by families brought to the attention of children’s social services in this way. It also explored which other agencies contributed to services for families experiencing domestic violence and captured young people’s, survivors’ and perpetrators’ views of services.

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### Methodology

Researchers from the University of Central Lancashire undertook this study between 2007 and 2009. The research was undertaken in two sites, one in the north of England and one in the south. It comprised three key stages:

**Stage 1: Interviews with 40 young people, survivors and perpetrators** elicited their experiences and views of professional intervention in domestic violence.

**Stage 2: A study of professional practice** included a retrospective review of police and children’s social services records that tracked a cohort of 251 incidents of domestic violence cases over 21 months. Interviews were also undertaken with 58 practitioners, managers and

administrators from the police, independent domestic violence advocates (IDVA) services and children's social services.

**Stage 3: A survey of innovative practice** sent to local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) in England and Wales collected examples of innovative practice in respect of police notifications of incidents of domestic violence to children's social services.

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### **The notification system: key messages**

- The notification system as it is currently operated draws large numbers of children and families into the auspices of children's social services but fails to deliver a service to the majority of families notified.
- For the system to operate more effectively, police and social workers need to work together to share more information more consistently; this will increase accurate identification of those children and families most at risk who need intervention from children's social services.
- Other supportive services are required for those children and families who do not reach the thresholds for receiving intervention from children's social services but for whom domestic violence is a persistent feature of their lives. These interventions could be delivered by universal services such as health and education, but also by specialist domestic violence services, which would need to be funded for this purpose.
- As the front-line service intervening with children and families experiencing domestic violence, police officers attending an incident should acknowledge and respond to children and young people's immediate needs for information and explanation.
- High-quality, supervised contact services that families can access on a voluntary basis would offer a means of early intervention directed precisely at the circumstances where domestic violence often arises. Central government funding would be required for third sector agencies to provide this service.

## Research findings

### The domestic violence incidents

- The 251 incidents of domestic violence studied were wide ranging in terms of seriousness and levels of violence. Injuries to adults and children were recorded in just under a third of incidents.
- Just over half the couples in the sample were separated, and separation provided the context in which a number of the incidents occurred.
- Access to children and questions about the care of children were also key issues contributing to domestic violence incidents. A number of incidents occurred in the setting of child contact or when the perpetrator was seeking access to the house or children.

### Police intervention in incidents of domestic violence

- Young people described being excluded or ignored when police intervened in domestic violence incidents. They wanted more information and explanations from the police. The review of files indicated that police officers rarely engaged with children at domestic violence incidents and half the officers interviewed expressed some reluctance about talking directly to children.

They listen to the adults more... they don't want to talk to you.

(Nicola, young people's focus group)

...kids are our witnesses and our victims. It is important to explain everything to the children; they have a right to know what is happening.

(Specialist police officer)

- Children and survivors wanted perpetrators to be removed from the home immediately following an incident, and file data showed that the police appeared to be successful in removing perpetrators from the scene in the majority of incidents.

...they should be taken away because a mum or child wouldn't call 999 just to get a dad taken away for no reason.

(Louis, young people's focus group)

## Children's social services interventions

- The notification system acted to draw to the attention of children's social services a large number of families who had had little or no previous contact with children's social workers. However, only a small proportion of families notified received a service from children's social workers and most of these were already open cases. Police notifications triggered an intervention at the level of an initial assessment from children's social services in only five per cent of sample cases.
- In cases where children were under 12 months, severe injuries and repeat notifications on families were factors that appeared to push families towards the threshold where they received a service.
- There was no difference in the rates at which families returned to the attention of children's social services over the next 21 months between those cases where a "no further action" pathway had been pursued and those where the sole intervention had been a letter sent by social services to the family. A high rate of repeat notifications indicated that domestic violence continued to be an issue in these families.

...the woman I had written to was quite... frustrated with the letter... she felt that it was the ex-partner's behaviour... that we should be addressing.

(Initial assessment social worker)

- Where families did receive interventions, it was likely to be at the safeguarding rather than family support level. Although families had multiple problems, it was not the case that the importance of domestic violence was always subsumed by other issues.
- Those families who received a safeguarding service were seen to struggle to acknowledge the extent of domestic violence in the family and its impact on the children. Together with families' fears and suspicions of children's social services, this was seen to make some families unwilling to engage with social workers. As a result, a child protection rather than a family support response was more likely.

