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Understanding the Geospatial and Contextual Patterns of Rural Domestic Abuse

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

> *"We've got a lot of villages, rural farms and houses which are in the middle of nowhere ... down long lanes, roads which in the winter can be impassable ... So, we do have a very large area to cover and getting to addresses can be difficult..."* (PC5)

> *"Some of the very rural remote areas don't have bus services, or a strong internet connection, or even a phone signal. All of that exacerbates someone's isolation and is a barrier to accessing support."* (DA6)

Foreword

Tackling and preventing Violence against Women and Girls, including domestic abuse, is a key priority for Cumbria Constabulary and our local partners, especially as this is an area which is often under reported.

To help our collective understanding of domestic abuse in rural communities I am delighted that Cumbria Constabulary was successful in achieving funding from the Home Office Science, Technology, Analysis and Research Fund to help us to provide better support, advice and help to those in our communities suffering from domestic abuse.

Cumbria is a predominantly rural county which presents different challenges than our urban areas when keeping people safe. It is vital that all police forces and partnerships develop an excellent understanding of what is happening in our rural communities, so informed decisions and choices can be made about how we respond to those suffering domestic abuse and safeguarding those who are vulnerable.

I welcome this report as it helps increase our understanding of rural domestic abuse. It provides Cumbria and other rural areas with an evidence base that can be used to make the best use of our resources and support. The findings align with the national focus of protecting victims, and targeting perpetrators.

Chief Constable Michelle Skeer QPM
Cumbria Constabulary

I am delighted to be writing this foreword in recognising the delivery of such timely research into trends and patterns of rural domestic abuse. As a national Taskforce set up in 2021, we often describe it as a watershed moment for society and policing in how much more needs to be done to radically reduce Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).

The pandemic shone a light on what happened behind closed doors and our media brought the tragic deaths of more women to the attention of the public. Moreover, policing legitimacy has been deeply damaged by Sarah Everard's murder by a serving police officer, the abhorrent and inappropriate behaviour of officers photographing and sharing images of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman's dead bodies, and examples of police officers showing appalling misogynist behaviour. In policing, we are determined to seize this moment to make fundamental and long-lasting change.

Policing benefits enormously from support from a range of funded work within the STAR programme. The core recommendations made throughout this research align closely to the focus that the National Police Chiefs' Council's VAWG framework for delivery has been driving for the last twelve months: trust and confidence of victims, a focus on perpetrators and an understanding of place, and the need to profile where our most risky places are. We welcome this research and wish Cumbria colleagues and partners well as this academic understanding is used to shape a better service for all victims of domestic abuse.

Chief Superintendent Samantha Millar QGM
Programme Lead on the National Police Chiefs' Council's VAWG Taskforce.

February 2023

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Introduction and Background

In 2020, 9.7 million people in England and almost 1 million people in Wales lived in rural areas (Defra 2021).[1] The latest population estimates suggest that in mid-2020 almost half a million people lived in Cumbria (ONS 2021), which is described by the Office for National Statistics (2016) as a 'predominantly rural' county. Although Cumbria's landscape is dominated by rural towns and villages, the concentration of people in urban centres means that the resident population of Cumbria is almost equally split between urban (47%) and rural (53%) areas (ONS 2017). A growing body of international research evidence suggests that the persistence of traditional values, rural isolation, and limited support services mean that rural victims may wait longer before seeking help, enduring more serious violence, than those in urban areas (DeKeseredy 2021; Little 2016; National Rural Crime Network 2019). There is, however, a dearth of research on the needs and experiences of domestic abuse (DA) victims in rural parts of England and Wales.

This research was funded by the Home Office Police Science, Technology, Analysis and Research (STAR) Fund to examine the geospatial and contextual patterns of DA in the predominantly rural county of Cumbria. This Research Briefing Paper presents findings from our analysis of: data from all DA-related incidents and crimes recorded by Cumbria Constabulary between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2021; data on DA-related referrals to Victim Support in Cumbria during the same period; and interviews with 42 local practitioners. Copies of the main Research Findings Report are available from the research team.

That much DA goes unreported to, or unrecorded by, the police is well known. That data from Cumbria Constabulary and partners reflect reporting and recording practices, and not some objective reality, should be kept in mind when reflecting upon the findings. In our report, we document efforts to get behind the 'dark figure' of DA to better understand the nature, extent and geospatial distribution of DA in Cumbria.

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1. The rural population of Wales was derived from ONS 2021 alongside spatial data containing the Rural Urban Classification 2011 of Lower Layer Super Output Areas that is available on the ONS's Open Geography Portal.

Analysis of Data from Cumbria Constabulary

An incident is any event that comes to police attention and is recorded as an incident. If the police find sufficient evidence of criminal activity, a crime will usually be recorded (Home Office 2021). Typically, then, crimes are linked to a preceding incident.

The dataset: Cumbria Constabulary provided details of all DA-flagged incidents, and intimate partner abuse (IPA) crimes, recorded over a 30-month period from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2021. In keeping with the broad definition of DA in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, DA incidents include a wide range of relationships and behaviours and are not limited to abuse between intimate partners. IPA crimes are limited to abuse between intimate partners. The data comprised 17,264 DA incidents and 8,901 IPA crimes. These IPA crimes involved 5,390 unique victims and 5,367 unique offenders.

Characteristics of IPA crime: Most of the 8,901 IPA crimes were violence against the person (n=7,616, 85.6%). Interestingly, over half of the aggrieved relationships involved former partners (n=4,847, 54.4%). Turning to outcomes, 989 IPA crimes resulted in a charge or summons (11.1%). The majority did not proceed to charge because of evidential difficulties (n=7,095, 79.7%). In a high proportion of cases, the outcome was recorded as 'Evidential difficulties: victim does not support action' (n=5,631, 63.3%).

Characteristics of victims and offenders: Of the 5,390 unique victims, almost three quarters were female (3,891, 72%) and the rest were male (1,499, 28%). Of the 8,901 IPA crimes, 76% were perpetrated against female victims and 24% against male victims. Controlling for adult gender-specific population size (i.e. the population at risk), the risk of females experiencing IPA crime (3,160 per 100,000 women aged 16+) was three times that of males (1,050 per 100,000 16+ males).

ONS population estimates suggest that in 2020 almost a quarter of the population of Cumbria was aged 65 years or older. Of the 5,390 unique victims of IPA crimes, just 196 (3.6%) were aged 65 years or above. In other words, older residents are starkly under-represented in police recorded IPA crime compared to their representation within the resident population. Wydall (2021) and others have noted the 'invisibility' of older IPA victims in theory, policy and practice. During the qualitative strand of our study, practitioners confirmed working with older victims of IPA, identified intersections between IPA and other issues (e.g. dementia; being a care giver or receiver), and illuminated the particular barriers that older survivors face in accessing services. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Cumbria has a hidden population of older people whose IPA is unknown to service providers.

