

BRIEFING FROM THE DOMESTIC ABUSE COMMISSIONER FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

HOME OFFICE COUNTING RULES

About the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales is the independent voice for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The Commissioner uses statutory powers, which are set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to raise public awareness and hold both agencies and government to account in tackling domestic abuse.

The changes to the Home Office Counting Rules

Following recommendations made in the *Policing Productivity Review*, by the National Police Chiefs Council, the Home Office implemented changes to the Counting Rules – the mechanism used by police forces across England and Wales to record crime.¹ Prior to the changes, which were implemented in June 2023, most police forces recorded a maximum of two crime incidents when a victim made a report to the police, regardless of whether more than two different crimes had taken place. Now, only one incident – what is deemed the most serious crime – will be recorded by the police due to the implementation of the ‘Principal Crime Rule’. Additional changes to the rules have also allowed the police to stop counting malicious communication crimes – crimes of threatening of abusive messages – and public order offences. More officers than before are also permitted to remove a crime from the record if evidence suggests no crime took place.

Policing Minister Chris Philp has stated that the changes to the counting rules could help to reduce “red tape”,² with the National Police Chiefs Council estimating that 443,000 officer hours could be saved by simplifying crime recording.³ However, the Commissioner is clear that administrative ease should never come before accurate recording and victim safety.

What the statistics show

Data published in April 2024 revealed that 17,600 fewer domestic abuse incidents were recorded in the period from October to December 2023, when compared to the quarter one, April to June 2023, before the changes to the counting rules fully came into effect. This amounts to an apparent eight per cent reduction in domestic abuse recorded crimes.

There has also been a considerable decrease of 26 per cent in the number of malicious communication offences recorded by the police, a reduction of 71,134

¹ Home Office (2023) [The Policing Productivity Review](#)

² Gov.UK (2023), [‘Cutting red tape to free up police time to focus on solving crimes’](#)

³ Home Office (2024) [Government plan to save 38 million hours of police time](#)

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reports. These crimes include threatening or abusive messages, which are commonly reported by domestic abuse victims. In their release, the Office for National Statistics acknowledge that the decrease in crimes may partly be attributed to the changes in police recording.

Whilst there has been a welcome seven per cent increase in the volume of sexual offences recorded by police, since this time last year, this is likely down to the work being conducted within policing as part of Operation Soteria rather than due to changes in counting.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's concerns

The introduction of these changes contradicts the Government's own strategic priorities, with the *Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan* stating that "[the Government] need to increase reporting to the police of domestic abuse-related incidents and recorded crimes."⁴ The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is concerned that administrative efficiencies are being prioritised over accurate reporting of domestic abuse and ultimately the safety of victims.

The Principal Crime Rule, requiring the police to only record what they regard to be the most serious of any crimes reported is deeply concerning as domestic abuse is rarely a one-off incident. Victims will typically report multiple crimes to the police. Not recording these crimes individually makes it harder to understand the extent and types of abuse being reported to the police by victims, painting a false picture of the reasons why they are contacting the police or police activity. Concerningly, no alternative measures for tracking this have been proposed.

Recording only the principle crime downplays the hard work and staff time from officers who are rightly trying to investigate every crime that is reported to them. Moreover, these changes could result in the police prioritising the investigation of the principal crime they record, rather than all of the crimes which are reported to them. Currently, inefficient IT systems prevent the police from giving a clear picture of all crimes reported by one victim. The computer systems used by most forces are unable to easily add additional crime classifications below the principal crime which has been recorded, nor do they automatically link together separate crime records. Moreover, once a crime has been reported by a victim, there is no electronic method for tracking the victims' journey across the criminal justice system to identify the court outcome or point of attrition.

⁴ Home Office (2022) [Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan](#)

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The Commissioner fears that the police will be limited in their ability to track and identify escalations in behaviour or build a picture of conduct crimes such as coercive and controlling behaviour if their force data system is only capturing a small proportion of what victims are experiencing. This is likely to prevent dangerous offenders from being identified and brought to justice.

The Commissioner initially raised concerns regarding these changes with the Policing Minister in February 2023. Despite this, the government pressed ahead with implementing these proposals, with limited consultation from the Commissioner or the wider domestic abuse sector. Upon the release of the first set of statistics available following the implementation of these changes, the Commissioner wrote to the Policing Minister again to highlight the impact of these changes on the recording of domestic abuse – with last quarter's figures finding that there had be 23,000 fewer recorded domestic abuse incidents.⁵ The Minister has now agreed to meet with the Commissioner on this issue, over a year since she first lodged her concerns.

Recommendations

- The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is calling for these new counting rules to be robustly evaluated, and for a clear plan of action to be set out once the evaluation is concluded to ensure victims are not adversely affected.
- The government must invest in the development of a data tool which allows the tracking of domestic abuse cases across the criminal justice system, so it is possible to track the victims' journey from report to court and identify key points of attrition and the driving factors behind this.
- The Commissioner further recommends that the government provide funding for policing to invest in upgrading their police systems to allow them to be able to classify crimes together automatically in order to make incidents easier to track.
- The Commissioner is calling more broadly for the transformation of the criminal justice system response to victims of domestic abuse – from report to court and beyond. The Commissioner sees accurate reporting as the fundamental first step in improving criminal justice outcomes for victims and survivors, and holding perpetrators to account.

⁵ Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2024) [Letter to the Policing Minister on Falling Police Recorded Crime: Changes to the Counting Rules](#)