

# Developing a new measure of domestic abuse: April 2023

An overview of the redevelopment of questions to measure domestic abuse in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

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# 1 . Overview

The way domestic abuse manifests is constantly changing. To ensure our statistics continue to provide the most accurate information and meet the needs of users, over the last few years we have undertaken a user engagement, research, and testing programme to improve the collection of data on domestic abuse. We have developed new questions on domestic abuse as part of the self-completion section of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). The new questions aim to meet the main requirements for domestic abuse data.

This article expands upon the two previous research updates and details the further work and testing conducted in recent months. We have included the new survey questions on the CSEW from April 2023 as part of a split-sample trial and present these here alongside our plans for measuring prevalence of domestic abuse and controlling or coercive behaviour. The criteria which will be used to evaluate the success of the new domestic abuse survey questions are also outlined.

Our previous research is outlined in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2021 article](#) and our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022 article](#).

## 2 . Exploring issues with current survey questions and understanding user requirements

Following our initial research outlined in our [Developing a measure of controlling or coercive behaviour article](#), further work was required. Before redeveloping the survey questions, we wanted to fully understand all issues with the existing questions and the user requirements. The existing domestic abuse questions can be found in our [Crime and justice methodology](#).

A user survey conducted in 2020 highlighted several issues with the survey questions and data currently collected, mainly:

- they do not align with the definition of domestic abuse introduced in the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)
- they exclude the offence of coercive or controlling behaviour introduced in the [Serious Crime Act 2015](#)
- they do not measure the number of incidents or frequency of abuse
- there is a greater user need for data to understand the nature of the abuse

Given these issues, significant changes to the questions were needed, in turn suggesting that a wider programme of improvements was required.

In autumn 2020, we put out a research tender to take forward the redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics with the aim of further exploring the issues with the current survey questions and data collected, alongside the user requirements previously gathered.

In November 2020, we awarded a research contract to a consortium led by the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol, also involving the College of Policing, Women's Aid and Men's Advice Line. The work took place between December 2020 and June 2021 and is outlined in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2021 article](#).

To explore the issues with the current survey questions and data collected, 11 victims of domestic abuse were consulted through six online individual interviews and an online focus group with five participants. More information about the characteristics of participants can be found in [Section 4: Research participants](#).

Following interviews and focus groups with survivors, a group of 18 core stakeholders were consulted. Stakeholders reviewed the findings about the headline prevalence measure, measuring frequency of abuse, measuring coercive and controlling behaviour and measuring impact.

Based on the findings of all the research, a number of recommendations were made, as outlined in section 3 of our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2021 article](#).

Further information about the research conducted by the University of Bristol can be found in their article [The Measurement of Domestic Abuse – Redeveloping the Crime Survey for England and Wales](#).

### 3 . Developing and testing new survey questions

After reviewing the recommendations from the previous work, we began the development of a new set of survey questions to measure domestic abuse. We put out another research tender to take this forward in autumn 2021. The aim was to develop the new survey questions based on topic knowledge, user requirements and qualitative testing with victims and the general public.

We awarded a research contract In November 2021 to a consortium led by the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol, that also involved the College of Policing, Women's Aid Federation of England, Men's Advice Line, IMKAAN and Welsh Women's Aid. The research took place between November 2021 and April 2022 and was carried out in two stages.

The aim of stage one of the research was to develop and test an initial set of survey questions. Questions were drafted based on findings from the previous research and tested via online focus groups with 19 victims and individual online interviews with eight victims. More information about the characteristics of participants can be found in [Section 4: Research participants](#). The testing explored how the questions should be framed, whether they captured lived experiences and the ease of responding. Based on the findings, the draft questions were refined further.

The aim of stage two of the research was to further develop the questions through cognitive testing with victims and members of the public who had not experienced domestic abuse, as well as through consultation with stakeholders.

The cognitive testing included interviews with 30 individuals, conducted online, in-person and over the telephone. A general public sample of 16 individuals with no experience of domestic abuse was recruited from previous Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) respondents, and three individuals from an LGBT+ Network. A further 11 participants with lived experience of domestic abuse were also recruited via a wide range of domestic abuse support services. More information about the characteristics of the participants can be found in [Section 4: Research participants](#).

