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'It builds the bigger picture': viewing intimate partner sexual violence investigations through the lens of coercive control

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ABSTRACT

Despite research highlighting high attrition rates in intimate partner rape and sexual assault cases progressing through the criminal justice system, limited attention has been paid to the investigation of these offences within the broader context of domestic abuse, and specifically coercive control. Addressing this gap, this exploratory study draws on seven anonymised police case examples and 20 interviews with police investigators and supervisors to illustrate the barriers to investigating and charging rape and sexual assault offences in the context of (ex)intimate partner domestic abuse. We focus on the context of England and Wales, where legislation was enacted in 2015 to criminalise 'controlling or coercive behaviour'. We identify seven issues spanning the investigation and prosecution process, demonstrating how a lack of understanding of, or engagement with, the broader dynamics of abuse, specifically coercive control, can be present at all stages of the investigation and prosecution process. We also show how situating intimate partner sexual violence in the context of coercive control can overcome some of the difficulties associated with investigating and prosecuting this type of offending. This is illustrated through a case example of a successful intimate partner sexual violence prosecution in which a controlling or coercive behaviour charge provided crucial evidence to support the sexual offence charges. The findings point to the value of employing a coercive control lens for police investigative practice and for how victim engagement in intimate partner sexual violence cases is understood and responded to across the criminal justice system.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, rape offences recorded by police in England and Wales have increased four-fold (Stanko 2022). Alongside this increase in recorded offences has been a corresponding decrease in charge rates. In March 2019, the Government announced an 'end-to-end' review of the response of the criminal justice system to cases of rape with a view to improving justice outcomes for victims. In response to the review, in June 2021 the Home Office launched Operation Soteria, a major Government-funded collaboration between academia and policing to take a transformational and evidence-led approach to the policing of rape and serious sexual assault offences

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(RASSO) (see Stanko 2022, Hohl and Stanko 2024). This work led to the development of a new National Operating Model, adopted by all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

Research undertaken as part of Soteria suggested multiple explanations for poor police response to RASSO, including a lack of specialist knowledge, a disproportionate investigative focus on the credibility of victims, and under-resourcing of specialist units resulting in significant levels of officer burnout (see Stanko 2022). The research also found distinct patterns by suspect type: just under a third of recorded offences constituted intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV), committed by current or ex-intimate partners, and the charge rate for IPSV was the lowest of any perpetrator type (see Stanko 2022). These patterns suggest that investigating IPSV may involve particular challenges that differ from investigating other forms of RASSO.

IPSV occupies a distinctive position: it is a sexual offence, yet one that occurs within the context of an intimate relationship and is therefore also 'flagged' by police as domestic abuse (DA). This dual character creates particular investigative challenges. Proving sexual offending in the context of DA is viewed by some officers as challenging as it depends almost always on the issue of consent (see Wiener *et al*. 2026). Forms of evidence that can be helpful in relation to stranger and acquaintance perpetrated sexual offences, such as forensics and CCTV, are far less likely to be relevant, and physical injury, which is relatively easy to capture, is frequently not present. Thus, the issue of proving beyond reasonable doubt that the victim did not consent, and the perpetrator did not have a reasonable belief in consent, becomes more possible with the framing of the act (of sexual violence) in the wider context of the abusive relationship (see Wiener *et al*. 2026).

Given these features, how IPSV cases are investigated and by whom matters. As part of year 2 of Soteria, the authors were commissioned to explore the issue of sexual offending in the context of DA in greater depth, including examining how these cases were being handled and where their investigation might best be situated (see Wiener *et al*. 2026). Currently, police forces vary in their approach, with some assigning such cases to specialist DA units, others to RASSO units, and others still to generalist Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs). The findings from that research suggested that the investigation of such cases is best situated in specialist units that deal with 'relational' offending – DA or wider safeguarding units – where officers understand the context of power and control in which such offending primarily takes place (Wiener *et al*. 2026).

The current study builds on the findings presented in Wiener *et al*. (2026) by using anonymised case examples to illustrate barriers to investigating and charging IPSV. We demonstrate how a lack of understanding of, or engagement with, the wider context of the abuse, specifically coercive control, can be present at all stages of the investigation and prosecution process. We also illustrate with a successfully prosecuted case example how applying a coercive control lens to IPSV can help overcome the challenges associated with investigating and prosecuting this type of offending.

Issues with investigation and prosecution of IPSV

Existing research on investigation and prosecution of IPSV, which draws predominantly from an Anglo-American context, has highlighted a higher attrition rate for IPSV compared to cases involving non-intimate partners. This attrition occurs at all stages of the criminal justice process, with IPSV cases showing lower criming and charge rates (Hohl and Stanko 2015, Stanko 2022), lower conviction rates at court (Sumalla *et al*. 2024), and if convicted, more lenient sentences (Bielen *et al*. 2022, Sumalla *et al*. 2024).

A case-file analysis undertaken for Soteria revealed a significant proportion of IPSV cases where the victim did not want a crime recorded or investigated. In many such cases, the victim was 'telling not reporting' (Lovett *et al*. 2023, p. 9) – in other words, disclosing sexual victimisation without any intention of making a formal report, often in response to a risk assessment for DA undertaken by first response officers. Some victims of IPSV can struggle to recognise or label their experiences as rape or sexual assault due to factors like prior consensual relations with the perpetrator,

societal perceptions and myths around 'real rape', and cognitive dissonance (Logan *et al*. 2015, Jaffe *et al*. 2021, Lilley *et al*. 2023), with qualitative interviews showing that victims may redefine their experiences as rape after the end of the relationship (Basile 1999, Parkinson and Cowan 2008). In addition, there has been an increase in the recording of third-party reports by professionals and/or carers of vulnerable victims, in some cases without their knowledge or consent (Lovett *et al*. 2023). Unsurprisingly, analyses disaggregating rates of attrition by methods of reporting have found that withdrawal is particularly high when sexual offence disclosures are not direct victim reports (Murphy *et al*. 2022, Wunsch *et al*. 2021). The Soteria case-file analysis suggested that many such investigations are not supported by victims even from the outset (Lovett *et al*. 2023).

