

Redefining Domestic Abuse: Coercive Control

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Dec 16, 2025 ⌚ 16 min read

Summary

- There is a trend in the U.S. towards expanding the definition of domestic violence to address “coercive control,” including non-physical forms of abuse that undermine a person’s autonomy.
- Coercive control laws were previously enacted in England and Wales and Scotland.
- In the U.S., coercive control laws have been enacted in Hawaii, California, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, among other states.
- The author calls for more states to enact coercive control laws, and for training for attorneys and law enforcement in recognizing nonphysical forms of abuse.



Introduction

Until 2007, the term “coercive control” was not well known. It was then that sociologist Evan Stark published his award-winning book *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*.¹ Coercive control refers to a “systematic pattern of behavior that establishes dominance over another person.”² Victims often are isolated from friends and family and feel trapped in the relationship due to financial, logistical, or emotional barriers created or exploited by their abuser.³

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Stark’s work shaped the legal and political fields, prompting nations to enact new laws criminalizing coercive and controlling behavior.⁴ Stark notes that when abuse reaches the point of physical violence, the victim cannot effectively resist or escape.⁵ Dr. Monckton Smith, from the University of Gloucestershire, studied 372 murders committed by intimate partners in the United Kingdom and found that in nearly all of them, coercive control was a dominant characteristic of their relationship.⁶ If our justice system can catch the abuse in its early stages, it gives the victim a greater chance of survival and can help to stop the abuse before the victim faces serious physical injury or death.⁷

Stark said that “the domestic violence revolution has stalled.”⁸ As a society, we saw sweeping criminal justice and legal reforms in the area of domestic violence (also called “intimate partner violence”) beginning in the 1970s when battered women’s shelters began opening up across the nation, and states began to recognize and criminalize marital rape.⁹ Also, Congress first passed the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, which was the first federal legislation that provided federal resources to encourage community-coordinated responses to combating violence against women.¹⁰ Despite all this progress, society has been slower to address the problem of coercive control.

According to The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from 2016 to 2017, 46.2% of women and

42.8% of men have experienced at least one form of coercive control by an intimate partner during their lifetime.¹¹ The study defined coercive control as “including behaviors that are intended to monitor, control, or threaten” an intimate partner.¹² This statistic shows that nearly half of all women and men have experienced at least one psychologically aggressive behavior, intended to monitor and control, by an intimate partner in their lifetime.¹³ Contrast this with physical violence, where women (32.5%) are much more likely to suffer *severe* physical violence by an intimate partner compared to men (24.6%).¹⁴

I. International Trends

A. England and Wales

In 2015, England and Wales expanded the meaning of domestic violence to include coercive control, making controlling and coercive behavior in a relationship illegal.¹⁵ Now, violators who are convicted could face a fine or a sentence of up to five years in jail.¹⁶ Additionally, to help with enforcement, police in England and Wales “are now being trained to spot signs of controlling behavior. . . .”¹⁷

One concern with criminalizing coercive control is the lack of evidence it leaves.¹⁸ Unlike physical abuse, which often comes with physical injury or medical records, coercive control doesn’t always leave a paper trail.¹⁹ Police often rely heavily on the victim’s testimony, which can be deemed less persuasive at trial.²⁰ In some ways, this puts the burden on the victim to document their abuse. Natalie Curtis, a woman from England, took notes to document her abuse, including saving text messages and phone records and filming her abuser’s outbursts.²¹ He later pled guilty to coercive control and was sentenced to two years in prison.²²

Compare Ms. Curtis’s story to that of Rachel Williams, who left her abuser in 2011 before the coercive control law was enacted.²³ Ms. Williams’s husband called her constantly and dictated her physical appearance, such as how she wore her hair or what color lipstick she wore.²⁴ If she didn’t comply, he would scream at her or grab her by the throat and hit her.²⁵ She left him in 2011, before the coercive control bill was enacted. After dealing with 36 police officers over six weeks and giving a detailed statement about the violence and threats, her abuser was charged with assault.²⁶ He was released on bail, and the day after a judge lifted restrictions on his movement, he went to Ms.