Consultations with core CSEW stakeholders from government departments, Kantar Public, non-governmental organisations and academia were carried out online.

More information on the stages of the research can be found in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022 article](#).

The research concluded with the following recommendations:

- the number of participants with experience of family abuse who took part in the cognitive testing was relatively small, therefore the questions require further testing with victims with experiences of a range of family abuse
- the questions require large-scale testing, for example as part of a split-sample experiment
- the questions should ask about current partner abuse, previous partner abuse and family abuse experienced since the age of 16, with follow-up questions asking if any of the behaviours happened in the last 12 months
- subject to further testing, the headline prevalence measure should take account of both behaviours and impacts experienced by the victim and be calculated using abuse profiles
- abuse profiles should be published to provide comparison of those likely in need of services and support, and those who are less likely to need such support

The survey questions developed during the research, along with the implementation of the recommendations, aim to address the issues identified with the data currently collected. The new questions will account for a wider range of abusive behaviours, aligning with the definition of domestic abuse introduced in the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#). They will also account for experiences of controlling or coercive behaviour, and will measure the frequency of physical violence.

## Further testing of family abuse questions

Following the recommendations from the previous research, the University of Bristol conducted further question testing with victims with experiences of a range of family abuse. The testing took place between September and November 2022 using the same methods as were used for the previous research. Online interviews were conducted with 12 victims of family abuse recruited via domestic abuse support services. More information about the characteristics of participants can be found in [Section 4: Research participants](#).

The majority of participants found the questions easy to answer and had no issues with the wording or understanding the questions. The testing also explored whether specific perpetrators (for example, father, mother, brother) could be linked to specific abusive behaviours experienced. Participants highlighted that within the question structure it would be difficult for them to link each behaviour experienced to a specific perpetrator, particularly as the questions required them to also consider different time periods.

## Usability testing

Kantar Public (the CSEW survey contractors) conducted usability testing of the new questions in February 2023 to ensure that respondents were able to navigate through and respond to questions on a tablet device. The testing involved face-to-face interviews with individuals to explore their understanding of the questions, how they found answering the questions on a tablet device, the question routing, and usability of the question format. The usability testing included 10 individuals, 5 with lived experiences of domestic abuse recruited through domestic abuse support services and 5 members of the general public recruited through a qualitative research recruitment agency.

The main findings of the usability testing were:

- the order of the questions was well received with positive feedback about them increasing in severity and being grouped into themes
- the survey questions were felt to be quite long and could be repetitive
- the family abuse questions in the second half of the survey could come as a surprise without introduction
- there were a number of issues with the layout of questions, for example where participants had a current partner and at least one ex-partner the layout could cause confusion
- instructions for questions were not always clear regarding how many options respondents should tick
- the reference periods “in the last 12 months” and “since the age of 16 years” were not always clear in the questions and could be missed

Based on the testing, recommendations were made to improve the usability of the new questions. The recommendations taken forward include:

- changes to the layout of the questions and providing more clarity about what the survey includes
- instructions about how to respond to questions and the reference period for questions
- some minor wording and format changes to the questions

## 4 . Research participants

Our research and testing over the last few years has involved a wide variety of participants with different characteristics and experiences of domestic abuse. Table 1 shows a summary of the participants involved in all the research that took place between December 2020 and February 2023. The research included victims of domestic abuse as well as members of the general public with no experience of domestic abuse.

Table 1: Research participant characteristics  
England and Wales, December 2020 to February 2023

<b>Characteristic group</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Percentage of participants</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
All	90	100.0
Female	62	68.9
Male	26	28.9
Non-binary	2	2.2
<b>Age group</b>		
16 to 29 years	15	16.7
30 to 44 years	32	35.6
45 to 59 years	24	26.7
60 years and over	18	20.0
<b>Sexual orientation</b>		
Heterosexual	69	76.7
Bisexual	5	5.6
Gay or lesbian	6	6.7
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White	51	56.7
Mixed	4	4.4
Asian	23	25.6
Black	2	2.2
<b>Children</b>		
Have children	43	47.8
Do not have children	45	50.0
<b>Disability</b>		
Disabled	21	23.3
Not disabled	59	65.6

Source: Office for National Statistics

#### Notes

1. Participants include victims of domestic abuse and members of the general public.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 as some participants did not provide some information.

