



DOMESTIC HOMICIDE PROJECT SPOTLIGHT BRIEFING #6 YOUNG VICTIMS

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1. BACKGROUND

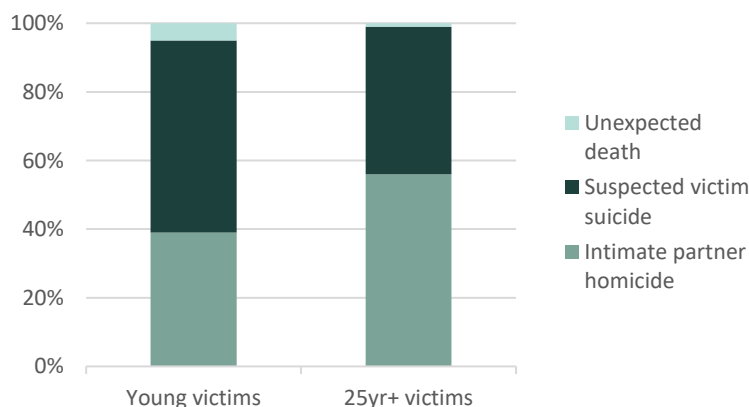
The Domestic Homicide Project (the Project), based in the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) within the College of Policing, was established by National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing and the Home Office in May 2020. The Project collects, reviews, and shares quick-time learning from all police-recorded domestic homicides and suspected suicides of individuals in England and Wales with a known history of domestic abuse victimisation (hereafter 'suspected victim suicide') to learn lessons to prevent future deaths. All police forces in England and Wales submit notice of relevant deaths to the Project shortly after the death occurs.

This Briefing analyses all 57 cases in the project dataset over the first three years and 10 months of the project (01/04/2020–30/01/2024) involving a young victim aged 16 to 24 years old who was either killed by an intimate partner or was suspected to have taken their own life following abuse from an intimate partner. The UK Government defines domestic abuse victims in intimate partner relationships as aged 16 and over. Because literature shows that young people's definitions of intimate relationships can be more fluid than those of older adults (SafeLives, 2014), this included one case where the relationship was defined as 'Other' (which encompasses acquaintance, friend or flatmate), to ensure that all potential intimate or sexual relationships within the dataset were captured. A second dataset of all 645 cases involving victims aged 25 years and older (hereafter '25yr+ victims') was created from the Project database for comparison and interpretation of the young victims' dataset. This second dataset was matched on relationship categories and the same date range. Combining both datasets gives a total sample for this briefing of 702 cases.

2. VICTIMISATION

1 in 13 victims of all intimate partner homicides (hereafter 'IPH') or suspected victim suicides in this dataset (8%, n=57/702) were young, aged 16-24 years. This proportion of young victims is in keeping with the limited international literature (e.g. Sorrentino et al (2020) found 8% of all IPH victims were aged 15-24 years).

Type of death



Amongst young victims, 39% (n=22) were murdered by an intimate partner and 56% (n=32) were suspected victim suicides.

This is a higher rate of suspected suicide amongst young victims compared with 25yr+ victims: 56% (n=32) compared with 43% (n=276), respectively.



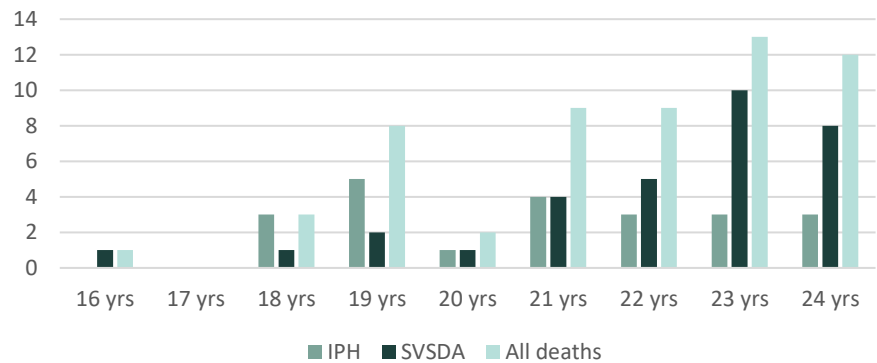
Victim-suspect relationship

- Across young victim cases, the current partner was the suspect in 58% (n=33), ex-partner in 28% (n=16), intermittent/ casual sexual partner in 12% (n=7) and flatmate in one case. This is in line with previous literature on the proportional breakdown of current vs ex-partner in young people’s intimate partner violence (SafeLives, 2014; Adhia et al, 2019).
- Fewer young couples lived together (40%, n=23) compared with 25yr+ victims (59%, n=380). This may have implications for police risk assessment in ensuring risk is not downplayed where couples are not living together e.g. the perpetrator is not judged to be less of a risk based on having less physical ‘access’ to the victim.

