

Challenging the ‘public story’ of domestic violence and abuse: Understanding and responding to risk in relationships of adult family violence

Research exploring what is understood by ‘adult family violence’ and how relationships and associated dynamics of risk are experienced, recorded and responded to in practice.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Lancashire
Principal researcher(s)	Lily Graham LMGraham1@uclan.ac.uk
Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctoral Training Centre for Industry and Collaboration • Two police forces in the north west of England
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	March 2023
Date due for completion	March 2026

Research context

It is increasingly recognised that understandings of domestic abuse are based on a particular ‘public story’ (Donovan and Hester 2014), often relating to a cis-gender and heteronormative image of intimate partner violence. This ‘public story’ impacts practice, with data pertaining to risk assessment concentrated on intimate partner homicide. The extent to which abuse across the

family is effectively understood, responded to and risk assessed in practice therefore remains unclear.

Recent research on adult family homicide (Bracewell and others 2022) highlights that these relationships are often defined by complex intersecting vulnerabilities, including substance use, care roles, criminal histories and trauma. Therefore, it is crucial for research to enhance understandings of adult family violence, defined as domestic abuse between family members aged 18 or over, before homicide to demystify experiences of abuse across the family.

Furthermore, research should aim to improve knowledge on the effectiveness of domestic abuse risk assessment and practice in supporting these potentially complex relationships. This will help gather a picture of 'what works' for policy, practice and academia.

Aims

- To challenge the 'public story' of domestic abuse and increase understanding of meanings and experiences of adult family violence.
- To highlight how risk is experienced in adult family violence and the role and effectiveness of risk assessment procedures in capturing these dynamics.
- To develop knowledge on effective professional support during the risk assessment encounter for victim-survivors of adult family violence.

Research methodology

Mixed methods research will be used to capture the understanding and construction of domestic abuse and risk, and subsequent impacts on adult family violence, on the macro policy level, the institutional level and the micro-interactional level.

1. The first phase is a thematic policy analysis of key statutory guidance from the Home Office relating to domestic abuse which aimed to shape practice during the years 2021–2023. Policies and guidance were collected through purposive sampling from the Gov.UK website. Four key documents were selected and subjected to thematic analysis in NVivo.

2. The second phase relates to the mixed methods analysis of police case file data from two north west police forces. Data from reported cases of domestic abuse between family members over the age of 18 during the years 2021–2023 were extracted. Descriptive frequency statistics will provide an overview of the demographic trends in victim-survivors, perpetrators and their relationships as well as trends in risk assessment, outcomes and crime codes. Following this, 10 case files from each force will be extracted and subjected to a thematic analysis to explore processes of decision making.
3. The final phase will be semi-structured interviews with police officers and practitioners in England and Wales who have, or have been, responsible for completing risk assessments for domestic abuse relationships, as well as semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors. These interviews will aim to explore interactions between professionals and victim-survivors. A sample size of 17 practitioner interviews has been achieved with 10 police officer interviews and 10 victim-survivor interviews to be completed. These interviews will be subjected to thematic analysis.
4. Following data collection, the data will be triangulated and integrated during the write-up stage of the PhD.

Research participation

The researcher is currently seeking victim-survivors, those with lived experience of abusive or those who had unhealthy relationships with adult family members when they were also adults. The researcher is hoping to speak to those with lived experience who are residing in England and Wales and are:

- aged 18 or over
- have experiences in interacting with or being supported by professional services
- currently feeling safe.

The research will involve a one-to-one interview with the researcher; this can be either on Microsoft Teams, over the phone or in a safe and confidential public location. The researcher would be happy

to chat about what is most comfortable and familiar for you, as well any other adjustments that might make you feel more comfortable. The researcher is hoping to speak to people about their experiences so they can make their thoughts, opinions and reflections central to the research study.

Before taking part, please ensure:

- The contact details you leave would not be able to be accessed by anyone who makes you feel at risk, unsafe or uncomfortable.
- That no one who makes you feel unsafe, at risk or uncomfortable would have access to your browser history.
- That taking part in the project would not put you at further risk of harm. This could be from someone else or may negatively impact you emotionally.

Please note, if you do decide to take part, you will reserve the right to withdraw at any point during the collection and up to two weeks after the interview has finished.

Participation is entirely voluntary and will be confidential. This research has been granted ethical approval from the University of Central Lancashire's BAHSS Ethical Review Committee. The reference number for this is: 01136.

To sign up for the study, ask questions or to find out more, please email LMGraham1@uclan.ac.uk or fill in this [contact form](#).

If you feel you need any further support, please contact:

- National DV Helpline: 0808 2000 247
- [Nation Domestic abuse hotline](#)

References

Bracewell K and others. 2022, '[Beyond intimate partner relationships: utilising domestic homicide reviews to prevent adult family domestic homicide](#)', Journal of Gender-Based Violence 6(3), pp 535-550.

Donovan C and Hester M. 2014. 'Domestic violence and sexuality: what's love got to do with it?' Bristol: Policy Press.