## 5 . Stakeholder engagement

Throughout the development of the new survey questions, we sought involvement and feedback from a wide range of stakeholders to ensure their needs and requirements were considered. At each stage, stakeholder engagement has included representatives from a variety of organisations across support services and charities, the academic sector, other government departments and our survey contractor. The following section outlines the main stakeholder engagement activities we have undertaken over the last few years; however, we have also met with stakeholders on a one-to-one basis at their request.

### User survey 2020

In summer 2020, we conducted a user survey to understand more about how users of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) made use of the domestic abuse data. The survey was open to anyone with an interest in our statistics on domestic abuse. We received 39 individual responses from stakeholders detailing their current uses of domestic abuse data from the CSEW and their future requirements and priorities.

### Stakeholder meeting March 2021

As part of the University of Bristol's research to examine the current survey questions, they facilitated an online meeting with a group of 18 core stakeholders in March 2021. This was to review the early findings on the current headline measure of domestic abuse, measuring the frequency of acts of abuse, measuring coercive and controlling behaviour, and measuring impact. The group of core stakeholders consisted of individuals representing organisations who we regularly engage with in relation to our annual domestic abuse publication. It also included individuals who were involved in our previous work to develop new questions on coercive or controlling behaviour as outlined in our [Developing a measure of controlling or coercive behaviour article](#). The group of stakeholders met again in June 2021 and the results and recommendations from the research were shared and discussed.

### Stakeholder event October 2021

We hosted an online stakeholder event open to anyone with an interest in statistics on domestic abuse in October 2021. We provided an update on the research conducted by the University of Bristol exploring issues with the current survey questions and their recommendations for future work. We facilitated breakout groups with stakeholders to get their feedback on the recommendations, answered questions about the research or future plans, and addressed any concerns.

### Stakeholder feedback February 2022

We gathered feedback from core stakeholders on an initial set of draft survey questions which had been developed by the University of Bristol in February 2022. We shared the draft questions and information about the work that had been done with stakeholders. We also provided a range of options around collecting data to measure prevalence in the last 12 months and the associated prevalence measures we could produce. Nine stakeholders responded with feedback on whether the questions met their requirements, providing suggestions on the wording and their preferred option for prevalence measures.

### Stakeholder event October 2022

We hosted a second stakeholder event open to anyone with an interest in statistics on domestic abuse in October 2022. We provided an update on the most recent research conducted by the University of Bristol to develop and test new domestic abuse questions, sharing the findings and our future plans. Stakeholders were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide online feedback regarding whether the new questions would meet their needs, their views on the redevelopment process, and on our plans for deriving a measure of controlling or coercive behaviour. We reviewed stakeholder feedback following the event to ensure we had addressed the main concerns raised.

## 6 . New questions

## Question structure

Following the research undertaken over the last two years, a [new set of domestic abuse questions \(PDF, 471KB\)](#) have been added to the self-completion part of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). This is on a split-sample trial from April 2023 until the provisional date of March 2025. The design of the new questions is different to the current domestic abuse questions that are included on the CSEW and can be found in our [Crime and justice methodology](#).

The questions will continue to be asked as part of the self-completion module that follows the face-to-face interview. Though the long-term ambition is to move the CSEW online, changes to the mode of collection for domestic abuse questions will be considered as part of the wider CSEW transformation.

The new domestic abuse questions are split into two parts. The first part asks questions on intimate partner abuse, while the second part asks questions on family abuse. Each part is split into questions on abusive behaviours followed by questions on the impact of those behaviours. The questions collect information on experiences since the age of 16 years. These questions aim to capture data on experiences of victims over the course of their adult life.

Within the intimate partner questions, respondents are asked about abusive behaviours experienced by their current partner and/or their ex-partner. Research found that asking respondents to think about any domestic abuse they have experienced by a partner presented a challenge to some victims, as those who are still living in an abusive relationship often do not recognise what they are experiencing as abuse.