One reason for the greater attrition in IPSV cases, even in cases where an investigation was initially supported by the victim, is the higher rate of victim withdrawal compared to RASSO cases involving other perpetrator types (Hester 2015, Hohl and Stanko 2015, Alderden and Long 2016, Waterhouse *et al*. 2016, O'Neal 2017). Various factors may impede a victim's ability to support a rape investigation, yet existing research suggests engagement is especially complex in the context of ongoing DA. A key influencing factor is the level of entrapment generated by coercive control (see Stark 2007). A victim will usually experience ongoing threats from the perpetrator and will also often (with good reason) be afraid of him (Pain 2012). Studies show that the risk of (fatal) attack often increases around the time of separation from a controlling abuser (Monckton-Smith 2021) and the inability to leave an abuser may also stem from financial dependence, or not wanting to label the father of their children a sex offender (Lea *et al*. 2003, Hester 2015, Alderden and Long 2016, O'Neal 2017). Victims may also withdraw if their motivation for reporting was primarily concerned with safeguarding – obtaining a protective order or requiring a police report to help access support services, for example – rather than seeking prosecution (O'Neal 2017). Consequently, victims of IPSV can vacillate between support and withdrawal during the course of the investigation (O'Neal 2017), which can result in the police framing them as uncooperative or unreliable if they fail to understand the wider domestically abusive nature of their situation (Lovett 2021). Lack of understanding about the entrapment victims experience can lead officers to dismiss reports or discredit victims based on their continued relationship with the perpetrator (Hohl *et al*. 2023).

Lack of understanding of the wider DA context extends beyond the police to the prosecution. Reviews of IPSV cases have highlighted inappropriate prosecution decision-making influenced by evidence that lawyers felt weakened the case (such as the resumption of relationships and consensual sex with suspects), misunderstandings about victim resistance, and prosecutors dismissing IPSV cases as 'one word against another' without considering the broader context of the abuse (Angiolini 2015, Munro *et al*. 2025).

When cases of IPSV do reach court, they face additional hurdles. Juries often lack understanding of common victim behaviours and dynamics specific to IPSV within a context of DA, including having expectations about resistance and difficulties comprehending why victims might stay with or return to their abuser (Ellison and Munro 2013, Ellison 2019). Research with mock juries has shown variability (juries reaching different decisions on the same case) and a tendency not to convict (Ellison and Munro 2013) in cases of IPSV. While jurors in one study tended to be fairly open-minded initially, they regarded IPSV cases as less 'clear cut' (Ellison and Munro 2013, p. 300) than those involving strangers, feeling it was harder to be certain that the defendant did not reasonably believe there was consent to sex. Trial observation research has also demonstrated that this public misunderstanding can be exploited by the defence (Temkin *et al*. 2018).

Sexual victimisation as an element of coercive control

Existing research on sexual offence investigation and prosecution predominantly focuses on victim-perpetrator relationships and on comparing outcomes (e.g. charge and conviction rates) on this basis. Even studies focused specifically on IPSV give little detailed consideration to the broader context of DA, particularly coercive control. This limits understanding of how this context could

affect the investigation and prosecution of both the sexual offences and any associated non-sexual DA related offences (e.g. physical assaults, threats to kill) committed by the same perpetrator. Non-sexual DA offences are often overlooked in this literature altogether, despite frequently being investigated alongside IPSV.

The lack of focus on coercive control when considering IPSV is problematic, as victim-centred research shows that sexual victimisation frequently manifests as part of wider coercive control (Tellis 2010, Tarzia 2021, Wiener 2022). Coercive control, the most destructive form of DA, involves the perpetrator employing a course of conduct aimed at subordinating and dominating a victim, creating a hostage-like sense of entrapment (Stark 2007). In IPSV investigation and prosecution, coercive control can provide essential context to the sexual offending for the police, prosecution and the jury, particularly around whether the victim could have freely consented to sex, and whether the perpetrator could have reasonably believed that consent was freely given. In addition to potentially aiding in proving the sexual offence, this context helps officers, prosecutors and juries in understanding victim behaviours throughout the relationship and investigation, such as fluctuating support for the investigation, staying with the perpetrator, and resuming sexual relations. Recent literature has started to highlight the need to acknowledge the wider context of coercive control to properly investigate (Hohl and Stanko 2024) and prosecute (Armstrong and High 2025) IPSV. However, detailed examination of the practical challenges and opportunities of this approach remains limited.

The present study

Given the limited body of literature in this area, the current research seeks to contribute to the understanding of the intricacies surrounding the attrition of IPSV cases in the criminal justice system by examining the issue through the lens of coercive control. By this we mean an investigative and prosecutorial approach that situates IPSV within the broader context of coercive control, recognising that sexual violence in intimate partner relationships predominantly occurs as part of ongoing patterns of abuse and uses evidence of this broader context to help address the issue of consent that is central to IPSV prosecutions. Such an approach may, in England and Wales, involve pursuing controlling or coercive behaviour (CCB) charges (Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76) alongside sexual offence charges. The current analysis employs detailed police case examples to illustrate how the highlighted complexities surrounding the identification and investigation of IPSV play out in practice. We end by presenting a case example of a successful intimate partner rape prosecution in which coercive control was centred in the investigation and trial strategy.