Victim demographics

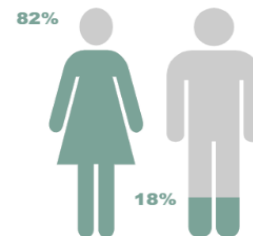
Most young victims were towards the upper end of the age bracket, with the majority aged between 21 and 24 years. This was particularly true of suspected victim suicides, where most were aged 23 or 24 years. By contrast, although involving a small sample size overall, the most frequent age for IPHs was 19 years (five cases).

Age of young victims

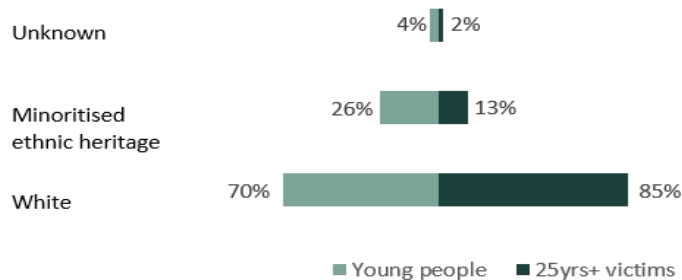


Sex

82% of young victims were female (n=47) and 18% male (n=10), similar to 25yr+ victims where 81% were female (n=520) and 19% male (n=125).



Ethnicity



26% of young victims were of minoritised ethnic heritage (n=15) and 70% white (n=40), a higher minoritised rate compared with 13% (n=85) and 85% (n=549), respectively, amongst 25yr+ victims. In 4% (n=2) and 2% (n=11) of the young victim and 25yr+ victim datasets, respectively, victim sex was not known.



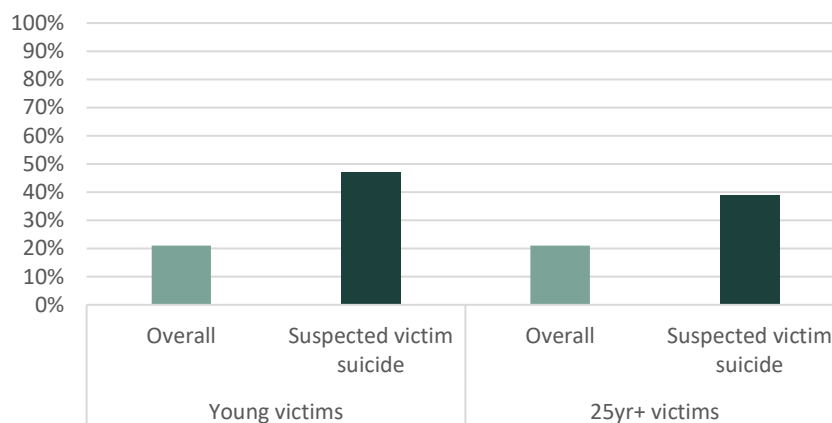
Other victim demographics

- Two young victims were identified as LGBTQ+. Caution is needed in interpreting as these are very small numbers.
- Data on ethnicity and sexuality is new information – a recent rapid evidence review of teen peer abuse (Weir et al., forthcoming) found no studies disaggregated by these characteristics.
- Three young victims (5%) were identified as having a disability and/or care need, a lower rate of identification than the 20% (n=91) identified in the 25yr+ dataset.

Risk profile

- Slightly more young victims were deemed high risk DA victims by police (35%, n=20) compared with 25yr+ victims (28%, n=179), and slightly more were known to MARAC (40%, n=23, compared with 34%, n=218).
- 21% of young victims overall (n=18) were identified as having a prior mental health need, the same proportion (n=138) as amongst 25yr+ victims. However, for suspected victim suicide cases only this rose to 47% (n=15/32) of young victims, compared with the lower rate of 39% (n=109/276) for 25yr+ victims.

