Centre for Economic Performance

POLICY BRIEF

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Domestic abuse: improving risk assessment and response by the police

Domestic abuse remains a pervasive challenge worldwide. According to data from the Office for National Statistics, domestic abuse affects one in five people aged 16 and above in the UK. In 2021, the then Conservative government took significant steps to tackle the issue through the Domestic Abuse Act, which established clear definitions and stronger protections for victims. But more work needs to be done, particularly on risk assessment by the police.

After an incident of domestic abuse, officers must judge whether the victim is likely to face repeated violence, a decision that shapes the protections provided and urgency of response to future calls. Currently, one of the most widely-used risk assessment tools is DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment and Honour-based violence), a list of 27 questions, including questions like "has the current incident resulted in injury?".

But research shows that use of DASH is inconsistent. For example, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has shown that some police forces classified fewer than 10 per cent of cases as "high risk", while for others more than 80 per cent of cases were classified this way. In August 2025, safeguarding minister Jess Phillips raised concerns that DASH "doesn't work" in an interview with the BBC.

The Labour Party has made tackling violence against women and girls a central priority in its manifesto. Delivering on this ambition requires moving beyond the current approach. CEP research has helped to identify approaches—rooted in better data and analysis—which are more effective. Integrating these tools into call-handling systems, alongside measures to reduce police workloads and support victims, could transform the effectiveness of domestic abuse response.

Policy recommendations

- **Integrate electronic criminal history data into real-time call handling systems.** This would enable immediate risk predictions, improving response urgency and resource allocation over reliance on DASH questionnaires. For this and many other AI projects, an open application programming interface (API) is needed so researchers are able to communicate with the police systems.
- **During risk assessment in domestic abuse cases, adopt a two-step approach**. The first screening would be done by applying machine learning techniques to criminal history information. A second screening can use a more sensitive instrument to distinguish true high-risk cases from false positives.
- **Review the scheduling of football games**. Games scheduled at midday or the afternoon lead to prolonged drinking and higher domestic abuse rates. Shifting games to the evening or holding them on weekdays could help to mitigate a significant proportion of these incidents.

Experts

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Key findings

- **Most perpetrators of domestic abuses are men:** In intimate partner cases, the perpetrator is male in 83.4 per cent of reported incidents.
- **Charges deter repeat violence:** Imposing criminal charges in cases of domestic abuse reduces violent recidivism by 40 per cent compared with the average recidivism rate.
- **Alcohol as a risk factor:** Perpetrators' use of alcohol in domestic abuse cases increases the likelihood of them being charged but reduces the probability of cases being graded as "high risk".
- **Impact of sporting events:** Alcohol consumption by men during afternoon football matches leads to an increase in domestic abuse. Domestic abuse reduces by 5 per cent during a game, suggesting a substitution effect of football and domestic abuse. But reports of domestic abuse increase after the match, with the highest percentage of cases reported between 10-12 hours after kick-off.
- **Response times shape outcomes:** A 10 per cent increase in the response time after emergency calls leads to a 4.6 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of a crime being detected. Faster response times make it more likely that victims or witnesses will name a suspect.
- **Impact of police workload:** An increase in police workload leads to a rise in the probability of victims withdrawing their statements in domestic abuse cases.
- **DASH makes errors:** Out of 16,203 domestic abuse cases analysed, there were 1,917 repeat attacks. DASH risk assessments failed to identify the perpetrator as high risk in 1,702 of those repeat attacks.
- **Machine learning solutions:** Using criminal history data, machine learning models can cut the error rate to as low as 6.1 per cent, correctly identifying up to 1,234 repeat attacks that were not identified by the DASH system.

Related research

Black, D.A., Grogger, J., Kirchmaier, T., and Sanders, K. (2023) Criminal charges, risk assessment and violent recidivism in cases of domestic abuse, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1897.
This study analyses two approaches to reducing violent domestic abuse recidivism.
Blanes i Vidal, J. and Kirchmaier, T. (2018) The Effect of Police Response Time on Crime Clearance Rates, The Review of Economic Studies, 85(2), pp. 855-891.
The paper explores whether faster police response times help to combat crime by increasing the likelihood of an arrest.
Grogger, J., Ivandić, R. and Kirchmaier, T. (2021) Comparing Conventional and Machine-Learning Approaches to Risk Assessment in Domestic Abuse Cases, Journal of Empirical Legal Studies, 18(1), pp. 90-130.
This paper compares the predictions from conventional and machine-learning based approaches to risk assessment of domestic abuse.
Ivandić, R., Kirchmaier, T., Saeidi, Y. and Torres-Blas, N. (2024) Football, Alcohol and Domestic Abuse, Journal of Public Economics, 230.
This paper explores the role of alcohol and emotions in explaining the dynamics in domestic abuse around major football matches.
Kirchmaier, T. and Oparina, E. (2024) Under pressure: Victim withdrawal and police officer workload, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1985.
This paper addresses the relationship between a police officer's workload and the likelihood of statement withdrawal of domestic abuse victims.

How to engage with our research

Get in touch with CEP via cep.info@lse.ac.uk

Contact the LSE Public Affairs team at comms.publicaffairs@lse.ac.uk

About CEP

Established at LSE in 1990, the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) carries out policy-focused research on the causes of economic growth and effective ways to create a fair, inclusive, and sustainable society.

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