Our analysis found that almost three quarters (3,879, 72.3%) of offenders were male and 74.9% of victimisations involved a male offender. The similarity between the proportions of female victims (noted above) and male offenders is not surprising given that three quarters of IPA crimes involved male offenders and female victims.

Temporal trends: We begin by examining monthly trends around IPA crime and DA incidents. These were calculated for the 'at risk' population, which controls for geodemographic variations in age and gender between small area geographies known as Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs). The plots below (Figure A) show the rate of police-recorded IPA crime and DA incidents by month per 100,000 of the 'at-risk population'. The three periods of national COVID 19 lockdowns are marked in blue.
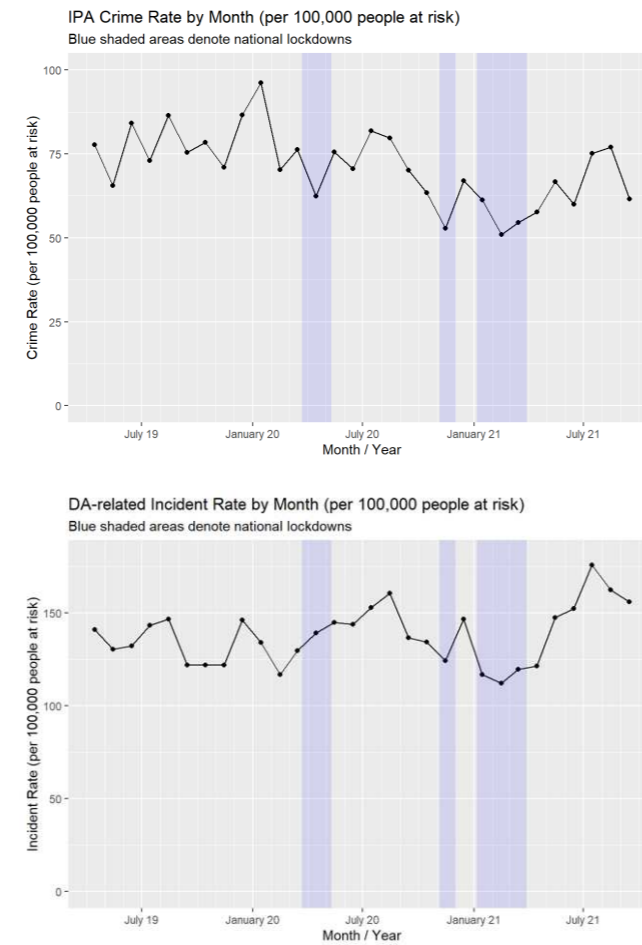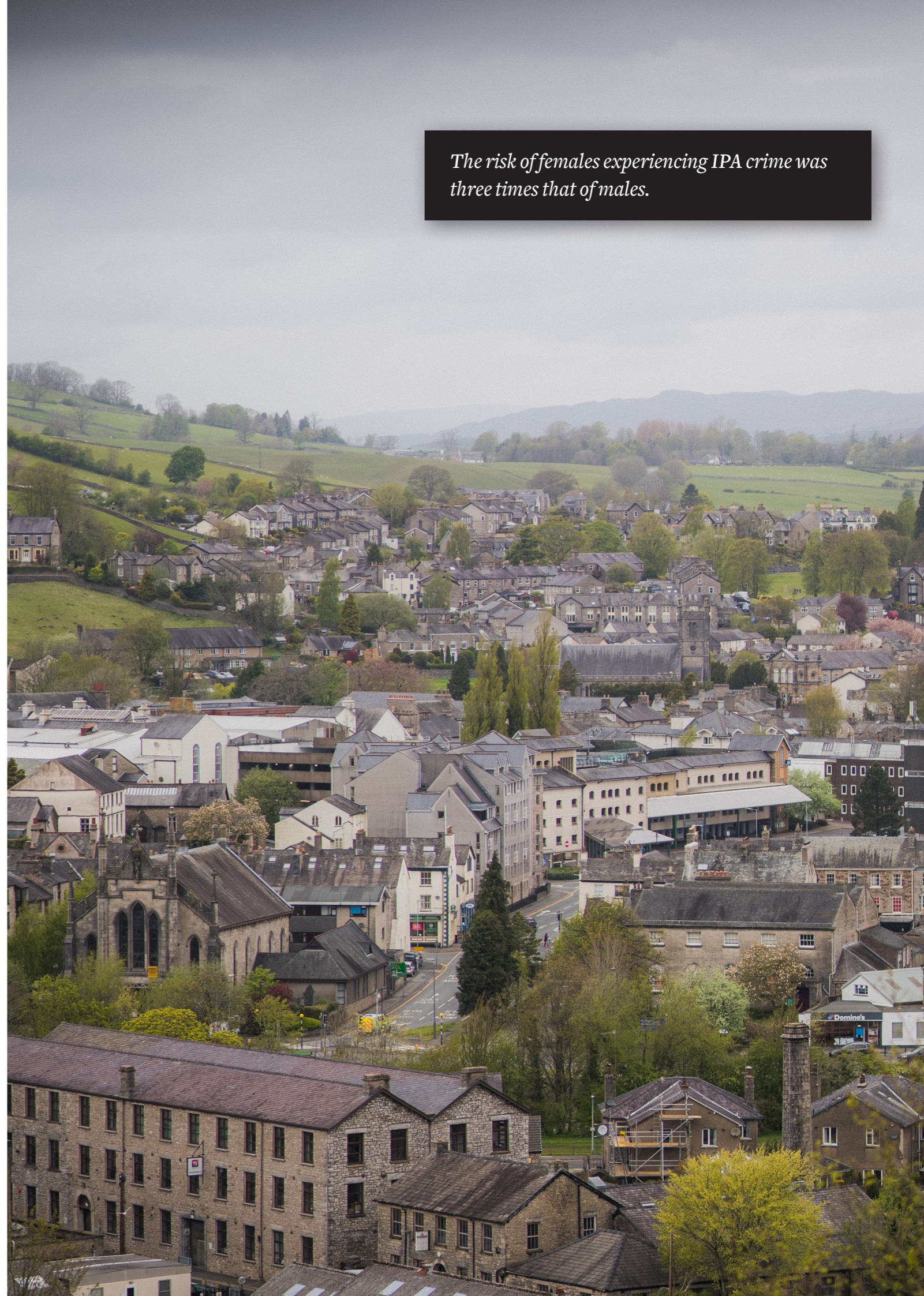

Figure A: IPA crime rates and DA incident rate, per month, per 100,000 people at risk

Disaggregating these data by victims' gender, we found that the rate of IPA crimes against females is roughly double the rate against males. Whilst temporal trends in IPA crime appear relatively stable, there are some indications of overall reductions during the last year of data provided. Disaggregating IPA crime by offence type found more distinct changes over time in both Harassment offences, which saw considerable reductions at the time of the first national lockdown and remained relatively low thereafter, and Stalking offences, which slowly increased across the study period (likely due to changes in recording patterns).