Mental health needs



Key Learning Points – Victimisation

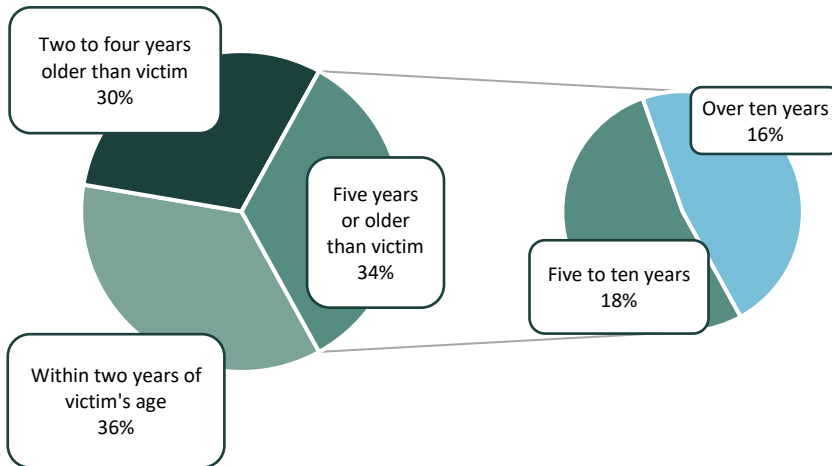
- One in 13 domestic abuse related deaths (8%) involved a victim aged 16-24 years old.
- Proportionally more young victims were of a minoritised ethnic heritage than 25yr+ victims.
- Only 40% of young couples lived together.
- One-third of young victims were deemed high-risk by police, slightly more than the 25yr+ victims.
- Substantial rates of known mental health needs amongst young victims, especially amongst suicides.



3. SUSPECT PROFILE

Demographics

Age



One-third of suspects (36%, n=20) in young victim cases were within two years of the victim's age. A further 30% (n=17) were two to four years older. A further third (34%, n=19) were much older, by five years or more.

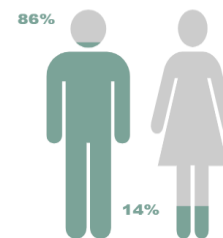
Amongst these much older suspects, 10 (18% of overall sample) were five to 10 years older and nine (16%) were more than 10 years older (and of these, 7/9 were more than 16 years older).

Older – and especially “much older” partners (defined in previous studies as older by two years or more; but in this analysis as five years or more) are a

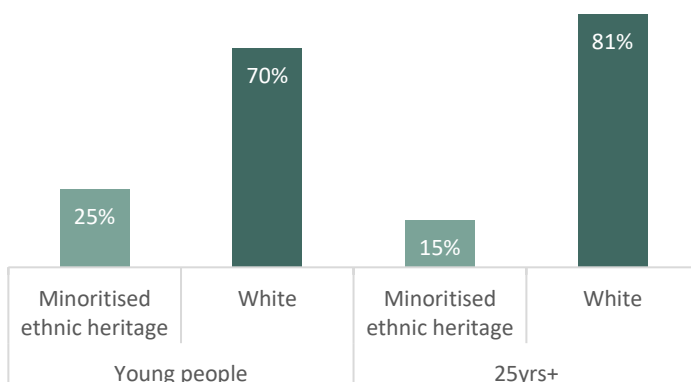
statistically significant known risk factor for young people's domestic abuse (Barter et al, 2009). The new data in this briefing shows that 'much older' partners are a feature of one-third of young victim cases, both IPHs and victim suicides.

Sex

14% of young victim cases involved a female suspect (n=8; seven victims were male, one female), and 86% a male suspect (n=48); this is similar to the 25yr+ victim cases at 18% (n=114) and 82% (n=528) respectively. In 2% (n=1) and <1% (n=3) of the young victim and 25yr+ victim datasets respectively, suspect sex was not known.