Research methods

This research forms part of the Operation Soteria initiative, a Home Office-funded project aimed at enhancing the investigation of RASSO within England and Wales (see Stanko 2022). A strand of this project specifically examined the overlap between DA and RASSO (see Wiener *et al*. 2026) and findings presented in this paper form part of this strand of work. Data for the research comprised a mapping exercise to locate the investigation of IPSV in each police force in England and Wales, qualitative interviews, and fieldwork visits (for a detailed description see Wiener *et al*. 2026). The present paper draws on the qualitative interviews and, primarily, case examples collected during fieldwork visits to forces.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from City St. George's, University of London (#ETH2223-1457). Participants were provided with information sheets outlining the nature of the research, informed consent was obtained on an opt-in basis using consent forms, and care was taken to ensure participant confidentiality was maintained throughout. For the case examples, identifying details have been changed to ensure victim confidentiality.

Interviews

Between October 2022 and July 2023, 20 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with police investigators and managers across 13 police forces. Participants were recruited through initial contact with force safeguarding or RASSO leads, who then facilitated access to CID and/or DA unit managers, who further facilitated access to investigators within their units. Interview participants were selected based on either their direct involvement in IPSV investigations or their management/oversight of teams who conduct such investigations. An interview guide was developed with probes around investigation and victim care in IPSV cases. Interviews typically lasted 30–60 min and were recorded with participants' consent and professionally transcribed verbatim. Data were anonymised prior to analysis and individual respondents assigned a unique identifier (see Wiener *et al*. 2026).

Data analysis was undertaken following the 'framework' method (Ritchie et al. 2013, p. 220). Line-by-line coding of three interview transcripts was conducted by all three authors to develop a thematic index, with any differences identified and resolved by discussion. Following full indexing of the data by the first author, a thematic framework was constructed in Excel, allowing the comparison of key themes across participants while retaining the context of their individual accounts. Individual thematic charts were then produced for key themes that emerged from the analysis (for further detail, see Wiener *et al*. 2026).

Case examples

Five fieldwork visits to four different forces were conducted during the initial qualitative fieldwork period. These visits lasted approximately half a day and involved ethnographic interviews and discussions conducted in situ of specific case examples to better understand how IPSV was investigated. During the visits we spoke with investigators and supervisors in specialist units about the practical and operational functions of their respective teams and the nature and scope of IPSV caseloads, exploring specific case details where relevant. No audio recordings were made during these visits to allow flexible, less formal, case-focused discussions with different officers contributing as and when relevant; instead, meticulous notes were taken in real-time and typed up shortly after the visit.

We also conducted follow-up visits to three forces between spring and autumn 2023 to obtain detailed information about specific IPSV cases. These visits entailed working collaboratively with an officer to examine the files related to the cases held on police systems. We developed a pre-defined data extraction sheet in Excel to systematically capture information on victim and suspect background, prior DA reports and risk assessments, incident details, investigative process, and case outcomes (where cases had been finalised). A final follow-up was undertaken with a Detective Constable via Microsoft Teams in December 2023 to record details of a successful prosecution.

We adopted an iterative approach throughout the project, necessitated by the exploratory nature of this research. We employed a case study approach, selecting specific cases that highlighted key themes emerging from our interviews and the existing literature, paralleling recent research by Douglas and Fitzgerald (2025) who used detailed case examples to examine complex patterns in prosecutions of non-fatal strangulation. While our case examples were derived from fieldwork visits to a few forces and may not be reflective of the variation in police practice across forces, our aim was not to generalise or make claims about the frequency of outcomes, but to understand the diverse issues and potential outcomes of IPSV cases within the criminal justice system. Our interview sample across 13 forces also provides wider comparative context. Our findings focus primarily on the case examples, with interview and fieldwork visit data providing additional analytical context where relevant.

Findings

The findings derived from police case examples and interviews showed that the absence of comprehension or involvement with the broader context of DA (specifically coercive control) can occur at all

Table 1. Overview of issues and accompanying illustrative case examples.

Issues identified	Case example
Issue 1 – Initial failure to identify and prioritise CCB	Case A
Issue 2 – Patchy understanding of CCB in RASSO units and CIDs	Case B
Issue 3 – Perceived high threshold for charging CCB	Case C
Issue 4 – CPS reluctance to charge sexual offences committed by intimate partners	Case A
Issue 5 – Victim reluctance to support prosecution for sexual offences	Case D
Issue 6 – Sexual offences are charged alongside CCB but dropped at court	Case E
Issue 7 – Offender convicted of CCB but not sexual offences	Case F
Successful convictions for sexual offences in the context of CCB	Case G

stages of the investigation and prosecution of IPSV; it also demonstrated how situating sexual violence in the context of coercive control can help alleviate some of the challenges of investigating and prosecuting this type of offence. Below we present our findings around seven distinct issues, illustrated through six detailed case examples, alongside a successful prosecution that demonstrates how these barriers can be overcome. Table 1 presents the organisation of the issues (numbered 1–7) and the example of a successful conviction, as well as the accompanying case examples (lettered A-G). Case A illustrates both initial failure to identify and prioritise CCB (issue 1) and CPS reluctance to charge sexual offences committed by intimate partners (issue 4), demonstrating how multiple challenges can be present within a single case.

Issue 1: initial failure to identify and prioritise CCB

In the context of investigating IPSV cases, incorporating coercive control hinges first on the police identifying and prioritising CCB as part of the investigative process. Our interviewees identified DA knowledge and understanding as needing improvement, particularly among frontline officers, with notable gaps in understanding CCB specifically. One DA unit supervisor summed up the challenge by stating: 'that's probably the offence that we've had most problem with over the last few years […] trying to upskill the initial attending officers to understand what CCB actually is' (DA-05-R17 (I)).