Examining the trends seen during the national COVID 19 lockdowns is challenging without additional historic data to estimate baseline expected time series (i.e. to determine whether the variations depicted in the plots were outside the normal range). Initial explorations led to several observations, however. The lowest police-recorded IPA crime rates occurred during the three lockdown periods. These minima were largely driven by changes in reported IPA crimes involving female victims. Similar patterns were not observed in the DA incident data, however. It could be that within the incident data, decreases in IPA are masked by increases in other forms of DA, such as child-to-parent violence (CPV) (Holt and Lewis 2021) or violence between siblings.

Temporal trends in crime severity: We used the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Crime Severity Score (CSS) to create monthly measures of cumulative IPA crime severity across Cumbria. While levels of IPA crime severity exhibit considerable variation across the study period, overall temporal trends in severity appear relatively stable with some indications of reductions in cumulative severity in the most recent year of data (likely a reflection of reductions in offending/reporting not reductions in the severity of offences). Disaggregating IPA crime severity by gender, it seems that for most of the 30-month study period the average severity of offences against female victims was slightly greater than that against male victims. Notable is an apparent increased disparity in crime severity between female and male victims during the second and third COVID 19 lockdowns. Again, further historic data are needed to determine the significance of these disparities.

Seasonality: Our exploration of seasonality found that IPA crimes peak on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Across the year, IPA crimes peak during the summer months of July and August. Both of these findings are commensurate with previous research.

The spatial patterns of IPA crimes and DA incidents: We then examined the spatial patterns of police-recorded IPA across Cumbria's 321 LSOAs. The map at the top of Figure B shows the number of crimes in each LSOA: the dark red areas have more IPA crime than the light red areas. LSOAs were rank ordered according to the number of police-recorded IPA crimes. In the map at the bottom, LSOAs with counts above the median are shown in red.

Those with counts below the median are shown in blue.

Count IPA Crimes
Apr-2019 to Sept-2021
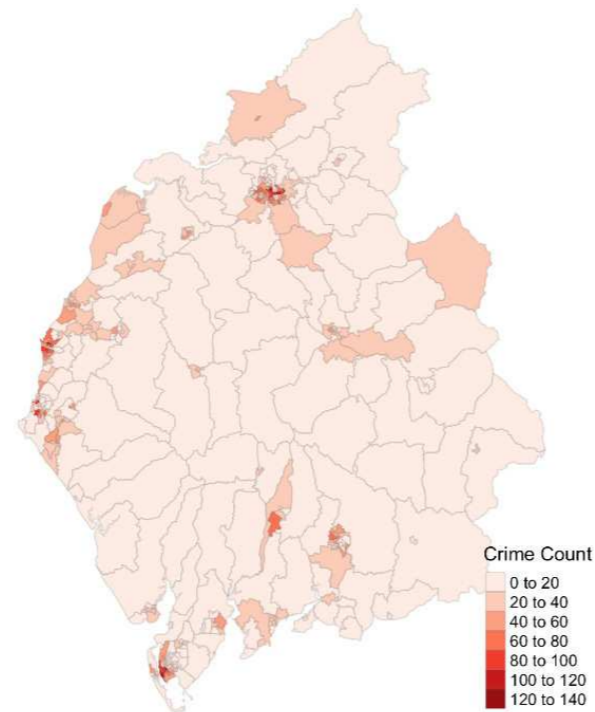
IPA Crimes in Cumbria, relative to average LSOA count
Apr-2019 to Sept-2021
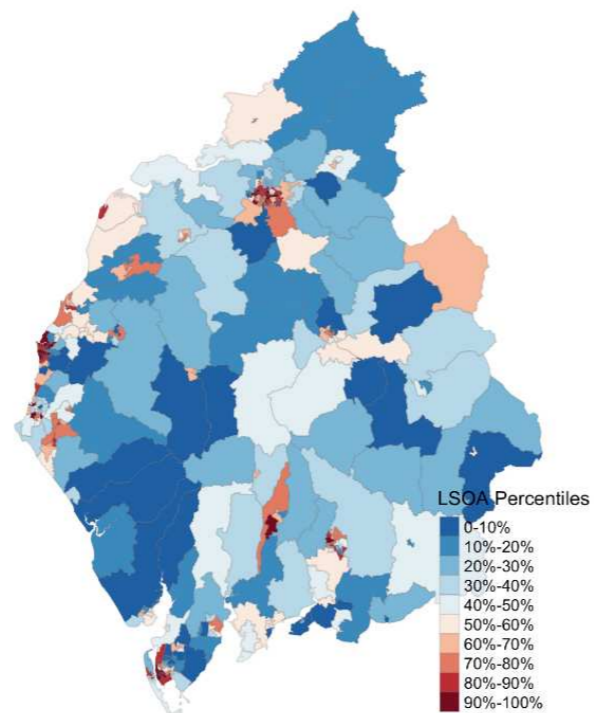
Figure B: Count of IPA crimes in each LSOA, and ranking LSOAs by decile of IPA crime count.

We also examined changes in LSOA crime counts between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 (i.e. the year before the first COVID 19 lockdown) and 1 October 2020 and 30 September 2021 (i.e. the most recent year in the data). We found that roughly one third of LSOAs experienced more IPA crimes in the 2020-2021 window compared to the 2019-2020 window, while two thirds of LSOAs witnessed less IPA crimes. That said, most changes are relatively small with the average change in IPA offending in each LSOA being a reduction in 2.5 crimes over the year. Care should be taken when interpreting these trends, which could reflect changes in reporting patterns.

Work to map DA incident counts and rates produced similar patterns. Just over a half of all LSOAs generated more police-recorded DA incidents during the 2020-2021 compared to the 2019-2020 window, and around two in five LSOAs saw less DA incidents. The remaining LSOAs saw the same level of incidents in both periods.

Mapping crime severity: We also explored the spatial distribution of crime severity across Cumbrian LSOAs. The maps in Figure C (below and right) depict the cumulative ONS crime severity score associated with all IPA crimes seen in each LSOA. They show the distribution of crime severity over the entire 30-month study period, both in raw scores (below, where the darker areas have higher cumulative scores) and ranked relative to the median LSOA (on right, with above median scores indicated in red, below median scores in blue).

