



**VISION**  
**Policy Briefing**  
**Addressing abuse in**  
**teenage relationships**

# Addressing abuse in teenage relationships

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## Summary

This briefing highlights emerging findings and policy recommendations from ongoing research and stakeholder engagement into abuse in teenage relationships carried out by the [UKPRP VISION consortium](#).

## Background

Abuse—whether physical, emotional, or sexual—within young people's relationships is often overlooked in both research and policy. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) finds that young women aged 16 to 19 are more likely to experience domestic abuse than any other age group (ONS, 2020). Despite this high prevalence, this age group is less likely to be referred to support services (SafeLives, 2017). Furthermore, the CSEW does not cover individuals under the age of 16, leaving a major gap in understanding of prevalence. Research conducted in Wales with 11- to 16-year-olds identified a range of mental health and social impacts associated with domestic abuse, including teenage pregnancy, self-harm, and further violent behaviour (Young et al., 2021).

In 2022, the UK ratified the [Istanbul Convention](#), a treaty aimed at preventing and combating violence against women, which explicitly includes girls under 18. However, the cross-government definition of domestic abuse fails to adequately address adolescents in relationships, particularly those under 16, leaving them caught between child protection procedures and adult-focused domestic abuse policies (Barrow-Grint et al., 2022).

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 marked a significant step forward by recognising children living in homes where domestic abuse occurs between parents or other adults as victims in their own right. However, this protection does not extend to children experiencing abuse within their own relationships. Research by [SafeLives](#) (2017) found that abusive behaviour in teenage relationships typically begins at the age of 14 or 15, creating a substantial gap in recognition, support, and targeted prevention for those under 16. This gap poses ongoing challenges for those tasked with policing and addressing adolescent domestic abuse.

## Current VISION research and activity

To address these gaps in research and policy, the VISION consortium in collaboration with Deputy Chief Constable Katy Barrow-Grint (Gloucestershire Constabulary) have undertaken the following activity (a synthesis of work can also be found [here](#)):

- Formed a cross-sectoral working group with membership from the Home Office, Children's Commissioner's Office, Department for Education, Islington Borough Council Social Care, National Police Chiefs Council, Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office, SafeLives, Respect, Youth Realities, The Children's Society, H.O.P.E Training, Thames Valley Police, Gloucestershire Police, Northumbria Police and several universities.
- Hosted two roundtables with the working group to break down the complexities of teenage relationship abuse.
- Carried out a systematic rapid review into risk and protective factors associated with abuse in teenage relationships (Weir et al., forthcoming).
- Co-produced a workshop with young people with lived experience of abuse in their relationships.

- Organised a [conference](#) in April 2024 attended by 160 practitioners, policy makers and academics to discuss interventions and responses.
- Hosted DCC Katy Barrow-Grint as Practitioner in Residence at the Violence and Society Centre, City St George's, University of London.

### **Key findings**

As a result of the research and activity already undertaken, we have curated key findings within teenage relationship abuse in the UK.

**Lack of consistent terminology and recognition** – various terms are used to describe abuse in teenage relationships, including ‘teen dating violence’, ‘adolescent domestic abuse’, ‘teenage relationship abuse’ and ‘youth intimate partner violence’. Both the workshop with young people and the roundtables identified that young people generally do not associate the behaviours they experience with any of these terms and are more likely to use language like ‘toxic relationships’. This presents a challenge for schools when working with young people, raising the need to find common language and terminology that meaningfully resonates with their experiences. Our workshop with young people found a lack of recognition of ‘domestic abuse’ as a concept in general, and specifically in teenage relationships, underscored by domestic abuse being downplayed or normalised in the media and online (such as on social media influencers like Andrew Tate, television programmes like Love Island, and increasingly accessible violent pornography), the use of outdated conceptions of domestic abuse and normalisation due to past exposure in childhood.