The testing outlined in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022 article](#) explored whether specifically asking a respondent to think about abuse experienced by a current partner could be used as a more accurate measure for recent abuse. This was instead of phrasing questions with the wording "in the last 12 months." Respondents were also asked about the time period they were thinking of when recalling the information. The findings suggested that the accuracy of responses for people who were still in an abusive relationship may be affected when answering questions phrased as "in the last 12 months."

## Domestic abuse in the last 12 months

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of producing a specific 12-month prevalence measure of domestic abuse as part of our stakeholder engagement in early 2022. This was instead of producing an alternative proxy recent measure. A 12-month prevalence measure differs from the since the age of 16 years measure as it identifies victims experiencing abusive behaviours more recently.

We added questions to the end of the set of behaviour questions, asking respondents if they had experienced any of those behaviours in the last 12 months by a current and/or an ex-partner. This was in response to our stakeholder's feedback, along with the findings from the testing. We will include these follow-up questions along with the prompt for the respondent to think specifically about their current partner. This will allow us to produce a 12-month prevalence measure that is as accurate as possible and complements the since the age of 16 years (lifetime) measure.

## Types of abusive behaviours

The [new domestic abuse questions \(PDF, 471KB\)](#) cover the following types of abusive behaviours by asking a set of questions on each of the following:

- emotional abuse
- financial abuse
- health related abuse
- threatening abusive behaviours
- forceful abusive behaviours
- sexual assault
- stalking
- physical abuse

We will capture detailed information on abusive behaviours respondents have experienced for each abuse type since the age of 16 years (lifetime). If the respondent states that they have experienced any of the behaviours for each abuse type since the age of 16 years, they will be asked if they have experienced any of the behaviours in the last 12 months.

## **Question implementation**

We will begin receiving data in the summer of 2023 and will then start analysis. This will be ongoing as we continue to receive additional data. Our analysis will include developing prevalence measures and exploring the production of abuse profiles as outlined in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022 article](#).

We will evaluate the success of the new questions and make a decision on the future of domestic abuse measurement in the CSEW by early 2025. Our strategy for assessing the new questions is outlined in [Section 8: Strategy for evaluating the new questions](#).

## 7 . Calculating domestic abuse prevalence

We plan to estimate domestic abuse prevalence using the new questions in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) in two ways. Similar to currently published measures in our [Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics dataset](#), we will produce estimates of domestic abuse prevalence in the last 12 months and since the age of 16 years (lifetime). However, as outlined in [Section 6: New questions](#), the new questions are structured differently to the current ones, therefore new methods for calculating domestic abuse prevalence will be required.

The [new domestic abuse questions \(PDF, 471KB\)](#) cover eight types of abusive behaviours outlined in [Section 6: New questions](#). At the end of each question set, respondents that have stated that they experienced abusive behaviours are asked if they have experienced the behaviours in the last 12 months. Respondents that answer yes to these behaviours in the last 12 months will form part of our 12-month prevalence measure. Methods of measuring prevalence will be evaluated as we receive and analyse the data and are subject to change.

The new questions will also provide data that will allow us to calculate estimates of domestic abuse prevalence since the age of 16 years. Unlike other estimates, we plan to use the questions on both abusive behaviours and the impact of those behaviours to develop the since the age of 16 years (lifetime) prevalence measure. As outlined in our [Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022 article](#), abuse profiles will assist in the production of measures of prevalence.

Abuse profiles aim to account for both the level of abusive behaviour and the impact of the behaviour on the victim and could be used to differentiate types of domestic abuse victims. For example, victims of “one-off” or infrequent abuse, where the impact felt is reported as limited, are differentiated from those suffering ongoing, coercive abuse.

Initial work to establish abuse profiles and assess severity using responses to the behaviour and impact questions suggests different profiles could be measured using statistical methods. We will conduct further work to explore this using the data collected from April 2023 onwards.