Cumulative ONS Crime Severity Score (CSS)
Apr-2019 to Sept-2021
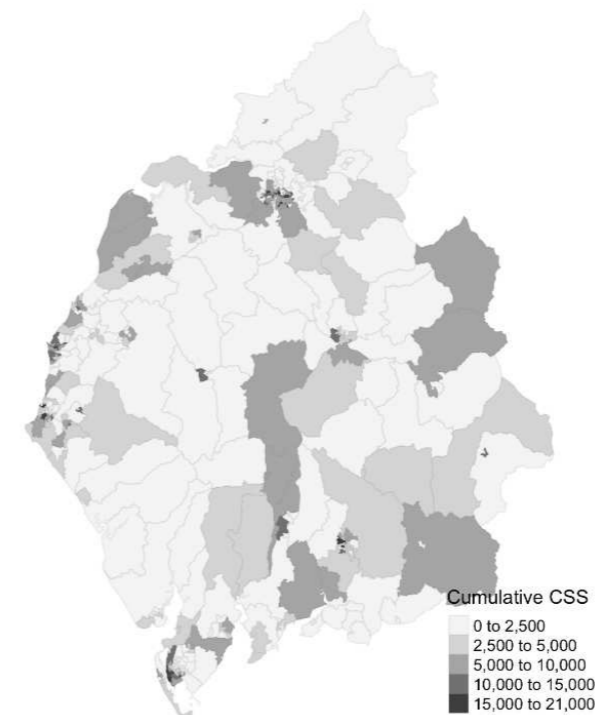
Cumulative Crime Severity Score, relative to average LSOA
Apr-2019 to Sept-2021
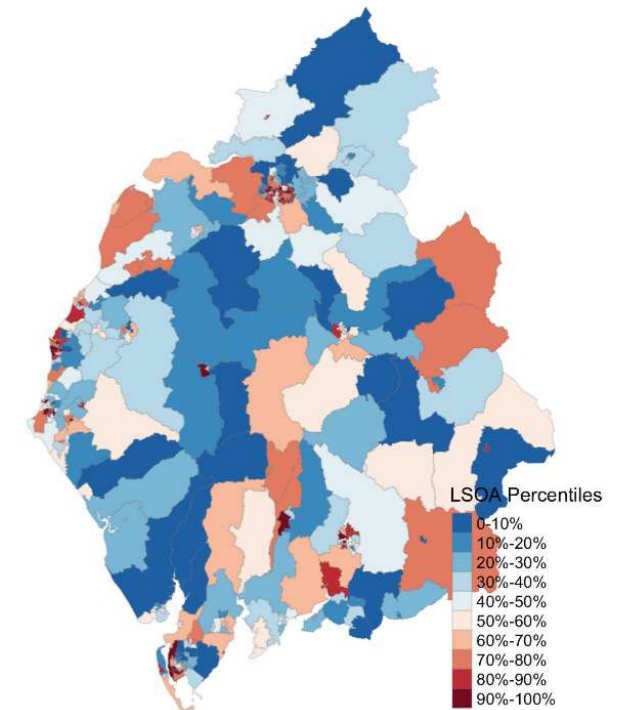
Figure C: The distribution of crime severity scores by LSOA

We again examined changes between our earlier time window (2019-2020) and our later time window (2019-2020), now for cumulative crime severity. Just under 60% of LSOAs saw less cumulative IPA crime severity with the remaining LSOAs seeing increases in crime severity in the later window compared to the earlier window.

A primary observation from this part of the analysis is that IPA crimes and DA incidents known to the police concentrate significantly in a relatively small number of typically urban LSOAs. While acknowledging that LSOAs are devised to have somewhat comparable population sizes, this observation is true when considering both numbers of crimes and incidents and when examining rates of offending (which control for population size). As noted above, leading commentators contend that '[t]here is now strong international empirical evidence showing that rural women are at greater risk of experiencing various types of intimate violence than are their urban and suburban counterparts' (DeKeseredy 2019: 312). In the qualitative strand of the study, practitioners spoke in detail about the barriers to service access experienced by victims from rural and farming communities, which may prevent them coming forward. It seems likely, then, that Cumbria has a hidden population of rural victims of IPA.

Quantifying crime and incident concentration:
Further explorations found that IPA crimes, DA incidents, and IPA crime severity all concentrate within LSOAs, with 3% of LSOAs witnessing 12% of police-recorded IPA crimes, 12% of DA-related incidents and 12% of IPA related crime severity; 10% of LSOAs seeing 30% of IPA crime, 29% of incidents and 33% of crime severity, and 25% of LSOAs witnessing 56% of crime, 55% of incidents and 60% of severity. Comparing these measures, we see that crime severity is the most concentrated of the three.

Characteristics of High IPA Crime LSOAs: Having quantified the spatial patterns of DA incidents and IPA crime and severity within Cumbria, we then examined some of the characteristics of High IPA Crime LSOAs to identify factors associated with high levels of IPA crime coming to the attention of police. Utilising the latest Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data for Cumbria we found that LSOAs where relatively high levels of IPA crime come to the attention of police also experience a number of distinct forms of social and environmental deprivation.

Rurality and DA: The ONS 2011 Rural/Urban Classification provides two urban and four rural categories for LSOAs and other small area geographies. From these, we produced a new binary classification according to which Cumbria's LSOAs are either Rural (n=169) or Urban (n=152). We found that whilst Rural LSOAs are home to 54% of Cumbria's 16+ population at risk, they host just 34% and 35% of DA incidents and IPA crimes coming to the attention of police respectively. Moreover, the rate of incidents and crimes (irrespective of victim gender) recorded in Urban LSOAs is over twice that observed in Rural LSOAs. Similar patterns of spatial concentration were found for IPA crime and DA incident rates. In conjunction with other research evidence and the findings from the qualitative strand of this study, this again suggests that residents of rural LSOAs are less likely to report IPA crimes and DA incidents than their urban counterparts.

Patterns of repeat offending and victimisation: We then examined patterns of repeat offending and victimisation in the data from Cumbria Constabulary. Turning first to victims, the data contained 8,091 IPA crimes associated with 5,390 unique victims that occurred over the 30-month period from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2021. Of those victims, 1,832 (34%) experienced more than one IPA crime during the study period, up to a maximum of 19 IPA victimisations experienced by one person during this time.

A considerable proportion (39%) of IPA crimes were repeat victimisations. Considering strategies to identify those most at risk and prevent repeat victimisation, 7.1% of victims (383 people) experienced 4 or more IPA victimisations, which in turn made up 23.2% of total IPA crime. These findings support the implementation of a tiered response to IPA crime which concentrates some proportion of local multi-agency resources on repeat victims.

Time course of repeat victimisation: We then examined the temporal patterns of repeat victimisation and considered the implications for practice. After discarding repeats that occurred within 12 hours (and were often part of the same 'event') and those that happened a year or more after the previous event, we found that likelihood of repeat offence is highest within a short time period of an initial offence (with just over a quarter of all repeat victimisation occurring within 30 days of a previous victimisation) and that risk of revictimization subsequently decays over time. This suggests that multi-agency work to support victims should be timely in nature when the risk of re-victimisation is greatest.

Repeat offending: Of the 5,367 offenders analysed, 1,836 (34%) were repeat offenders who committed more than one IPA crime, up to a maximum of 17 IPA crimes for two people, during the study period. A considerable proportion (40%) of IPA crimes were repeat offences. Just under 8% of all IPA offenders who had committed four or more IPA crimes throughout the study period were responsible for almost a quarter of all IPA offences. This supports a strategy of targeting the most prolific offenders for intervention. An alternative (or complementary) strategy might be to target offenders associated with the most harmful offences. These strategies are discussed below. That said, during the study period, 66% of offenders were only associated with a single IPA crime, suggesting the need to look further afield than historic IPA offending to prospectively identify and prevent the offences of these individuals.