**Very limited UK research on risk and protective factors for under 16s** – our rapid review found that in the last 10 years there was only one UK academic study that looked into risk and protective factors for abuse in teenage relationships for those aged under 16. Of the 79 global studies (most of which were from the USA), key themes were identified around social and cultural factors, the school and neighbourhood environment, mental health and wellbeing and associations between bullying and witnessing parental intimate partner violence. Whilst many of the studies differentiated risk and protective factors by gender, very few looked at differing experiences by sexuality or ethnicity.

**Importance of schools and communities** – unlike adult domestic abuse, which is largely experienced in private, abuse experienced in teenage relationships is more likely to occur outside of the home, especially within schools. Schools and communities therefore present an opportunity for intervention, both in terms of disclosure and support and in education around healthy relationships. Our rapid review found that the school environment was a significant risk or protective factor for victimisation, with young people at increased risk when they were less involved in extracurricular activities, if they felt unsafe at school, did not feel connected to their school or there was a poor school climate. Conversely a positive school environment acted as a protective factor. Young people with lived experience of abuse in their relationships see school as a key point of early intervention, but feel that improvement is needed in terms of better education about healthy relationships and recognising abusive behaviour from an earlier stage.



## Key Recommendations

1. Develop a national strategy – prevention and early intervention
2. Explore support for young people – victims and those carrying out harmful behaviours
3. Commission research into under 16s – including those with lived experience and taking a whole systems approach
4. Improve measurement in under 16s
5. Agree terminology and produce an associated education programme

At our second roundtable the police officers involved in the Holly Newton murder highlighted that there was no physical violence before her murder, but that there had been stalking and coercive controlling behaviour. Discussion followed about how coercive control is both more prevalent and normalised in young people and harder to recognise as a 'red flag'.

**Very difficult to measure extent of issue** – due to the current Home Office definition of domestic abuse there is very limited and consistently recorded administrative data collected on those under 16 who are experiencing abuse. For example, within policing domestic abuse flags may not be applied to under 16s, so young people may be recorded as being assaulted, but not as experiencing domestic abuse. A recent example of this practice was with the murder of 15-year-old Holly Newton, whose homicide was classified as knife crime, something her mother, Micala Trussler, thought was wrong:

*“Although the legal definition states that I’m not allowed to call it domestic abuse, the situation that Holly found herself in was a classic case of domestic abuse”.*

Practice around recording under 16s is also thought to vary by police force, meaning data collection will not be consistent. In social care, cases are often recorded in casefile notes, rather than in quantifiable databases, so the extent of abuse is not known. With limited survey data the scale of the issue is very difficult to measure, and this has implication for support service provision, with very limited evidence for commissioners to base their funding allocation on.

**Need to take a more radical review of systems** – our discussion highlighted the difficulty of addressing abuse in teenage relationships within the current systems. Services are currently at odds with one another, for example Youth Justice Services are hesitant to criminalise those carrying out harmful behaviour, but there is a lack of alternative interventions meaning behaviour remains unchallenged even when serious harm is being caused. The threshold for referrals into social care from school safeguarding teams has been raised, putting schools under increased pressure to support young people without additional resources and training, this comes at a time when there has been an increase in the number of children experiencing mental health and wellbeing challenges. Discussion on whether the statutory age of domestic abuse should be lowered to 13 concluded that changing the age limit would not be effective without wider systemic changes.

## Next steps

Our work in this area is ongoing and our current and future research plans (subject to funding) include:

- As Practitioner in Residence at City St George's, DCC Katy Barrow is putting out a 'Call for Practice' to each police force to ask how they currently respond to teenage relationship abuse for under 16s.
- Hosting three roundtables in Thames Valley, Gloucestershire and Northumbria to discuss and map local responses to teenage relationship abuse across different sectors and organisations.
- Using natural language processing (NLP) to extract data and quantify the scale of relationship abuse in social care text-based casefiles.
- Analysing data from a pilot in Thames Valley Police where data and risk assessment for under 16s has started to be collected routinely.
- Working with a school trust to trial data collection across all schools on lower-level signs of unhealthy relationships, particularly coercive control.
- Using school survey data from Wales and Islington to identify risk and protective factors where students disclose relationship abuse.
- Working with Safelives to conduct local area systems mapping.

## Further information

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