We anticipate measures of domestic abuse prevalence developed using the new survey questions will capture controlling or coercive behaviour more accurately than previous measures through measuring behaviours that were previously missed. However, we do not anticipate that we will produce a separate 12-month prevalence measure of controlling or coercive behaviour. This is because the number of survey questions are limited. This means we are unable to capture all the information required to enable the development of a measure that aligns to the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour introduced in the [Serious Crime Act 2015](#).

Instead, we aim to produce an accurate measure of 12-month domestic abuse prevalence that includes controlling or coercive behaviours. We also aim to produce a since the age of 16 years (lifetime) measure of controlling or coercive behaviour which accounts for abusive behaviours and the impact of those behaviours.

We will share further information on our methods over the coming years.

## 8 . Strategy for evaluating the new questions

This section outlines our strategy for evaluating the success of the new domestic abuse survey questions and how we will make a decision on the future of domestic abuse measurement in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).

Our evaluation criteria have been developed in line with the quality requirements of the [UK Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and [Eurostat's European Statistics Code of Practice](#), which sets out five dimensions for measuring the quality of statistical outputs. The dimensions are:

- relevance
- accuracy and reliability
- timeliness and punctuality
- comparability and coherence
- accessibility and clarity

Our evaluation criteria are as follows.

## **Relevance**

- The new questions and proposed outputs meet the priority requirements of users.
- The majority of users are satisfied with the outputs produced from the new questions.
- Data collected from the new questions can produce prevalence estimates and breakdowns at the same level of detail as is currently produced.
- Methods for producing abuse profiles have been tested and shared with users.

## **Accuracy and reliability**

- The new questions accurately measure lived experiences of victims of domestic abuse.
- The new questions do not lead to a significant increase in non-response rates.
- The new questions do not lead to a significant increase in non-response bias.

## **Timeliness and punctuality**

- The new questions do not negatively affect the timeliness and punctuality of our domestic abuse publications.

## **Comparability and coherence**

- The comparability between estimates produced using the new questions and the existing time series is clear to users.
- Estimates produced using the new questions closely align with government definitions of domestic abuse, for example the Serious Crime Act 2015 and Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and any differences are clear to users.

## **Accessibility and clarity**

- Estimates produced using the new questions are presented in a format that is easily available and clear to users.
- Supporting information about the changes to the questions, and estimates produced using them, is easily available and clear to users.

We will assess the criteria using a range of sources including, but not limited to, data collected from the split sample trial, our research work to date and user engagement. The sources will be used to answer research questions linked to each criterion. The research questions will be developed throughout the evaluation.

An example of a research question we will want to answer is “Does feedback from victims gathered throughout the research suggest the new questions accurately measure their lived experiences?” Answering this question will provide evidence to assess the criteria within the accuracy and reliability quality dimension.

Further details on the research questions we design to assess the criteria will be shared in future updates.

## 9 . Future developments

We would like to thank everyone who has participated in this research, including our research participants and all the stakeholders involved for the feedback they provided to inform our decision making.

Our new domestic abuse questions were introduced on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) on 1 April 2023 on a split-sample basis until the provisional date of March 2025. Over the next two years we will analyse the data received and assess the evaluation criteria outlined in [Section 8: Strategy for evaluating the new questions](#).

We will publish regular updates of our findings including trial outputs based on the new questions. Our next update will be published in late 2023 alongside our [Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview Statistical bulletin](#).

If you have any feedback, please contact the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Centre for Crime and Justice via email at [crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk](mailto:crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk).

## 10 . Related links

[Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2022](#) Bulletin | Released 25 November 2022  
Figures on domestic abuse from police recorded crime and a number of different organisations.

[Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2022](#) Article | Released 25 November 2022  
Update on the ongoing research to redevelop statistics on domestic abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

[Redevelopment of domestic abuse statistics: research update November 2021](#) Article | Released 24 November 2021  
Update on the ongoing research to redevelop statistics on domestic abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

[Developing a measure of controlling or coercive behaviour](#) Article | Released 18 April 2019  
Initial research into new questions aimed at identifying controlling or coercive behaviour.

## 11 . Cite this methodology

Office for National Statistics (ONS) released 5 April 2023, ONS website, methodology, [Developing a new measure of domestic abuse: April 2023](#)