Ethnicity

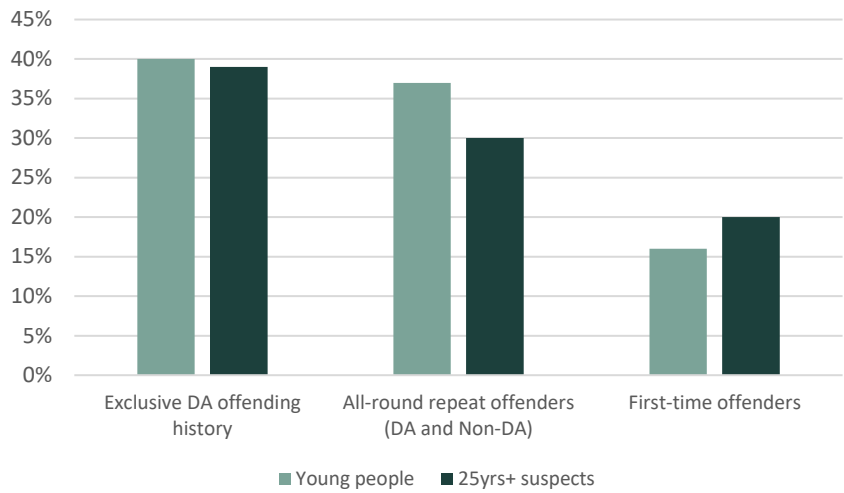


25% of suspects in young victim deaths were of minoritised ethnic heritage (n=14) and 70% white (n=39) compared with 15% (n=95) and 81% (n=524) in the 25yr+ dataset. In 7% (n=4) and 4% (n=26) of the young victim and 25yr+ victim datasets respectively, suspect ethnicity was not known.



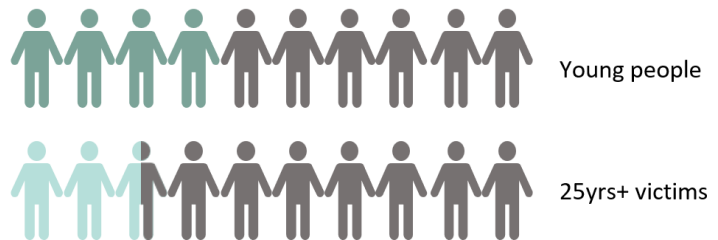
Prior offending and risk profile

Suspects in young victim cases most commonly had a history of exclusively domestic abuse offending (40%, n=23) or they were all-round repeat violent offenders with a history of both DA and non-DA violent offences (37%, n=21). Only 16% (n=9) were first-time offenders in this incident. This broadly mirrored suspects with 25yr+ victims, though there were even fewer first time offenders amongst the young victim group.



- In terms of police footprint, 77% of suspects (n=44) in cases with young victims were previously known to police for domestic abuse, slightly more than the 70% (n=450) in cases with 25yr+ victims. However, when considered by type, more suspects in cases with young IPH victims were known to police for domestic abuse (67%, n=14) compared with suspects in cases with 25yr+ IPH victims (53%, n=157).

A notably higher proportion of suspects in cases with young victims were known for high risk and/or serial domestic abuse, 40% (n=23) compared with suspects in cases with 25yr+ victims (26%, n=167).



- Other risk factors for suspects in cases with young victims were present at similar rates to cases with 25yr+ victims, e.g., alcohol use; previous attempts to kill; previous use of weapons; previous non-fatal strangulation; stalking; prior rape or sexual assault; breach of a protection order. Across the board, risk factors in young victim deaths were present in similar, or (with the exception of alcohol use) slightly higher, rates compared to their 25yr+ counterparts. Prior research has shown that many risk factors present in IPHs of young people mirror those in adult victims (e.g. Glass et al, 2008; Bush, 2020).

Suspect risk factors for young victims and 25yr+ victims





Key Learning Points – Suspect profile

- Suspects in young victim cases were more likely to be known to police for high risk and/or serial domestic abuse offending than suspects in 25yr+ victim cases (40% compared with 26%), and equally likely to be exclusively DA offenders in terms of their prior criminality. This is in keeping with the young victim profile which identified experience of high-risk, MARAC-level domestic abuse.
- Two-thirds of young victim cases involved a perpetrator who was more than two years older, and one-third a perpetrator who was five or more years older. Nine cases (16%) involved a “much older” perpetrator more than 10 years older (and up to 26 years older) than the victim. This suggests that older – especially “much older” perpetrators may be a particular risk factor for some young victim deaths following domestic abuse, including both partner homicides and suspected victim suicides.

