

Increasing use of technology driving new forms of domestic abuse

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A new [Home Office report](#) has found that domestic abuse perpetrators are increasingly using digital and online technologies to monitor, threaten and humiliate their victims.

The report, based on a project funded by the UK Home Office Domestic Abuse Perpetrators Research Fund and compiled by researchers from the Universities of Portsmouth and Kent, found an increasing number of cases and reports of [technology](#)-facilitated [domestic abuse](#) (TFDA), where perpetrators are engaging in a wide range of abusive behaviors incorporating offenses under the 1990 Computer Misuse Act (CMA) and digital tools. These include:

- Using spyware to access their partners' or ex-partners' accounts and also to monitor their movements.
- Creating fake accounts to [abuse](#) and harass victims or impersonating victims and presenting them in a derogatory manner.
- Using new forms of technology (e.g., smart devices, voice assistants, connected cameras, GPS trackers/tags) and smart home appliances (e.g., heating systems) to monitor, stalk and harass victims.
- Stalking and controlling their victims via location apps and geo-location on social media.
- Image-based sexual abuse, also known as 'revenge porn,' where perpetrators threaten to release intimate pictures or videos to friends or family or publicly release online.
- Unauthorized access of emails and social media accounts.

The report's lead author, Dr. Lisa Sugiura, senior lecturer in criminology and cybercrime at the University of Portsmouth, said: "With the increased use and development of technology, perpetrators of domestic abuse are progressively using CMA offenses and [digital tools](#) to monitor, threaten and humiliate their victims.

"Technical skills are not necessary to perpetuate most forms of technological abuse. Many of the tools used are everyday technologies, readily available, accessible, and familiar. Apps are affordable and easy

to use."

Dr. Jason Nurse, Associate Professor in Cyber Security at the University of Kent, co-authored the report and commented: "Perpetrators are adept at adjusting to new technology and exploiting legitimate tools. Smart devices such as Alexa, Nest and Hive (smart heating systems), and Ring doorbell and cameras, are also being used within domestic abuse contexts. These are in addition to the various technologies—from teddy bears with covert cameras to car trackers—that we found online marketed for stalking and spying on one's partner."

The researchers state that while technology is a facilitator, online abuse is another coercive and controlling behavior that can be part of a wider pattern of domestic abuse. While for some victims there is no physical abuse, digital technologies are used for other forms of harmful behaviors, which are no less serious.

The report also found that children are increasingly being involved in TFDA cases, especially in post-separation shared parental situations. Children are being used to facilitate the abuse of the other parent, with their devices such as phones, tablets and games consoles being exploited by perpetrators to monitor and maintain control over victims.

Dr. Sugiura said: "Within coercive and controlling relationships, the use of technology to further that abuse is likely. Perpetrators may already have manipulated access to their partner's accounts or are already accessing them or spying on them without their partner knowing."

The report provided several recommendations to tackle harmful behaviors, including:

- Change all passwords on accounts and devices when a relationship ends. This includes [smart devices](#) and internet

connected devices around the home.

- Avoid passwords an intimate or ex-partner might guess.
- Check any devices with internet connectivity for spyware trackers pre-installed (mobile phones, laptops, smart fitness trackers and wearables, etc). Cookies should be deleted, and the browser history cleaned.
- Be mindful that gifts, toys, and other seemingly innocent items may contain secret cameras, microphones or GPS trackers, so do check these items if they have come from an abusive partner.
- Check the privacy and use of facial images and email addresses on social media accounts.

It also recommends that policy, legislative and support responses consider these rapidly developing practices of abuse. The researchers call for the specific inclusion of the role that technologies can play in facilitating and exacerbating domestic abuse within the Domestic Abuse Bill; training police to identify potential criminal offenses in under-utilized areas (for example Computer Misuse Offenses), which could often be used earlier in cases against offenders; for tech companies to do more to prevent the creation of fake accounts, and removal of those who repeatedly do so; and for online retailers to clamp down on the sale of spy kits and technologies, particularly those directly marketed to tracking and spying on partners.

Dr. Sugiura said: "As technology becomes ever more ingrained into our everyday lives, hastened further by the COVID pandemic, which has driven many more human interactions and tasks online, TFDA is only going to escalate and increase further the risk of harm, unless appropriate interventions in prevention and enforcement occur.

"We hope our findings inform studies that provide digital safety guidelines for individuals, empower and protect victims, and also provide guidance for government and platforms on how to limit the

access of these technologies to perpetrators."

The report authors recognize there needs to be further research into the experiences of underrepresented groups including male TFDA victims as well as victims and perpetrators who are BAME/ LGBTQI+ / have disabilities, and that future studies should focus on working with specialist domestic abuse service providers who support these groups.

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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