Conditional probability of reoffending: It appears that as the number of IPA crimes an offender commits increases, so the conditional probability of them committing another IPA offence increases. This underscores the need to identify (and intervene with) repeat perpetrators early in their offending career.

Offending intermittency and escalation: There is also some evidence to suggest that the time between subsequent offences reduces (i.e. offending gets more frequent). However, the average severity of these offences does not seem to increase. The analysis around the probability of reoffending, intermittency and escalation should be repeated with a larger time window to increase validity.

Comparing strategies to target high frequency v. high harm offenders: Police crime reduction strategies often include identifying and targeting those who commit the most crime within a given timeframe. An alternative approach looks not only at crime frequency but also crime severity (here defined through the ONS Crime Severity Score). Underpinning this approach is the belief that those offenders who cause cumulatively the most harm warrant the most attention (Sherman et al. 2016a, 2016b). We used the data from Cumbria Constabulary to compare these two different approaches.

Figure D shows two cumulative contribution plots. The top plot focuses on crime frequency. Tracing up from a point on the X-axis and then (upon meeting the plot line) reading the corresponding value off the Y-axis shows, for example, that if the top 10% most prolific offenders were prevented from reoffending, we would anticipate a reduction in crime of around 25%. If the top 25% were prevented from reoffending, we would expect a reduction in crime of around 50%.
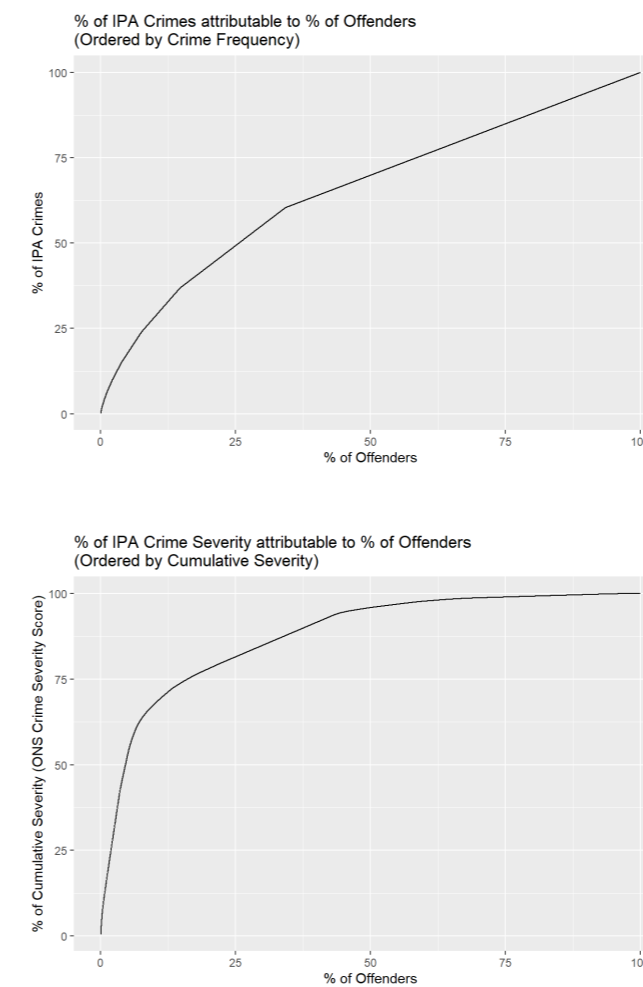

% of IPA Crimes attributable to % of Offenders
(Ordered by Crime Frequency)

% of IPA Crime Severity attributable to % of Offenders
(Ordered by Cumulative Severity)

Figure D: Targeting by offence frequency (top) and crime severity (bottom)

Inspection of the cumulative severity contribution plot (on bottom) demonstrates that crime severity is considerably more concentrated amongst offenders than offence frequency, with the top 10% of offenders (in terms of cumulative crime severity) responsible for 68% of total crime severity (and 19% of crimes). Further examination of the data found that 1% (n=54) of offenders generate 15% of total severity, 2% of offenders 26% and, remarkably, that over 50% of all crime severity generated across Cumbria was attributable to less than 5% of offenders. These findings demonstrate that when identifying IPA offenders for targeting, the methods used should prioritise offenders by crime frequency and crime seriousness.

Estimating the prevalence of false counterclaims: A key theme during the qualitative research was the issue of false counterclaims made by perpetrators. We developed an analytical strategy that sought to identify crimes resulting from counterclaims and, in turn, estimate what proportion of IPA crime they accounted for. We estimated that up to 5% of IPA crimes within the study period are potential false counterclaims.

"She had been grabbed by the throat and pinned against the wall. She couldn't breathe, and she dropped to the floor, and he'd kick her." (DA1)

"I think perpetrators are able to isolate their victims over a period of time and make sure family ties are severed." (DA7)

"The physical violence is one element, but … there may have been lots of control and coercion for many months and years." (DA14)

"Often there are debts run up in their name. So it makes it very, very difficult for them to leave the relationship because all the bills … in the house are often in the woman's name." (DA12)

What Other Data Could Aid Understanding of DA in Cumbria?

As noted at the outset, there exists a 'dark figure' of crime that goes unreported to or unrecorded by the police. This problem may be particularly acute for DA, because victims often face significant barriers to reporting. For this reason, we attempted to gain access to relevant data from other sources to better understand the nature and distribution of DA across Cumbria.

Victim Support: The research team gained access to data from Victim Support related to DA referrals and service users in Cumbria during the study period (1 April 2019 to 30 September 2021). After filtering these data for service users aged 16+ at the time of referral, Victim Support recorded a total of 6,451 unique service users associated with 9,092 DA-related referrals during this period. Details of the relationship between victims and offenders were not available, so these cases are not limited to IPA. Figure E depicts the gradual increase in referrals seen during the study period:
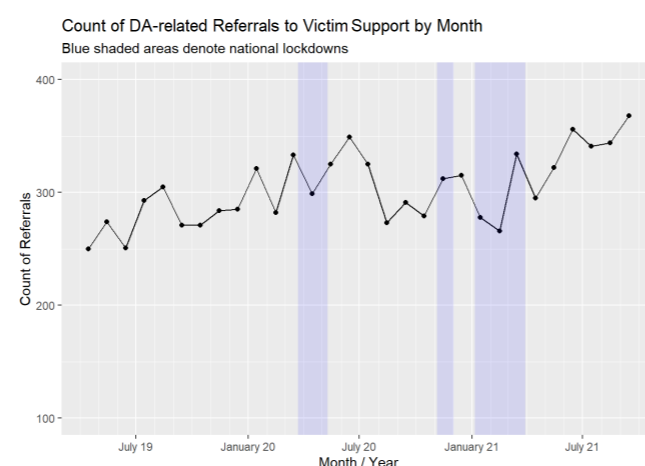

Figure E: Count of DA-related referrals to Victim Support by month

Of the total 9,092 recorded referrals from April 2019 to September 2021, 8,681 (95%) resulted from a police referral (and these referrals were associated with 6,210 unique service users), and 411 (5%) represented non-police referrals (associated with 395 unique service users). That the vast majority of referrals came from the police limited the extent to which we could use the Victim Support data to examine DA that was unknown to Cumbria Constabulary. Most of the non-police referrals were self-referrals by telephone, email, website or LifeChat.