KEY THEMATIC LEARNING

4. COERCIVE AND CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR

Coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) was present in young victim cases at a similar rate to 25yr+ victims (53% (n=30/57) and 49% (n=316/645) respectively). However, CCB was even more present in the suspected suicide cases with young victims (69%, n=22/32) compared with suspected suicides of 25yr+ victims (60%, n=165/276).

The nature of the CCB in young victim cases in many aspects mirrored that of 25yr+ victims – e.g., isolating them from friends and family, making degrading and derogatory comments, policing their movements and accusing them of cheating. However, there were some context-specific elements with young victims, including perpetrators exploiting mental health issues and/or body image issues, abuse on university campus, taking the victim’s student grant, control of social media, and threats to the victim’s parents, siblings, or the victim’s unborn child. Of interest, both the IPH and suspected victim suicide cases involving CCB strongly featured the suspect previously threatening to take their own life.

Prior research on young people’s intimate partner violence has identified “highly worrying” levels of CCB (Barter, 2009; Glass et al, 2008). Crucially, this dataset now shows that CCB is a precursor to both intimate partner homicides and suspected victim suicides.

Qualitative examples taken from police case notes illustrate the nature of the CCB in these young relationships:

Case study, IPH, female victim, male suspect:

Throughout their 6-month relationship the suspect had controlled the victim by stopping who she saw such as family and friends while also controlling her social media.

Case study, IPH, male victim, female suspect (n.b. counter allegations including that he raped her):

She restricted his use of social media and obsessed about where he was if he ever went out and would use fake accounts to track and abuse people she suspected of him cheating with. Chat messages were found where she has threatened to kill herself and the children when he doesn't respond to her or asks her to leave him alone.



Case study, suspected victim suicide, female victim, male perpetrator:

The perpetrator would have known the victim had [an eating disorder]. [The area about which she was most self-conscious] is the area that the perpetrator abused on her body and in addition he would call her fat. He made her spend significant amounts of money upon him because he was jealous about what she had spent on a previous partner. He was not happy because she earned more money than him.

Case study, suspected victim suicide, female victim, male perpetrator:

They were together almost the entire time during their two-month relationship, she was rarely alone. She had started to miss University lectures, work and had stopped going to the gym, so that he could be with her. He often picked her up from university unannounced. He had asked her to record the conversation with police, so that he could listen to it afterwards. She disclosed that he had twice suggested a suicide pact [with specific plans made]. The deceased disclosed that her boyfriend would regularly threaten to commit suicide in order to control her and would ask her not to leave him to go to university or work.

Case study, suspected victim suicide, SVSDA, female victim, male perpetrator:

He would manipulate the victim by making her feel worthless. He had another girlfriend who he would also see and he would compare and use her as a way of manipulating the victim into doing things she didn't want to do. Financially abused her by using her student grants to pay his drug debts. When the family arranged for the victim to go to a private facility to address her mental health issues, he tracked her down and encouraged her to leave with him.

5. PREGNANCY AND RECENT BIRTH

In 12% of cases (n=7) the victim was pregnant or within six months postpartum. This compares with <1%% (n=3) of 25yr+ victims. Three victims were pregnant and all three took their own life. Four had given birth within the last six months: of these, three were IPH victims, and one took her own life.

At least one international study identified pregnancy to be a risk factor for adolescent IPH victimisation (Adhia et al, 2019). But these findings suggest that pregnancy and the postpartum period can be high risk not only for IPH, but also for suspected victim suicide after domestic abuse and especially for young victims.

The young suspected victim suicides had highly complex histories including multiple & extensive prior domestic abuse victimisation, child sexual exploitation, mental illness, alcohol use and prior suicide attempts. These cases bear out findings from the MBRACE Mothers and Suicide report which found that (all) mothers taking their own lives typically had a history of multiple trauma and suicide was the leading cause of death of mothers six weeks to one year after pregnancy (MBRACE 2023).

In three cases the victim had recently split from the perpetrator or was in an on-again/off-again relationship; showing that separation was an aggravating risk factor. We discuss separation as a risk factor further below.

Five out of seven cases were already known to children's social care and four to MARAC. In two out of the four suspected suicide cases the victim was known to mental health services.