A thorough primary risk assessment can identify key indicators of coercive control (Myhill and Hohl 2019). While interviewees emphasised a broader context (an influx of new recruits with limited experience and training; the high-pressure environment frontline officers face), some suggested DA risk assessments were often viewed by attending officers as administrative tasks to rush through, rather than opportunities to identify the wider context of the abuse, including coercive control. They said this 'process mindset' can lead officers to lack the professional curiosity for important follow-up questions, potentially resulting in low quality risk assessments. While one might expect cases of CCB to be picked up by first response supervisors, our interviewees from specialist teams felt lack of experience and understanding of coercive control often extended also to those in supervisory roles, meaning cases were unlikely to be picked up through routine oversight.

Inconsistent primary assessment of risk has tangible consequences for victim safety, as these assessments are frequently the main source of information determining the initial risk grading for DA (standard, medium, high) and influence both safeguarding responses and the assignment of cases to specialist investigative teams (see also Myhill *et al*. 2023b). Yet interviewees noted that robust identification of CCB at this stage, while required for appropriate investigation, was often not achieved in practice. The following case illustrates how a scenario featuring extensive coercion and control may not come to the attention of specialist units, at least not initially.

Case A

The victim had been in a relationship with the suspect for around ten years. There had been a handful of previous reports to police over five years for 'minor' physical assaults which resulted in no further action. Although controlling behaviour was mentioned briefly in one early risk assessment, the attending officers did not

recognise this as indicative of CCB or explore it further. Despite the multiple police contacts, no previous call to police had been assessed as high risk and the case had not been referred to a specialist unit. The case was eventually referred to the DA unit following a third-party report to a partner agency. Only then was the full extent of the suspect's controlling and coercive behaviour identified, including a detailed written account the victim had kept documenting the abuse, which she started keeping following extreme isolation by the suspect. This written account documented sexual coercion alongside other controlling behaviours.

This case demonstrates the consequences of the 'process mindset' identified by interviewees, where each contact was treated as a discrete incident and officers failed to recognise the significance of controlling behaviour noted in the early risk assessment. This example reflects wider research findings that some first response officers were consistently worse at identifying and recording information in primary risk assessments for DA, and that information relating to CCB was especially poorly recorded (Myhill *et al*. 2023b). It also highlights how the incident-based approach of police responses to DA obscures the identification of CCB, as demonstrated by prior studies (e.g. Myhill *et al*. 2023a, Robinson *et al*. 2025).

Issue 2: patchy understanding of CCB in RASSO units and CIDs

As we have reported elsewhere, understanding of CCB may be more limited and patchy in RASSO units and generalist CIDs compared to specialist DA units: a notable issue given that only about a third of police forces assign IPSV investigations to DA units (if they have them) (Wiener *et al*. 2026). The current analysis confirmed this variability. On the one hand, there were examples of officers working in RASSO units having a good understanding of CCB and of the issue of consent in the context of coercion and control. The head of a RASSO unit explained, in relation to consent:

> … we should be then presenting to say, a reasonable person, given what's taken place over the last 48 hours, would not be consenting … if she didn't have sex with them, life was going to be hell then for the next 24 hours … so actually, having sex just to try and just have a normal day. When you can get the evidence and overlay … phone calls, and what's actually going on the day before, you can start evidencing that actually, that wasn't a consensual act. (RASSO-02-R2(I)).

Two investigators in the same unit also had a good understanding, and expressed the view that it is rare for there to be sexual coercion without accompanying CCB. However, this level of understanding was not uniform. The following case, also from the same RASSO unit, illustrates how an investigator overlooked the wider context of CCB, which was only later identified by the CPS.

Case B

The victim was no longer in a relationship with the suspect, with whom she shared children. As part of enquiries into child protection matters involving the suspect's behaviour against one of their children, she disclosed he had committed sexual offences against her. The resulting RASSO unit investigation focused on the sexual offences, and the suspect was charged initially with rape and sexual assault by penetration. The investigator did not explore CCB in the original video recorded interview (VRI). It was the CPS that recognised this gap, feeling the investigation had not sufficiently explored the non-sexual aspects of their relationship, and requested a second VRI be undertaken to investigate potential CCB charges alongside the sexual offences. In this second VRI, the victim detailed controlling and jealous behaviour that left her isolated; physical violence, including non-fatal strangulation; reproductive coercion; threats by the suspect to commit suicide; and continued harassment post-separation. The suspect, who had an extensive criminal history including abuse of previous partners, was charged with CCB alongside the sexual offences. This case is awaiting trial.

The fact that the CPS, rather than the investigating officer, identified the need to explore CCB underscores the inconsistency even within specialist units and how understanding at senior level does not translate to consistent practice across a unit. The case also highlights the risk that officers who are not DA specialists may be more likely to treat IPSV in isolation from the broader context of DA. Findings from the wider project suggested that understanding of CCB was generally more consistent in specialist DA units that also dealt with IPSV cases (see Wiener *et al*. 2026).

Issue 3: perceived high threshold for charging CCB

Our findings suggest that perceived high evidential thresholds for charging CCB (see Myhill *et al*. 2023a) remain a feature of police practice, though this appears variable across forces and areas. Some interviewees felt that the willingness to charge CCB has increased over the years, with a recent improvement in awareness and understanding of the offence. However, others described ongoing concerns about high CPS thresholds for charging CCB. One officer described a case where the CPS was reluctant to charge, with the prosecutor holding an unreasonably high benchmark for charging CCB based on a case where the perpetrator made a victim 'sleep naked on top of the stairs' with a bucket of cold water being thrown at her every time she tried to move. Others noted that it can depend on the individual prosecutor: 'So as long as it's there lock, stock and barrel, it's easy, it's an easy thing … If there is a little bit of a grey area, it depends what prosecutor you have' (RASSO-02-R3/R4(FV)).

The perception of demanding CPS thresholds may influence police investigative decisions. When officers believe the CPS will only accept exceptional cases, they may be less likely to explore CCB in routine investigations. This can create a cycle where police anticipate CPS reluctance and do not fully investigate CCB, while CPS decisions may indeed reflect high thresholds. The following case illustrates this dynamic in practice.

