

Police-academic partnerships could help tackle the crime of coercive control

September 5 2023, by N. Zoe Hilton and Sandy Jung



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In 2020, calls to defund the police echoed a longstanding argument in critical criminology in favor of [police abolition](#).

Academics who support abolition [promote activism](#) over collaboration. But as calls for "defund the [police](#)" pivot to "[refund the police](#)" in

[priority areas](#)—in particular mental health, issues faced by marginalized people and intimate partner [violence](#)—police-researcher partnerships are needed more than ever.

When faced with shifting priorities, [police forces](#) may lack the research capacity to evaluate existing policies. Most police officers and supervisors [don't often read](#) academic research that could point them to current evidence-based practices.

Collaborating with independent researchers provides access to needed skills and may bolster public trust and [perceived legitimacy](#) of their work and efforts.

Academics who forgo working with police are losing out on opportunities for critical data access and effective knowledge mobilization. Researchers who seek to understand and evaluate policing practice need access to large-scale, timely and highly sensitive data on police operations.

Furthermore, if police participate in designing studies and interpreting findings, they may more readily acknowledge the need for change in light of unfavorable results—or adopt new practices that show positive effects.

Intimate partner violence

Academics who actively exclude the very people they seek to influence by their research are unlikely to be successful in that goal. Fortunately, many scholars now see co-operation and collaboration as the [best way to conduct research in criminal justice](#).

Intimate partner violence is one priority area that has seen the benefits of police-academic partnership. Beginning in the 1980s, researchers

collaborated with police organizations to evaluate the effects of arrest for domestic assault in the [United States and Canada](#). Studies showed that [arrest reduced subsequent violence](#), but the impact varied according to an individual's [history of violence and other risk factors](#).

More recently, an academic team initiated a partnership with police and other services to conduct research with the shared goal of [preventing intimate partner homicide](#).

We have been part of such partnerships over the course of our respective careers, from [the creation](#) of the first actuarial risk assessment tool for intimate partner violence to [the testing](#) of that tool in routine police practice.

Our current collaborators include researchers who have studied [how officers use such tools and assess risk](#) when responding to violent and non-violent incidents involving intimate partners.

Coercive control

Recognition of non-physically violent but coercive and controlling forms of abuse has grown rapidly in recent years, especially with the [increase in coercive control incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Coercive control involves repeated, systematic acts of [isolation, intimidation and violation](#) that undermine the partner and trap them in the abusive relationship. It's a pattern of behavior over time, making it challenging for police to identify because [officers' conventional understanding of intimate partner violence focus on overt acts of violence](#).

Coercive control is considered a [risk factor](#) for intimate partner femicide, and is believed to have [played a role in the apparent murder of](#)

[a four-year-old Toronto girl, Keira Kagan](#), by her father in 2020.

Researchers and activists have urged governments to make changes in how the [criminal justice](#) system responds to intimate partner violence in order to reflect [coercive control](#).

Coercive control is now outlawed in the [United Kingdom](#) and [Australia](#), and similar legislation [has been passed or considered](#) in several American states.

In Canada, [Bill C-332](#) seeks to criminalize coercive control, and the justice minister recently expressed the government's [openness to creating a new offense in the Criminal Code](#). [Keira's Law](#), which [passed the Senate on Aug. 17, 2023](#), is set to mandate coercive control training for judges.

How best to address coercive control?

But research suggests that criminalizing coercive control is fraught with challenges, including potential racial bias and the [difficulty of defining, detecting and documenting the behavior](#).

Police-academic partnerships can help answer crucial questions, including how [police officers](#) investigate coercive control, what the most effectual training methods are and whether policies are effective and equitable when implemented.

We are now collaborating with police to identify a common language for intimate partner violence risk appraisal. The [CELIA IPV project](#) for intimate partner violence research is studying how police can recognize and respond to non-physical, coercive and controlling behaviors.

An expressed goal of our collaboration is to expand formal partnerships

between researchers with expertise in intimate partner violence and policing services across Canada and to address research gaps in evidence-based policing for intimate partner violence.

We have so far established partnerships with the [Edmonton Police Service](#), the [Ontario Provincial Police](#) and the [Saint John Police Force](#) in New Brunswick.

Evidence-based policing

We'll also examine risk-assessment approaches for people engaging in [intimate partner violence across diverse gender and sexual identities](#), extending our partnerships and enhancing the potential for improving evidence-based policing whenever officers respond to a domestic call.

Police-academic partnerships are not just about the academic search for knowledge, and not just about the evaluation of policing practice.

They are about the creation of relationships with the potential to transform how each [partner](#) understands and interacts with the other. Collaboration is the essence of knowledge mobilization and will be fundamental to the success of anti-coercive control legislation.

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Provided by The Conversation

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