There was prior police contact in six out of seven cases. In two of these six cases the suspect was on bail at the time of the death, and in a third the victim had contacted police, but police had not responded. In three out of seven cases, domestic abuse report(s) had been made by the victim to police during the pregnancy and/or shortly after giving birth.



Qualitative examples taken from police case notes illustrate how pregnancy/recent birth are present in these cases:

Case study, suspected victim suicide, within 6 months postpartum:

White 23-yr old female victim in an on-off relationship with 23-yr old white male. Known extensive history of poor mental health including previous suicide attempts by victim. Multiple domestic abuse from different partners including this one. CCB, including male partner telling her to kill herself. Previous incidents reported to police including three during her pregnancy. Children's social care, mental health services and MARAC all involved.

Case study, IPH, within 6 months postpartum:

White 23-yr old female in relationship with white 30-yr old male. Suspect killed her after being released on bail with conditions not to contact her, for assaulting her that same day. Three previous DA incidents reported during pregnancy or shortly after baby born. CCB including suspect previous threats to kill himself. Ongoing drug use by suspect. Social services involved as well as police.

Key Learning Points – Pregnancy and Recent Birth

- A higher proportion of young victims were pregnant or within six months postpartum (12% compared with <1% of 25yr+ victims).
- IPH cases confirm the known risk that pregnancy and recent birth elevate the risk of domestic abuse.
- Providing new insight, this analysis suggests that pregnancy and recent birth may *also* elevate the risk of victim suicide.
- Almost all pregnancy or recent birth victims were known to police for domestic abuse, with half these prior domestic abuse reports being made to police during pregnancy or within six months of birth.
- Most cases were also known to children's social care, MARAC and half the suspected suicide victims known to mental health services.

6. RECENT SEPARATION

- The relationship recently ending was recorded as a risk factor for 44% of young victim cases (n=25), more than for 25yr+ victims at 29% (n=186).
- Broken down by type of death, amongst young victims the relationship recently ending was a factor in 59% (n=19/32) of suspected victim suicides and only 19% of IPH (n=4/21); compared with 36% of 25yr+ suspected victim suicides (n=100/276) and 26% of 25yr+ victim IPH (n=78/296).
- Relationship ending is a known risk factor for IPH of young victims as well as older adults (Adhia et al, 2019; Sorrentino et al, 2020; Caman et al, 2024). But it has not previously been identified as a risk factor also for young suspected victim suicides following domestic abuse.
- There is no clear pattern as to why recent separation might have disproportionately affected young victims, but a few case studies (from police records submitted to the project) suggest that fear of repercussions from the perpetrator (for leaving and/or supporting a police case) feature prominently.



A qualitative example taken from police case notes illustrates the impact of recent separation:

Case study, suspected victim suicide, female victim, male suspect:

There was a clear pattern of previous separations which resulted in the perpetrator harassing the victim and badmouthing her to friends and family, which left her feeling trapped into reconciling. In this context, a suicide could be seen as a reaction to the victim feeling helpless and seeking a way out of a pattern of reconciliation. She was in a relationship with this male, and it had recently ended. She told people that he was saying bad things about her, which he did when the relationship broke down, which would result in her recommencing a relationship with him.

Key Learning Points – Recent separation

- Recent separation is a risk factor for young victims – even more so than for older victims (identified in 44% of young victim cases compared with 29% of 25yr+ victim cases).
- Crucially, we identify that separation appears to be a risk factor for young victims of intimate partner homicides, and for the first time that it also appears to be a risk factor for young suspected victim suicides following domestic abuse.
- As with 25yr+ victims, the context around separation and suicide seem to relate also to victims being in fear of the perpetrator and/or controlled by them, as well as to separation leaving the victim feeling they have nothing left.