Exploratory analyses comparing the spatial patterns of police data and non-police referred Victim Support data: Given the size of the Victim Support dataset, and because many LSOAs only experienced single digit counts of non-police referrals to Victim Support across the study period, we began by aggregating Victim Support referral data to larger geographies to reduce the impact of this variability. Counts of both police recorded crimes/incidents and Victim Support referrals were aggregated to Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) level, of which there are 64 in Cumbria (compared to 321 LSOAs). This allowed us to see to what degree High and Low Crime/Incident MSOA areas, as highlighted by Cumbria Constabulary data, are equivalently represented within the non-police Victim Support referrals.

Comparing insights drawn from the geospatial patterns of Victim Support and police recorded crime and incident datasets demonstrates that for around half of all MSOAs in Cumbria, decile rankings of Victim Support referrals and police recorded crimes and incidents are roughly equivalent. At the same time, these exploratory analyses also highlight approximately 20% of MSOAs where the differences in deciles are potentially indicative of either underreporting of DA or increased engagement with Victim Support. For a range of reasons, these findings should be viewed with considerable caution. Nevertheless, we suggest they warrant further place-based investigation and contextualisation with expert local knowledge.

Women's Centres: Cumbria's three Women's Centres also provided data on referrals. Table A below summarises the number of referrals and time span of data made available to the research team. In total 2,236 referrals were included in the datasets provided.

Women's Centre	Time Span of Data Provided	Total number of Referrals recorded in Data
Women Out West	Aug 2020 to May 2022	310
Women's Community Matters	Mar 2019 to Sept 2021	1874
Cumbria Gateway	Oct 2017 to Sept 2021	52

Table A: Time span of data and number of referrals for each Centre

In the main Research Findings Report, we document the problems encountered when gathering the Women's Centre data, which mean that the findings come with caveats. Nevertheless, our work to map the geospatial distribution of referrals provides an indication of the geographic reach of the Centres.

Figure F below shows all of the MSOAs that produced referrals during the stated time periods, according to the data provided. Unsurprisingly, service users are drawn from the areas around the Women's Centres, as indicated by the dark blue areas. The areas that are not routinely reached by the Women's Centres are shown in light blue.

All Women's Centres
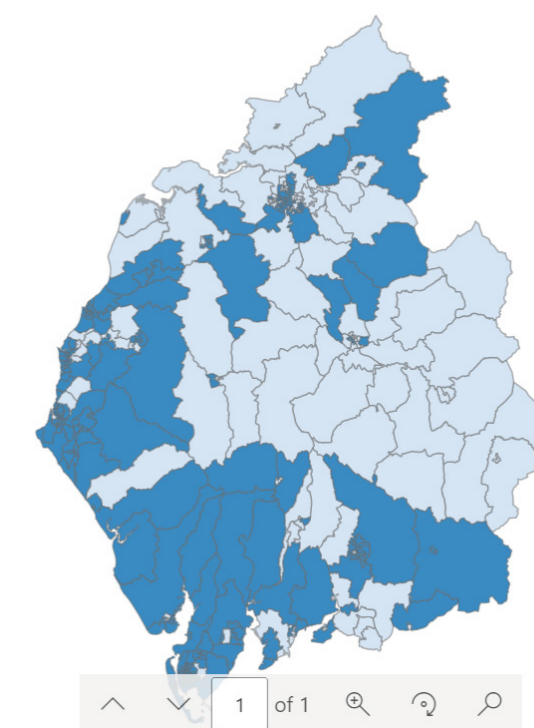Dark Blue Areas Denote Service Provision

Figure F: The MSOAs served by the Women's Centres, shown in dark blue

Additional work was undertaken to triangulate the data provided by Cumbria Constabulary, Victim Support and the Women's Centres. The Women's Centres were taken together as a single service provider for the purposes of these analyses. The MSOAs that generated IPA crime (in the police data) and IPA referrals to the other service providers were ranked according to whether they produced more or less referrals relative to other MSOAs for each organisation. A metric was then calculated to quantify the (dis)similarity of these rankings between organisations. A high dissimilarity score (tentatively) suggests that victims from some MSOAs are more likely to be known to some organisations than others (see Appendix 5 in the main report).

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 states that any child who is related to a victim or perpetrator and "sees or hears, or experiences the effects of, the abuse" is a victim in their own right.

Interviews with Practitioners

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 local practitioners. These comprised: 22 police response officers; one Detective Inspector and Safeguarding Lead; 17 DA service providers; one local government official, and a local GP with significant professional experience of IPA. We now present the key themes from the qualitative strand of our study.

Interviews with Police

Most police response officers reported encountering DA daily or weekly. Building on previous research (Hoyle 1998), interviewees were asked to describe the last two DA events that they encountered. Their actions were heavily shaped by procedural guidelines: they focused, for example, on how calls for service are triaged; the need to attend swiftly; expectations around safeguarding; the need to take positive action, and so forth.

Domestic violence or domestic abuse? When response officers described the two most recent incidents that they had attended, the majority of their responses focused on physical violence. To some extent, this may be a function of the nature of IPA calls for service: the data show that most IPA crimes involved violence against the person (7,616, 85.6%). It could, however, also reflect a need to better recognise the other forms of IPA as listed in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. This issue was explored during the interviews with IPA service providers.

Policing a 'predominantly rural' county: Officers' descriptions of their districts were dominated by their large geographical size and rural nature, which could impede a swift response to a call for service. Staffing shortages were also raised as an issue, as was not knowing when or whether backup would arrive. International research on the policing of DA in rural areas reported similar findings, noting the deleterious impact on officers' wellbeing (Huey and Ricciardelli 2017).

Dealing with counterclaims: Response officers reported sometimes having difficulty identifying the primary victim of DA. The Safeguarding Lead emphasized the problem of perpetrators making false counterclaims against their victim. There was little discussion amongst response officers of false allegations as a tool of abuse, however.

Interviews with IPA Service Providers and others

We also conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with local IPA service providers drawn from local organisations that work with victims and, in some cases, perpetrators. A Local Government Officer with significant knowledge of IPA service delivery, and a GP with extensive professional experience of IPA, were also interviewed. The interviews focused on the needs and experiences of victims, and included discussion of the police response.