Case C

This case involved sexual assault by penetration of the victim by her partner; the offender also physically assaulted her during the attack. The victim managed to film part of the attack with her phone. The investigating officer suggested there was insufficient evidence to meet the threshold for pursuing CCB and that the relationship was not well enough established to show a course of conduct that had a substantial adverse effect on the victim's day-to-day activities. Analysis of the case file suggested the relationship had been established for almost a year. During a risk assessment interview, the victim disclosed controlling and jealous behaviour and suggested she was not allowed to have male friends. She also disclosed non-fatal strangulation and threats to kill, and said she was afraid the offender would kill her. The abuse continued post-separation in the form of stalking-type behaviours. A CCB charge was not pursued.

Despite clear indicators of CCB – disclosures of controlling behaviours, non-fatal strangulation, threats to kill, and post-separation stalking – the investigating officer assessed that the threshold had not been met. This pattern is consistent with previous research finding that police officers internalise very high thresholds, with officers stating CCB needs to be 'life-changing' and referencing extreme cases of 'genuine' coercive control and officers regarding the offence as a 'grey area' evidentially, believing they needed exceptional evidence to meet what they perceived as CPS requirements (Myhill *et al*. 2023a).

Though the offender in this case was convicted of physical assault and sexual assault by penetration and received a significant custodial sentence, the investigating officer suggested the likelihood of a charge or conviction would have been severely reduced without the corroborating video evidence. Given that corroborating evidence is rare in IPSV, this raises concerns about decision-making in cases without such exceptional evidence, which may go uncharged. However, such cases might contain clear indicators of CCB that could provide alternative ways of demonstrating lack of consent, potentially strengthening the case for sexual offence charges.

Issue 4: CPS reluctance to charge sexual offences committed by intimate partners

Interview respondents' views of the CPS were also extremely mixed in relation to their willingness to charge IPSV. While some highlighted constructive working relationships and CPS receptiveness to charging both CCB and IPSV, other interviewees were less positive, suggesting the CPS adopted a high threshold to charging IPSV and preferred very clear-cut evidence. In some instances, officers said they had been advised the evidence was not strong enough for a standalone RASSO charge, but that it might help strengthen the case for CCB. Again, interviewees suggested practice was

variable at the individual level, with some prosecutors being more open to charging CCB and IPSV than others.

Case A (detailed in Issue 1) exemplifies this reluctance and raises questions about how consent is being interpreted in IPSV cases. After the context of coercive control was identified and the police built their case, the CPS refused to charge rape alongside the CCB, citing a high evidential burden and difficulty proving the suspect did not have reasonable belief in consent. This was despite the victim's detailed written account documenting extensive controlling behaviour over a ten-year period, including unwanted sex she was having to appease the suspect, with him being aware of its unwanted nature due to her lying still and crying throughout. The police appealed the CPS decision, arguing that the wider context of coercive control provided this necessary evidence, but the appeal was rejected. This raises the question of what evidence would suffice in IPSV cases where, due to their very nature, the evidence that would typically be relied on in stranger or acquaintance sexual offence cases is unlikely to be present.

Research from the separate CPS focused arm of Operation Soteria has highlighted similar issues, with contextual factors such as coercive control not being taken into consideration in domestically abusive relationships and lawyer responses suggesting 'a hesitancy to consider submission to sexual activity as a consequence of fear, pressure, or isolation as sufficient to establish a lack of freedom to consent, or to bring into question the reasonableness of any belief in consent held by abusers' (Munro *et al*. 2025, p. 1196). The authors state that this reinforces a 'narrow' and 'decontextualised' approach to consent which does not take into consideration the realities of the experiences of victims of DA. They state that a broader interpretation of what it means to have the freedom and capacity to make a choice and the context in which belief in consent is judged would better capture the limited agency victims in such situations navigate (Munro *et al*. 2025).

At the time of writing, case A is sub-judice. While the offender may ultimately receive a custodial sentence, the maximum sentence cap of five years for CCB, alongside lower-level physical assaults, arguably does not provide judges in such cases with sufficient sentencing options to impose a punishment that reflects the totality of the offending. A conviction for CCB would also not satisfy the principle of 'fair labelling' (see Youngs 2015) in a case where sexual offending is present, a point to which we return in the discussion.

Issue 5: victim reluctance to support prosecution for sexual offences

Interviewees suggested that victims in DA cases frequently do not want to support a prosecution, particularly for the sexual element of the abuse. Many are 'telling not reporting' cases where the sexual offending was uncovered in a DA risk assessment or investigations into other non-sexual DA-related offences, but where the victim did not want and never intended to make a formal report of the sexual offences to the police. Broadly in line with the literature reviewed above (e.g. Lea *et al*. 2003, Hester 2015, O'Neal 2017) interviewees cited various explanations for this reluctance: victims not wanting others to know about the sexual violence, concern about the impact on children, and cultural contexts where victims may not understand that the behaviour they experienced is criminal. Interviewees also noted how victims in some cases may not regard what happened as rape or sexual assault or may be reluctant to acknowledge or name their experiences in those terms. The following case exemplifies reluctance to name and support the prosecution of the sexual element while still engaging with the police in relation to the non-sexual elements of the abuse.

Case D

Over a four-year relationship, the victim endured severe abuse from her partner, who had previously violated protective orders and been remanded for abuse against her. The abuse continued when he was released and over a two-year period, she made almost 30 calls to the police, primarily concerning controlling behaviour and harassment by her partner. When police attended, she generally sought only to 'neutralise the threat' and have her partner leave, without supporting further police investigation. Following a particularly severe

attack involving a weapon and non-fatal strangulation, the victim escaped and sought police assistance. In a risk assessment, she revealed sexual violence, and the police opened a rape investigation, alongside other offences including CCB. In the VRI, the victim provided further details about the rapes, describing a pattern of generalised coercive behaviour on the part of the suspect to which she would eventually 'give in', while lying there crying throughout. Although she wanted to discuss the rapes in the VRI as part of the wider abuse she experienced, she was not ready to support this aspect of the investigation, stating that she 'did not see it as rape at the time'. The rapes were therefore not submitted to the CPS for consideration for charging. As a result, the suspect faced charges of CCB, stalking, assault, and breaches of protective orders. He received a two-and-a-half-year custodial sentence and was issued a stalking protection order.