8. NON-POLICE AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

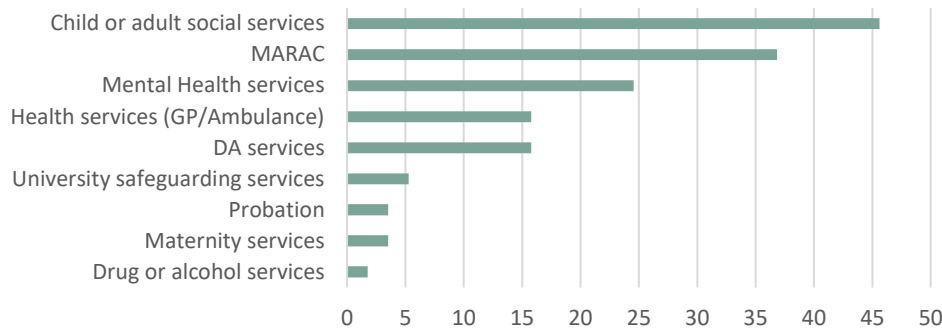
University context

- Three cases involved university students: two IPH and one suspected victim suicide.
- The male suspect (but not victim) in one IPH was a university student. Both victim and suspect were known to the police for prior domestic abuse but it is not known whether they were known to other agencies including university services. The female victim (but not suspect) in the other IPH was a university student and the homicide took place in university halls. Neither victim nor suspect were previously known to the police, the university or partner agencies.
- Both the male victim and female perpetrator of prior domestic abuse in the suicide case were students at the same university and the death took place in university halls. University authorities were aware of and had supported the students with multiple previous domestic abuse incidents; however, these had not been reported to police at the wish of the victim and perpetrator. Following the death, the local police service and university agreed to strengthen their working relationship to help investigate and safeguard future domestic abuse incidents on campus.



Other agencies

% of cases known to agencies other than police



- As well as 77% of young victims being known to the police for prior domestic abuse, 75% were previously known to a partner agency other than police (n=43/57), more than the 64% of 25yr+ victims (n=414/645).
- This partner agency was most commonly child or adult social services (46%, n=26/57) or MARAC (37%, n=21/57) or mental health services (25%, n=14/57), followed by domestic or sexual abuse services (16%, n=9/57), health services (GP/Ambulance) (16%, n=9/57), university safeguarding services (5%, n=3/57), maternity services (4%, n=2/57), probation (4%, n=2/57) and drug or alcohol services (2%, n=1/57).
- Previous studies have shown that young people often do not disclose domestic abuse to services, with main help-seeking routes being friends, although some tell mental health services or school-based counsellors (Barter and Stanley, 2016) (Barter and Stanley, 2016).

Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs)

- There were similar rates of referral and acceptance for DHRs involving young victims as for cases involving 25yr+ victims: 88% were referred (n=50/57) and 66% of these were accepted (n=33/50), compared with 86% referred (n=557/645) and 59% accepted (n=331/557).

Key Learning Points – Non-Police Agency Involvement

- In three cases the victim and/or suspect were university students: only one was previously known to university services for domestic abuse, whilst two were known to the police. The case known to university services led to a local agreement to strengthen police-university safeguarding work around domestic abuse amongst students.
- It is vital that universities and colleges have a clear safeguarding policy in place around what to do when a student discloses domestic abuse victimisation or perpetration; including referral routes to police and to local domestic abuse support services.
- Three-quarters of young victims were already known to a non-police agency, most commonly child or adult social services, MARAC or mental health services.
- Positively, deaths involving young victims are being referred and accepted for DHRs at the same rate as 25yr+ victims - showing that police and partners are already taking young victims seriously.



9. CONCLUSIONS

- Presenting new data, this Spotlight Briefing for the first time shows the extent, profile and risk factors in 57 cases of intimate partner homicide and suspected victim suicides of young victims aged 16-24 years in the UK between 2020 and 2024. In total, one in 10 domestic homicides and/or suicides involved young victims.
- Young victims are shown to face as much, and even greater, levels of risk than their 25yr+ counterparts. They are facing high levels of controlling and coercive behaviour, and violent and extensive previous domestic abuse offending from their perpetrators. At these young ages – and for many of them in their first serious relationships – they are especially vulnerable to control and manipulation.
- Young domestic abuse victims are taking their own lives at an even higher rate than 25yr+ victims.
- Key risk factors present in these young victim cases appear to include older – especially “much older” – perpetrators; coercive and controlling behaviour; recent separation; pregnancy and recent birth.
- Much of the context of the domestic abuse and deaths mirror that seen in 25yr+ victims; but some aspects seem to be particular to young people including university/college settings, control via social media, financial control via student grants, and threats to young victims’ families.
- There is positive news: these young victims and suspects are not invisible. Although prior research shows most young victims do not disclose domestic abuse to agencies (some tell friends, many tell no-one), amongst this group, many (77%) were already known to the police, and three-quarters (75%) were also known to other agencies including social services and mental health services.
- Positive practice is also seen in the referral and acceptance rate for DHRs involving young victims, which matches those for 25yr+ victims.