Practitioners' accounts of IPA: Practitioners were asked to illustrate the kinds of issues faced by service users. Their accounts provided graphic illustrations of the serious physical and sexual abuse that some (mainly female) victims experience at the hands of (mainly male) perpetrators:

'She had been grabbed by the throat and pinned against the wall. She couldn't breathe, and she dropped to the floor, and he'd kick her.' (DA1)

'He would often hit her. Push her. There was an occasion where he strangled her. He had thrown bottles, cans, objects at her.' (DA2)

'One lady said, "I need you to picture what I went through. He was pounding me in the head while I was cowering on the floor. And the only reason he stopped is because I told him to just finish me off, just kill me because I can't take any more."' (DA3)

'We see lots and lots of rape in the bed, when they have said no, but they don't listen and have sex with them anyway. That happens a lot in the abusive relationships.' (DA4)

The practitioners emphasised, however, that IPA takes myriad forms, and noted the extent and impact of other forms of abuse. There was much discussion of coercive control and psychological abuse, which some practitioners felt were more prevalent than physical violence and may act as a precursor to it:

'One of the most insidious things ... about domestic abuse with gaslighting and coercive control is that it completely psychologically damages someone. And the amount of women that I have spoken to, and men as well, who have said "I would rather they just broke my leg or gave me a black eye, because that would heal, whereas this lives in my head forever".' (DA6)

Economic abuse was also raised as a significant issue, and one that could prevent the victim from leaving:

'It usually includes making sure that they've got no access to money ... Often there are debts run up in their name. So it makes it very, very difficult for them to leave the relationship because all the bills ... in the house are often in the woman's name.' (DA12)

Practitioners reported that many service users had children. That abusers used victims' children to control and manipulate them was a common thread. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 states that any child who is related to a victim or perpetrator and 'sees or hears, or experiences the effects of, the abuse' is a victim in their own right.

One of the most prevalent themes was the extent to which victims are isolated by their abuser, or otherwise lose touch with

family and friends because of the relationship. This deliberate isolation was described as another facet of abusers' efforts to manipulate and control victims.

Older victims: According to population estimates from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Cumbria has a larger proportion of older residents than nationally, and it is set to rise. The limited research on older victims of IPA notes the distinct and complex needs of this group (Bows 2019). The physical or psychological illnesses caused by IPA may be exacerbated by the duration of older victims' exposure to abuse (Pathak et al. 2019: 65). Obstacles to accessing support may include a lack of knowledge about services, feelings of stigma and shame, and a lack of financial independence (p.71). Whilst younger victims may search for (or access) support services online, some older people may find this challenging. The particular needs of older victims were recognised by police response officers and IPA service providers. The following comments illustrate some of the issues raised:

'A woman was reporting controlling and coercive behaviour from her husband … The mental health practitioner had assessed him … about his capacity … because … he had significant mental health problems … similar to Alzheimer's, in terms of he doesn't really know what's going on.' (PC7)

'A lot of older victims … come when their partner has died, and they say "he has abused me for 50 years"… But their attitude is very much "I made my bed, I have to lie in it."' (DA4)

'… older people as well, women in their 70s, who are just finding out that there is support. They have been married for 50 plus years, and they're reaching out for the first time.' (DA9)

The particular difficulties faced by this hard-to-reach group underscore the need for areas to develop a bespoke, multi-agency response for older victims of IPA.

Rural victims: Throughout the interviews, the problems caused by living in rural areas were a recurring theme. Practitioners noted the safety implications of experiencing IPA whilst living in remote areas, and how difficulties with (for example) the transport infrastructure and internet connection could impede service access. One response might be to provide outreach services in rural areas. As one interviewee noted, however, the nature of small-town life means that some women prefer to receive support away from home:

'We actually tried to pilot [a support service] in one of the local towns, but the women didn't want to attend because of the connections. Everybody knows everybody. So they prefer to come that distance to Carlisle where it is a bit more anonymous for them.' (DA10)

The farming community: There are over 5,000 farms in Cumbria. Despite this, police and IPA service providers reported that contact with the farming community in the context of IPA is rare. Possible explanations for this are reviewed in the main report. Both the police and service providers noted that the presence on farms of firearms, chemicals and machinery brings particular risks.

Male victims: It is widely recognised that most perpetrators of IPA are male, and most victims are female. Despite this, some cases of severe abuse of men, by women, emerged during the interviews. The police response officers and IPA service providers both reported that cases involving female perpetrators and male victims were uncommon. Explanations included men being 'embarrassed' (PC1) or 'proud' and thus 'more unwilling to report' it (PC11). The existence of 'certain stereotypes, that men just shouldn't be [victims] of domestic abuse' (PC22) were also perceived as possible barriers to seeking help. Practitioners highlighted a dearth of bespoke support for male victims in Cumbria.

Local customs and cultures: A report by the National Rural Crime Network (NRCN 2019) stated that the persistence of traditional, patriarchal gender roles and values in rural communities may serve to subjugate victims of IPA and prevent them from seeking help. These findings were confirmed with respect to both rural and farming communities by the practitioners in our research.

The police response: Most IPA service providers felt that victims of IPA are 'somewhat likely' or 'not at all likely' to call the police. It was suggested that victims with experience of reporting IPA where no charges were brought may be reluctant to report abuse again. Concerns about being disbelieved, or judged, may be particularly acute for those experiencing coercive control. A fear of repercussions from the perpetrator, safeguarding interventions by Children's Services, and victims' name appearing in the local press, were also described as barriers to reporting. Some police officers suggested that people in rural and remote areas may be dissuaded from reporting by protracted response times.