- A stop-start pattern characterised interventions with some families who received services with repeated notifications or referrals resulting in repeated assessments. Intervention was often withdrawn when families informed social workers that the couple had separated; this happened despite evidence that domestic violence continues beyond, or can intensify at, the point of separation.

These families need a lot longer, more targeted work over time.

(Child protection social services manager)

- Social workers talked directly with children and victims when assessing or intervening in families. They were less likely to engage directly with male perpetrators: not all social workers felt that this was part of their role, although they noted the absence of other resources to address perpetrators' behaviour.

I've heard it said that we don't work with perpetrators in social work... I don't think you can ever say we don't work with perpetrators.

(Child protection social services manager)

- Those cases which received intervention and where children remained living at home with both parents 21 months after the notification were likely to be those where the father/mother's partner as well as the mother had engaged with support services.

### **The notification system**

- Variation was found between sites in the amount of information included as standard in notifications sent to children's social services. In some cases, information omitted from notifications meant that the full extent of children's involvement in an incident was not conveyed to children's social services.
- Co-location schemes, where police officers and children's social workers shared information in order to filter notifications jointly, were in the process of being introduced in a number of LSCBs.
- Risk assessment tools developed by the police to filter and route notifications appear to offer a means of reducing the volume of notifications received by children's social services, but most of the available tools are focused on the risks to victims rather than children. Since only five per cent of notifications were found to trigger a service from children's social services, the limited accuracy of such tools may be problematic.

### **Inter-agency work**

- Police officers and social workers were positive about the work of specialist domestic violence services and noted that they relieved demands on their services. While families were directed to these services for support, there was little evidence of communication and collaboration between social workers undertaking assessments and staff in these agencies.
- Regular inter-professional training was advocated as a means of ensuring that staff in all organisations were aware of the impact of domestic violence on children and had knowledge of other agencies' roles and procedures.

### **Wider service provision for families experiencing domestic violence**

- Practitioners acknowledged that very few families received a service from children's social services and emphasised the need to develop early intervention services for families experiencing domestic violence.
- Young people, survivors and social workers noted that provision for supervised contact would be valued by a number of families but this service was only available for families receiving a safeguarding service or through court orders.
- Survivors, police officers and social workers raised concerns about victims who had no recourse to public funds and were therefore unable to access refuges or other forms of advice and support in relation to domestic violence.
- Resource shortfalls were noted in respect of support services for all groups experiencing domestic violence. Services that offered interventions to children exposed to domestic violence were felt to be insufficiently available. Services for perpetrators that could be accessed on a voluntary basis were described as in particularly short supply.

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## Recommendations

- Front-line police officers should be provided with an appropriately designed information leaflet or z card to distribute to children and young people at the scene of a domestic violence incident.
- Conceptualising children and young people as victims of domestic violence may assist police officers to acknowledge and engage with their needs more fully.
- Children's social services should review the practice of sending letters to families following a notified incident of domestic violence in the absence of any further intervention and consider whether such letters act to promote families' engagement with social work services.
- Stop-start patterns of intervention should be avoided, and children's social services should work with other organisations and through commissioning to develop opportunities for long-term monitoring and support of families with multiple and complex needs.
- Children's social workers should be provided with training, supervision and support aimed at increasing skills and confidence in working with abusive men.
- Inter-agency approaches to filtering notifications which involve staff sharing access to police and children's social services information should be further developed and evaluated.
- Not all incidents of domestic violence need to be referred to children's social services but children's social services should be kept informed of incidents of domestic violence involving children, and social workers should contribute to inter-agency processes for identifying which families should be referred to children's social services.
- Multi-agency structures need to be more widely developed with the aim of engaging a range of other agencies, including both universal services and specialist domestic violence services, in delivering early intervention services to families experiencing domestic violence.

- Supervised contact services that can be accessed by families on a voluntary basis should be developed as an early intervention for children experiencing domestic violence. Such services will need to be staffed by trained and qualified staff. Central government funding should be made available for third sector agencies to develop these services.
- Government should establish legal means for victims of domestic violence with insecure immigration status to access safe accommodation and relevant support services.
- The availability of perpetrator programmes which can be accessed on a voluntary basis should be increased. Such programmes should liaise closely with children's social services to ensure that their work feeds into parenting assessments.
- Services offering therapeutic support to children and young people harmed by domestic violence should be identified as a priority area for development by central government, local authorities and children's trusts.



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