KEY FINDINGS AND PRACTICE POINTS FOR POLICE

Key Finding #1 – More young victims (aged 16-24 yrs) of intimate partner homicide or suspected victim suicide were known to the police as high-risk DA victims, than victims aged 25 yrs and older. Suspects in these cases were more likely to be known to police as high-risk and/or serial DA perpetrators (40%) compared with suspects in cases with victims aged 25yrs+ (26%).



Practice Point #1 – Do not underestimate the high-risk nature of domestic abuse against young victims aged 16-24 years. Young victims of partner homicide and suspected victim suicide are frequently high-risk, and their perpetrators often have an extensive and violent domestic abuse offending history known to police. Where available locally, refer to Young People's IDVAs. SafeLives' resources for working with young victims is also useful: [Young people and domestic abuse spotlight - SafeLives](#).

Key Finding #2 – Fewer young victims and perpetrators live together (40%) compared with victims aged 25 yrs+ (59%). Despite fewer living together, risk assessment shows them to be equally, and in some cases more, at risk of domestic homicide and victim suicide compared with their 25yr+ counterparts.



Practice Point #2 – Young couples must not be seen as less at risk because they do not live together. Police must maintain an open mindset around DA and secure and preserve evidence when there is a death involving a young person, even if they do not live with their partner. The VKPP will collaborate with the College of Policing to discuss reflecting these practice points in their APP sections on Teenage Relationships.

Key Finding #3 – Two thirds of young victims had a perpetrator who was more than two years older, and nine cases (16%) involved a "much older" perpetrator of 10 years or more.



Practice Point #3 – Domestic abuse perpetrators who are older than their young victims, and especially 'much older' (10 years or more), are a feature of both partner homicides and suspected victim suicides. Police should 'Think DA' with younger victims with older/much older perpetrators: risk-assess whether there is CCB, as well as considering CSE/mental health concerns/bullying; and make referrals for DA support if DA is identified.

Key Finding #4 – Controlling and coercive behaviour (CCB) was present in 50% of young partner homicide victims and 70% of young suspected suicide victims: similar, and even higher, rates to that found amongst victims aged 25 yrs+. Recent separation was also a prevalent risk factor for young people.



Practice Point #4 – Do not underestimate the scale and risk of controlling and coercive behaviour (CCB) for young victims. Some CCB of young people mirrors 25yr+ victims; but youth-specific contexts include control on university / college sites, via student grants, via social media, and threats to the young person's family. Recent separation of young couples in the context of CCB is linked to victim suicide and to partner homicide.

Key Finding #5 – Pregnancy and the postpartum period are shown to be particular risk factors for young victims, both for partner homicide and suspected victim suicide. This factor was present in 12% of young victim cases compared with <1% of victims aged 25yrs+. Almost all couples were known to the police for DA, and half made DA reports to police during pregnancy or within six months after.



Practice Point #5 – Pregnancy/recent birth is a factor on both DASH and DARA risk assessments and is shown to be particularly relevant for young victims. In responding to reports of DA about young victims, police must make sure they explore this risk factor to understand whether and how it makes young victims more vulnerable.



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NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

1. Please note that the Project does not collect data on suspected suicides involving suspects of domestic abuse, as this is outside the remit.
2. Cases of homicide from a family member or parents killing children were excluded, in order to look just at cases where there was an intimate partner relationship between victim and perpetrator. The project team did look at whether there were any intimate partner homicides or suspected suicides involving victims under 16 years, but there were none in this project dataset.
3. The '25yr+ victims' dataset includes Intimate partner homicides, Suspected victim suicides and Unexpected deaths. The 'Young victims' dataset includes Intimate partner homicides, Suspected victim suicides, Unexpected deaths and one 'Other' cases due to involving acquaintance/flatmate to allow for intimate relationship. In analysis, this 'Other' case is grouped in with the Intimate partner homicides for the young victim dataset.
4. Note that 'suspects' in suspected victim suicide cases were the suspects in the prior police-recorded domestic abuse.