Interviewees commented positively upon efforts by Cumbria Constabulary to develop the police response to IPA. Suggestions were also made for improvement, however. Some practitioners emphasised the need for officers to have 'a wider and better understanding of domestic abuse that moves away from focusing on physical assaults' and includes a 'contextual awareness of risk … looking at patterns rather than incidents' (DA14). Some commented on the need for police officers to better recognise false counterclaims. The need to keep victims informed about their case, and communicate decisions in a sensitive manner, were also emphasised.
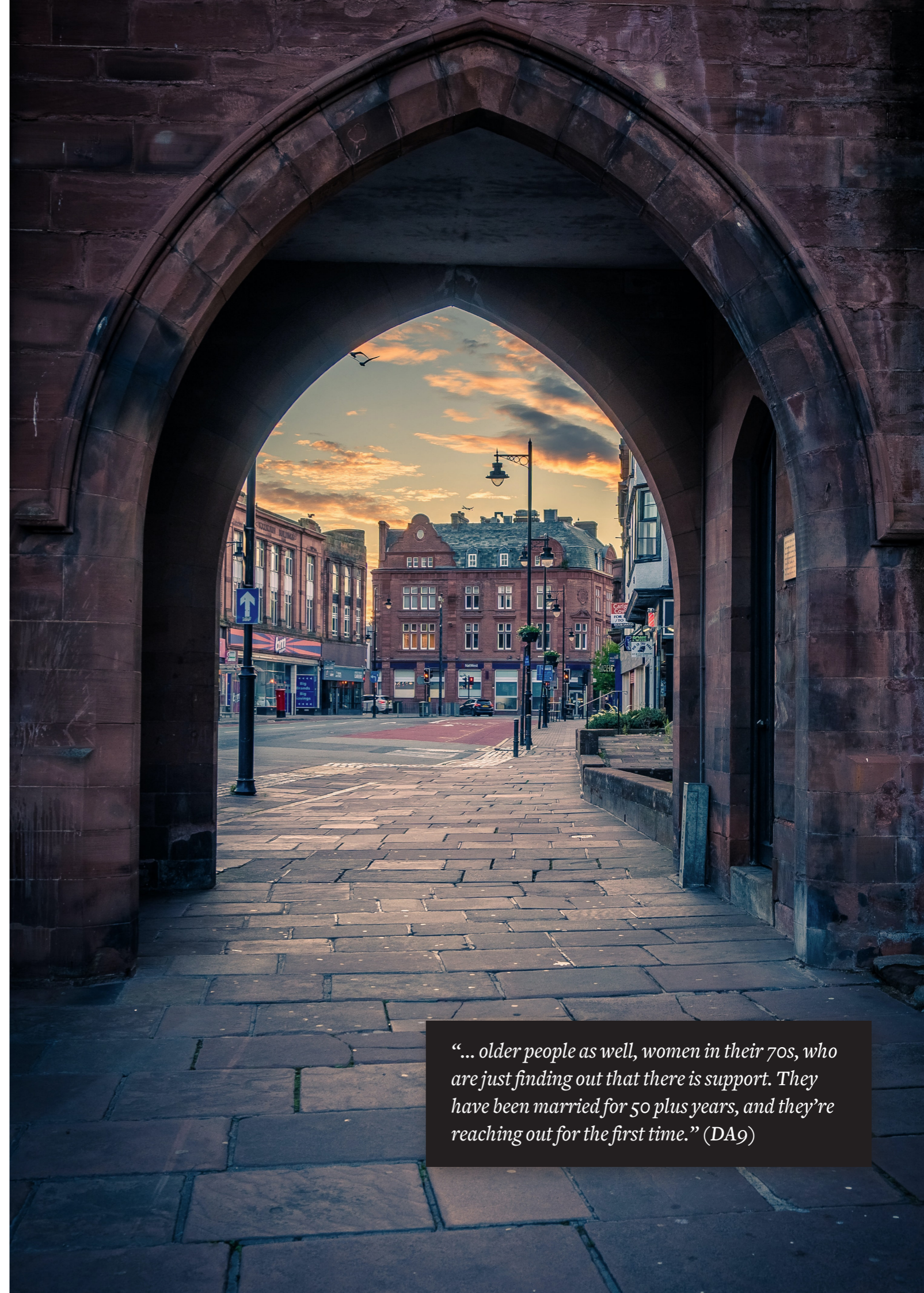
"… older people as well, women in their 70s, who are just finding out that there is support. They have been married for 50 plus years, and they're reaching out for the first time." (DA9)

Recommendations

Drawing on the research summarised here, we make a series of recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Evidence suggests that people who experience IPA in rural and farming communities, and elderly residents, have complex needs and are less likely to seek help. This suggests the need for a local multi-agency strategy, developed alongside local representatives of organisations such as Age UK and the National Farmers Union, to target hard-to reach victims and provide a bespoke response.

Recommendation 2: Responses to first time victims should be rapid, increase victim confidence, and encourage future reporting.

Recommendation 3: Any protective measures for recent victims should acknowledge that repeat victimisations typically happen close in time to previous victimisations, with risk decaying over time, and are typically perpetrated by the same individuals.

Recommendation 4: Considering repeat offending, strategies which target 'priority offenders' should consider approaches which identify cohorts of both 'high frequency' offenders and 'high harm' offenders. Relative resource allocation, and approaches to targeting these groups to prevent re-offending should acknowledge these differences and respond accordingly.

Recommendation 5: At the same time, work should be done to support the police-identified victims of 'high frequency' and 'high harm' offenders. This will require a co-ordinated response, underpinned by data sharing between Cumbria Constabulary and local IPA service providers.

Recommendation 6: The fact that 2/3 of offenders only come to police attention once for IPA in our data is important and identifying ways to prospectively prevent these offences will require thinking outside the box. Given that research typically shows offenders as 'generalists', this should involve the intersection of historic IPA, broader DA (including any evidence of child-to-parent violence), and other offending data. Combining these data with appropriately flagged incident, anti-social behaviour and/or intelligence data may permit identification of data signatures indicative of an increased risk of future involvement in IPA. More advanced efforts may take a similar approach while also capitalising on multi-agency data-linkage where appropriate.

Recommendation 7: Following a problem-oriented approach to policing DA, specificity is key in considering the range of different types of offending collectively described as DA. We have done some disaggregation of administrative data in order to better understand particular problems, looking at spatial and temporal patterns, attempting to measure IPA crime through specific offences and victim-offender relationships, and identifying potential counterclaims as a subset of general IPA. Nevertheless, much more can be done.

Recommendation 8: Following on from this, it is imperative that police response officers' understanding of IPA goes beyond physical violence to reflect that contained in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. National organisations such as Women's Aid and SafeLives provide bespoke training for police officers that may assist.

Recommendation 9: A core requirement for harnessing administrative data to support problem scanning/solving, and intervention evaluation, relates to data quality in a multitude of ways. This includes accuracy of geocoding, ensuring repeat individuals (victims and offenders) can be easily identified; robust and consistent use of flags or markers; and the sharing of information between forces to detect cross-border offending. Data provided for this project were well organised and for the most part well recorded. Nevertheless continuous efforts must be made to improve and expand (where appropriate) data collection and quality control, throughout considering the relevant ethical issues that come with such efforts.

Recommendation 10: Relatedly, while not analysed here, considerable contextual insights may be masked in police free text data of various forms relating to IPA, e.g., incident logs, modus operandi notes, and intelligence documents. A range of techniques are starting to be employed that attempt to systematically extract insights from these sources and may support analysts in sifting large volumes of data that would otherwise remain untapped.

Recommendation 11: The seven different 'grass roots' organisations that provide support to IPA victims (and, in some cases, offenders) in Cumbria together hold a wealth of data about local IPA. There is, however, no uniformity around data collection. Each organisation gathers different information and the data are held in independent case management systems. Insurmountable obstacles prevent local practitioners (and external researchers) from combining datasets to better understand the nature and extent of DA victimisation across Cumbria. The forthcoming Cumbria Domestic Abuse Landscape Report by Kelly Henderson for the West Cumbria Domestic Abuse Partnership will provide insights into the administration of local DA service delivery. Local government restructuring may provide an opportunity to think creatively about how the administration of these 'grass roots' IPA service providers and the data they collect could be brought together in productive ways.

Recommendation 12: Following on from this, DA service providers are likely to need data analytic support on an ongoing basis to enable data-driven service delivery. The amalgamation of datasets into a single case management system would allow a single data analyst to conduct this work across all service providers.

Recommendation 13: There were ethical and practical barriers to involving service users in this research. The impact of key national policies on IPA victims (such as, for example, the obligations upon police to take positive action) and interventions are poorly understood. Research with those with lived experience of IPA to determine what they want from police in the immediate, medium and long-term should inform local and national policy and practice.

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Further information