This case illustrates the inherent complexity of IPSV cases, in which victims may be willing to disclose sexual offences and situate them within the broader narrative of abuse, whilst at the same time resisting their translation into a formal prosecution. The distinction between disclosure and readiness to support prosecution reflects the nuanced considerations that victims navigate, which may be shaped by ongoing coercion and concerns about safety and consequences. Importantly, a victim's decision to not support a sexual offence investigation does not necessarily preclude willingness to support the investigation of non-sexual DA offences for which they initially sought police involvement. This distinction is rarely acknowledged in the existing literature or reflected in criminal justice responses, where victim engagement is commonly conceptualised as a linear or unified process, rather than as differentiated and offence-specific. Recognising this distinction has practical implications because it reframes such cases as not involving victim withdrawal or so-called 'uncooperativeness', but as involving a more complex negotiation of what aspects of their experience victims choose to formalise.

Issue 6: sexual offences are charged alongside CCB but dropped at the court stage

Investigators in one force suggested that it is quite common in cases where multiple offences are charged for the sexual offence charge to ultimately not be put before a jury. This might arise from the defendant changing his plea to guilty for one or more other offences while retaining a not guilty plea for the sexual offence. While the decision to drop the sexual offence charge rests with the CPS, officers suggested that where victims are involved in discussions about this option, it can be attractive to those who wish to move on with their life and perceive this outcome will result in having some degree of respite from the offender (even if a potential custodial sentence would be shorter than it would be for sexual offences), while simultaneously meaning they avoid the experience of cross-examination by defence counsel. Case E illustrates both the appeal of this option for victims and the circumstances that shape such decisions.

Case E

The victim was in her mid-twenties and shared three children with the offender (following reproductive coercion). He had an extensive criminal history and his abuse involved isolation, financial control, control of what she wore and did, threats to kill, and threats to commit suicide. After an incident where he broke into her house, broke her cheekbone, and raped her while threatening her with a knife, a third-party report was made to a partner agency. The victim supported the police investigation of assault, CCB and rape. She withdrew her support for the rape investigation due to coercion from the suspect who was able to contact her (and insist that he 'was not a rapist'). When he was arrested and remanded in custody, she reinstated her support for the rape investigation. The offender was charged with CCB, grievous bodily harm (GBH), and rape. Prior to the jury being sworn in, the suspect changed his existing not guilty pleas for CCB and GBH to guilty but retained his not guilty plea to rape. The victim was consulted about whether she wanted to proceed to trial and was told that she would be cross-examined over her retraction and subsequent reinstatement of support for the rape charge. She decided not to proceed and the rape charge was dropped. The offender received a custodial sentence of less than five years for CCB and GBH.

The case raises questions about the circumstances in which these decisions are being made. In some instances, officers may be correct in their assessment that not proceeding to trial is in the best interests of the victim as poor experiences at trial, such as delays and aggressive questioning by defence

counsels, are well documented (Stern 2010, Smith 2012). Yet it has also been suggested that special measures for vulnerable victims attending court are not always consistently implemented (Fairclough 2020), suggesting there may be scope for these experiences to be improved. Whether victims in such circumstances have the advantages of securing a sexual offence conviction – wider sentencing options and a higher level of offender management – adequately explained to them is unclear from the present study. What the case does illustrate is how the prospect of an adversarial process including cross-examination may lead to sexual offence charges being dropped even where they have met the evidential threshold for charging.

Issue 7: offender convicted of CCB but not sexual offences

Officers in this study discussed multiple cases in which an offender was convicted of CCB but not sexual offence(s), with one experienced investigator suggesting it 'happens often' (DA-05-R24/R25/R26(FV)). One of our participants described 'the strongest case I'd ever had that reached the court' in which there was corroborating evidence and being 'utterly gobsmacked' when the suspect was convicted of CCB but not rape. They said even the defence barrister acknowledged that '100 juries would have or should have found him guilty' (DA-01-R5(FV)).

Officers explained that significant challenges appear to arise for juries in IPSV cases as there will have been previous consensual sex between the victim and the suspect. This creates a different evidential context where it is rare to be able to rely on corroborating evidence such as witness testimonies; by contrast, substantial evidence will typically be available in CCB offences that have reached court. Additionally, participants noted that juries frequently struggled to comprehend why a victim might 'choose to stay' with the suspect after sexual violence or why she may have delayed reporting or disclosing the sexual offence(s) to the police. The following case illustrates this pattern.

> Case F
>
> The victim had been in a long-standing violent and coercively controlling relationship with the suspect. His extensive abuse involved financial control, constant surveillance requiring the victim to send photos of herself and her surroundings, threats to kill, physical assaults, and rape. As a result of his abuse, she also lost her job. The suspect was a serial perpetrator previously sentenced to prison for abuse against a former partner. The police investigation commenced after he raped her and kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant; in her VRI she detailed additional rapes and coercive control. The suspect continued to intimidate the victim despite court-imposed contact restrictions. Once he was remanded for breaching the order, she felt able to fully support the investigation and the suspect was charged with rape, CCB, and two counts of assault. He pleaded guilty to the CCB and assaults after the jury was sworn in but pleaded not guilty to rape. At trial, the jury found him not guilty of the rape; he received a custodial sentence and restraining order for the other offences.

The jury's verdict of an acquittal for rape, even where the offender has pleaded guilty to other serious offences against the victim, arguably presents a contradiction. The outcome, however, is consistent with research identifying misconceptions about IPSV among jurors, including difficulty understanding why victims may remain in abusive relationships or delay disclosure, which are responses that research demonstrates are common in the context of IPSV (Lilley *et al*. 2023). A successful conviction for CCB might be seen as a helpful 'backstop' in this type of case, ensuring that an offender receives a (custodial) sentence. Yet once again, the sentence does not reflect the totality or gravity of the offending, where sexual offences are present. The selective nature of both the guilty plea and the jury's verdict suggests ongoing reluctance to acknowledge sexual violence within intimate relationships, even when other forms of serious abuse within the same relationship are recognised.

Successful convictions for sexual offences in the context of CCB

Successful convictions for sexual offences in the context of DA were rare across both the qualitative interviews and the case examples. Where they did occur, however, they demonstrated the evidential value that a coercive control lens can play in making IPSV prosecutable. In Case G, the officer felt that without the accompanying CCB charge the CPS would not have 'run with' the rape case or if it had

gone to court, the jury would have struggled to understand why, for example, the victim returned to the suspect and resumed a relationship with him. The officer described specific elements of coercion and control as 'pieces of a 100-piece jigsaw'; situating the rapes in the context of CCB was a key part of both the investigation and the presentation of evidence.

Case G

The victim was in her early 20s and in an abusive relationship when she met the offender, who presented as a 'knight in shining armour'. Yet when they moved in together, the suspect became physically abusive and exhibited high levels of coercion and control including isolating and emotionally abusing the victim, dictating what she wore, forcing her to cancel a college course, and restricting access to medical appointments. He also threatened to kill her and 'bury her somewhere' and used weapons to intimidate her; this behaviour underpinned sexual and reproductive coercion. After escaping to a refuge and reporting the abuse to police, the victim and her young children experienced financial hardship, which provided an opportunity for the offender to resume contact, presenting himself as a changed man and using their children to rebuild access. He soon resumed his abuse and the police eventually became aware and arrested him. The police investigation collected extensive evidence, including medical records, witness statements from the victim's friends, family and neighbours, and digital evidence of coercion and control, which together represented a 'timeline' to put before the jury. The offender was sentenced to over 20 years in prison.

This case illustrates the benefits of applying a coercive control lens to IPSV. The investigating officer had a good understanding of CCB and how the wider context of DA vitiated consent to sexual activity. The officer also appeared to understand the necessity for trial strategy to inform the process of investigation and evidence collection such that evidence of the entrapment and dependency of the victim might enable the jury to question the suspect's reasonable belief in consent. The CPS also recognised the importance of the coercive control context at charging stage, requesting a second VRI to explore additional context, anticipating that the jury would need to understand how the suspect was able to re-establish contact and resume his abuse.

It is worth noting that only three years of the sentence was for CCB (which carries a maximum sentence of five years); the remainder of the sentence reflected the sexual offending. This clearly demonstrates that while CCB may be what makes IPSV prosecutable, it is successful sexual offence convictions that determine the majority of the sentence length.

Discussion

Work undertaken as part of Operation Soteria suggested there are significant potential advantages to situating IPSV investigations in a context of wider controlling and coercive behaviour. The present study provided a case example of a successful IPSV prosecution in which a CCB charge provided the evidence to underpin associated charges for sexual offences, with the CCB enabling prosecutors to counter popular myths and stereotypes around victim behaviour, including why a victim may return to an abusive partner.

The successful application of a coercive control lens to IPSV is dependent, however, on a number of assumptions. Specifically, CCB must be identified and recorded by first response officers; cases must be progressed by officers who understand DA and coercive control; prosecutors must be receptive to charging CCB; victims must be comfortable supporting sexual offences charges alongside wider DA-related offending; and cases must be presented to juries in a way that counters popular myths and stereotypes surrounding this type of offending. The present study has shown, through analysis of police case examples and qualitative interviews, that IPSV cases can be prevented from progressing at any of these stages.

There have been significant attempts to improve the capability of first response officers in England and Wales in identifying and responding to coercive control. The College of Policing's flagship 'Domestic Abuse Matters' training has been adopted by most forces and an evaluation showed an initial impact on arrests for CCB (Brennan *et al*. 2021). However, this effect tailed off after a few months and Myhill and colleagues (2023a) found in their observational study of

first responders a preference for recording crimes of physical assault even in cases where CCB had been identified, suggesting that motivation to record and investigate the offence may be lacking.

A possible explanation for the latter is the high perceived evidential threshold for the CCB offence identified in previous research with police (Myhill *et al*. 2023a), which the present study suggests some police investigators believe is shared by some prosecutors. It should be noted that there is no codified criteria or threshold in England and Wales for what constitutes adequate evidence for charging any specific criminal offence. The Code for Crown Prosecutors (Crown Prosecution Service 2018, p. 7) simply states prosecutors must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction based on 'objective assessment of the evidence'. Any particular threshold is therefore perceived or assumed, likely based on evolving practice and test cases. It must also therefore be amenable to change: Wiener *et al*. (2026) found that in specialist DA units utilising the CCB offence was more likely to be routine practice.

It appears from the present study that resources and force structures are perhaps more salient than knowledge and understanding in relation to a coercive control lens being applied to the investigation of IPSV, or at least the former compounds the lack of specialism applied to some cases. IPSV cases are investigated in dedicated RASSO units in a majority of forces (Wiener *et al*. 2026), where knowledge and understanding of CCB are less consistent. Many officers suggested, in fact, that investigators in RASSO units were not routinely trained in DA or CCB. Following Operation Soteria, the College of Policing has revised its Specialist Sexual Assault Investigators Development Programme to incorporate the 'whole story' approach (Tidmarsh 2021) which focuses on offender behaviour including coercive control. While a step forward, this input is not dedicated to IPSV or DA specifically.

Victims may be more likely to support an investigation for IPSV if it is initiated through the investigation of wider DA for which many reported in the first instance, much of which will constitute CCB. Yet it appears that the majority of DA, including CCB, is not investigated by officers with specialist knowledge or training. A recent study of a force without a DA unit found that a 'substantial and rising' proportion of the most complex DA workload like CCB was held by first response officers who do not necessarily have the skills, specialism or time to investigate the cases properly (Robinson *et al*. 2025, p. 15). Our wider study suggested that CCB is not frequently regarded as a CID-level offence unless accompanied by high-level physical violence and/or IPSV (Wiener *et al*. 2026). Even where forces have specialist resources, CCB investigations may not sit with a DA unit unless the case has been assessed as 'high risk' (Wiener *et al*. 2026).

While a CCB investigation need not necessarily be complex, the offence is inherently more time-consuming to investigate than, for example, a single physical assault or criminal damage for which there is clear physical evidence. In particular, the CCB offence requires evidence of both the offender's behaviour and the impact on the victim – the latter of which may more easily be established by a specialist. It is therefore concerning that such a large volume of investigations in which IPSV may form a part of the ongoing abuse are dealt with by officers with neither the time nor training to pursue them effectively. This situation speaks to what respondents have suggested is the perennial under-resourcing of DA relative to other specialist functions (Wiener *et al*. 2026).

Where IPSV is successfully charged alongside CCB, the present study highlights a potentially significant issue with IPSV charges being dropped when an offender offers to plead guilty to CCB. The appeal of this tactic to the offender is clear, as sexual offending carries a potentially higher custodial sentence, greater stigma, and a requirement to sign the sex offender register. However, we remain convinced of the necessity to charge CCB alongside IPSV: CCB *is* the evidence in these cases. CCB provides evidence that helps address the consent issue and counters common myths and stereotypes around victim responses. This aligns with recent victim-focused research showing that victims of IPSV need service providers to consider the wider context of their abuse to understand the sexual violence, and to recognise 'all the nuanced ways consent violations and coercive

control can work in a relationship' (Peeren *et al*. 2024, p. 6). Without this CCB context, IPSV may be less likely to both be charged in the first place and to be successfully prosecuted.

While avoiding cross-examination in court may in some circumstances be the right outcome for a victim, there are also potential disadvantages to dropping an IPSV charge, for the victim and wider society. As well as a longer custodial sentence, a sex offender will be labelled as such in future background checks and will also be subject to offender management upon release. What is not clear currently is how such plea bargains are presented to victims, or whether victims are routinely consulted at all. While charging decisions, including plea bargaining, ultimately rest with the CPS, our findings suggest prosecutors need to have a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors at play when making these decisions, including: the strength of CCB evidence in supporting sexual offence prosecutions; whether victims who have supported a prosecution to court stage may be willing and able to attend court with appropriate support and encouragement; the availability of special measures to victims; and the broader implications for victims and society when sexual violence charges are replaced with alternatives that may secure a conviction but fail to reflect the true nature of the offending.

Further work

This study focused primarily on police investigation of IPSV and while we spoke to officers about their experiences of working with the CPS and their perceptions of prosecutorial decision-making, we did not speak directly to prosecutors. Our findings therefore highlight the need for further research with the CPS on prosecuting CCB, both with and without RASSO. Although research with the CPS relating to Operation Soteria has been conducted and this highlighted training needs on coercive control (Munro *et al*. 2025), more in-depth research with the CPS is needed that goes beyond attitudes and Operation Soteria-specific practice, to focus specifically on CCB and IPSV. This research should consider organisational and procedural factors when examining CPS charging decisions, offering a more holistic understanding of how the CPS manage IPSV cases as they progress through the criminal justice system and the role that the CCB offence may play in these cases. Research should also draw together police and CPS findings to identify and test models for joined-up working on IPSV that foreground coercive control and enable broader application of CCB legislation.

Further research on the judiciary and court stage would also be valuable. Interviewees in our study echoed mock jury findings by Ellison and Munro (2013) and arguments by Ellison (2019) about juries' lack of understanding of common victim behaviours in IPSV cases. While the inclusion of the CCB offence might enhance juror understanding of IPSV, much may depend on how that wider DA offending informs trial strategy and how it is understood and presented by counsel. Some interviewees highlighted the absence of expert witnesses to elucidate the impact of coercive control on victim behaviour as an issue, suggesting that judicial directions alone were insufficient to bridge this gap in understanding among jurors.

Limitations

There are limitations to the data presented in this paper. Firstly, the collection of case examples was opportunistic, relying on cases that officers and staff were prepared to share during fieldwork visits, which may not capture the full spectrum of IPSV case handling. Additionally, our main fieldwork was concentrated in four police forces while qualitative interviews were conducted across 13 police forces, which may not capture variations in practice across different geographical areas and force structures. Nevertheless, our case study approach provides in-depth qualitative insight into current practice and areas for improvement in addressing IPSV investigations that are essential for understanding these investigative processes.

Concluding remarks

This research contributes to understanding an under-researched area by exploring the application of a coercive control lens to the investigation of IPSV. Our analysis revealed significant implementation gaps that prevented the consistent application of a coercive control lens across the different stages of the criminal justice system. However, as we outlined with the final case study, we also saw examples of where this type of evidence was successfully utilised to navigate the crucial evidential barrier surrounding consent in IPSV cases, resulting in the successful conviction for sexual offences. This suggests that while the potential exists for effective practice, outcomes currently depend more on individual practitioner expertise rather than systematic practice across the board. Our findings suggest the importance of addressing training gaps, charging practices, and coordination challenges facing police and prosecutors working with these cases, and further work is required with both police and prosecutors to explore how a coercive control lens can be routinely applied to IPSV cases.

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