Williams's place of work with a gun.²⁷ Ms. Williams attempted to fight him off, but he managed to shoot her in the leg.²⁸ Later that day, he died by suicide.²⁹ Ms. Williams believes that if she had support from law enforcement and the Serious Crime Act, she might have been able to receive an indictment on her husband and leave before his abuse escalated.³⁰

B. Scotland

In 2018, Scotland also passed a coercive control law, the Domestic Abuse Act, which went into effect in April 2019.³¹ In the first year the Domestic Abuse Act was enacted, 252 people were prosecuted under the act.³² In the second year of enactment, 2020–2021, that number increased to 420.³³ Notably, the second year of enactment was also the year that the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have exacerbated the impact of domestic abuse on victims.³⁴

Critics say that more needs to be done in relation to the sentencing policies for offenses and breaches and that these policies are not aggressive enough.³⁵ Additionally, some argue that police have not been adequately trained to recognize signs of coercive control.³⁶ Professor Michele Burman, a feminist criminologist from the University of Glasgow, is an expert in sociology, psychology, and law.³⁷ Professor Burman said that police officers need to be aware that coercive and controlling behavior can be “subtle and nuanced,” and police training needs to reflect the broad types of abusive behavior.³⁸ However, Detective Chief Superintendent Sam Faulds pointed out that Scotland Police get about 150 calls per night for domestic abuse, and they simply do not have the resources to send a specialist officer to that many calls each night.³⁹ She also pointed out that the pandemic disrupted domestic abuse training, though they were working to get “back on track.”⁴⁰

One victim who spoke with STV, a Scottish news company, said that she went to the police multiple times and had very different interactions with different officers.⁴¹ The woman, whose name was changed to Bethany for privacy, said that the first officer she spoke with made her feel “supported” and that the experience was “validating.”⁴² But when Bethany went back at a later date, she was told by a different officer to “think very carefully . . . about taking this further” and to “think about the fact that your ex-husband could lose his job.”⁴³ Bethany's experience highlights the shortfalls in Scotland's legislation. The laws are not truly helping victims if police are not properly trained to provide necessary and consistent support.

C. Canada

Ontario, Canada's law emphasizes the impact of domestic abuse, specifically coercive control, on children.⁴⁴ On November 20, 2020, Bill 207 received Royal Assent, revising the Children's Law Reform Act.⁴⁵ This law "makes explicit that conduct need not constitute a criminal offence for it to be considered in a family law proceeding."⁴⁶ Furthermore, the law mandates that courts consider any family violence and its impact on the child when assessing the best interest of the child.⁴⁷ The law allows judges to consider all abuse in the family context and whether the child is directly or indirectly exposed to the family violence.⁴⁸

One federal Canadian coercive control law is known as "Keira's Law," named after four-year-old Keira Kagan who was killed by her father in a murder-suicide in 2020.⁴⁹ Keira's mother tried to protect Keira from her father's coercive behavior but was told by a judge that "domestic violence is not relevant to parenting."⁵⁰ Keira's mother believes that the warnings about her ex-husband's abuse were ignored by judges.⁵¹ Her case highlights the issue that judges sometimes overlook the connection between domestic violence and its effects on children.⁵²

II. National Trends in the United States

Most states across the United States have no statute regarding coercive control.⁵³ This leaves a large gap in those states, rendering victims of nonphysical abuse with fewer options for protection.

In addition to international influence, the movement for coercive control legislation in the United States was motivated in part by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁴ Surveys have shown a significant increase in domestic violence around the globe in the first few days and months of the pandemic.⁵⁵ In England, calls to domestic abuse hotlines increased by 60%.⁵⁶ In Argentina, the 144 Helpline saw a 39% increase in calls between March 20 and March 31, 2020.⁵⁷ The United Nations has dubbed this the "Shadow Pandemic."⁵⁸ Lockdown measures had the unintended effect of enhancing some abusers' ability to control and isolate victims as people stayed home to reduce the spread of the novel and deadly disease.⁵⁹

A. Hawaii

Hawaii was the first state in the nation to explicitly include “coercive control” in the definition of domestic abuse for the purpose of seeking a civil protective order.⁶⁰ On September 15, 2020, Governor David Ige signed H.B. 2425 into law.⁶¹ The bill defines coercive control to include, *inter alia*, “a pattern of behavior that seeks to take away the individual’s liberty or freedom and strip away the individual’s sense of self. . . .”⁶² The law was inspired in part by the success of Scotland’s coercive control law.⁶³ Legislators who supported the legislation described coercive control as the “first step” for abusers who escalate to physical violence.⁶⁴ Hawaii experienced an increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁵

B. California

Not long after Hawaii passed its coercive control law, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 1141, permitting courts to consider coercive control as domestic violence for the purposes of seeking a civil protective order.⁶⁶

In a landmark case, Judge Vanessa A. Zecher, from the Superior Court of Santa Clara County, granted a woman a permanent restraining order against her husband on the grounds of coercive control.⁶⁷ The woman was never subjected to physical abuse.⁶⁸ She was given a list of instructions and demands from her husband, including the specific way she should wash the dishes.⁶⁹ Each night at 8:30 p.m. they would meet “to discuss whether she had met his demands.”⁷⁰ Judge Zecher emphasized the husband’s “threats of punishment” in her decision to grant the permanent restraining order.⁷¹ Judge Zecher said:

Whether intended or not, the use of the words “punishment” and “violations” have no place in a spousal intimate relationship and the use of those words have the effect of creating a circumstance where the victim spouse is “emotionally battered” to the point where the lines are blurred between what the victim spouse really wants versus what the victim spouse believes will please the other spouse to avoid an argument or to avoid being placed in a financially desperate situation with a child.⁷²

Notably, under California law “there is a rebuttable presumption that an award of sole or joint physical or legal custody of a child to a person who has perpetrated domestic violence is detrimental to the best interest of the child. . . .”⁷³ By extending its definition of domestic violence to include “coercive control,” California also has extended its

rebuttable presumption that an award of custody to a party who has engaged in coercive control is not in the best interest of the child.⁷⁴ Children often are used as a form of power and control for abusers, even after the parties have separated.⁷⁵ For instance, an abuser can maintain control by telling a victim that if they leave, the abuser will be sure to take custody of the children.⁷⁶ For couples who were not or are no longer married, the child may be the one thing linking the abuser to the victim.⁷⁷ The California law gives victims greater protection because it puts the burden on the abuser to overcome the rebuttable presumption in order to be granted custody. This approach makes it harder for an abuser to use the children as a means to control the victim.

C. Connecticut

In June 2021, Connecticut passed its own coercive control law, named “Jennifer’s Law.”⁷⁸ Like other coercive control laws in the United States, Connecticut’s law expanded the definition of “domestic violence” for the purpose of seeking a civil order of protection to include coercive control.⁷⁹ The statute defines coercive control as “a pattern of behavior that in purpose or effect unreasonably interferes with a person’s free will and personal liberty.”⁸⁰

The Connecticut law is named in part after Jennifer Dulos, who went missing on May 24, 2019.⁸¹ While Jennifer’s remains were never found, she is presumed to be dead.⁸² At the time of her disappearance, Jennifer was in the middle of a contentious divorce from Fotis Dulos.⁸³ In 2017, Jennifer alleged that Fotis exhibited “irrational, unsafe, bullying, threatening and controlling behavior,” causing her to fear for her safety and for the well-being of their five children.⁸⁴ In response, Fotis said that he never “physically threatened, stalked or assaulted” Jennifer.⁸⁵ Fotis was later charged with felony murder, among other crimes related to her disappearance.⁸⁶ Fotis died by suicide shortly after.⁸⁷

Jennifer’s story demonstrates why coercive control laws are an important tool in protecting victims. Abusers often escalate slowly, and coercive control can be the first sign that something is wrong.⁸⁸ Jennifer was afraid of her husband, and yet a judge found she could not prove physical abuse under then-existing Connecticut law and she was denied an order of protection.⁸⁹ The justice system failed her.

D. Massachusetts

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently passed a law that expanded Abuse Prevention Order protections to victims of coercive control.⁹⁰ The law defines “coercive control” as, *inter alia*, “a pattern of behavior intended to threaten, intimidate, harass, isolate, control, coerce or compel compliance of a family or household member that causes that family or household member to reasonably fear physical harm or have a reduced sense of physical safety or autonomy. . . .”⁹¹

The bill was first introduced by Representative Tram T. Nguyen, Representative Natalie Higgins, and Senator Michael Moore.⁹² Before Representative Nguyen ran for office, she was an attorney who often worked with survivors of emotional and mental trauma.⁹³ Through her work, she saw the trauma and financial devastation that her clients experienced as a result of coercive control.⁹⁴ She stated: “Domestic violence is not always physical violence, sometimes it’s much more insidious. Survivors and the courts need our help to update our laws to make it clear that coercive control is a type of domestic abuse that will not be tolerated.”⁹⁵

III. Analysis

There is a trend in the United States towards expanding the definition of abuse to include coercive control.⁹⁶ Such legislation is a critical part of protecting and empowering victims. By expanding the definition of abuse to include nonphysical forms of abuse, the justice system is better equipped to protect victims before physical harm is done. The ability to seek protective orders or other forms of relief empowers victims to take action. While victim-centered laws are a positive step in combating domestic abuse, more can be done, particularly with the deep-rooted criminal justice systems in place.

When the law only criminalizes physical abuse, abusers have numerous ways of retaliating against the victim.⁹⁷ Abusers can exert control over victims by threatening online humiliation, by telling them that they will never see their children again, or by threatening to drag out litigation until the victim has no money left.⁹⁸ These are all ways that abusers can exert control within the bounds of the law, depending on the jurisdiction. Because of this, victims may fear that seeking help will only make their situation worse.⁹⁹ They may be “used to coordinating their lives around their abuser’s wishes” and may feel lost or panicked without their abusive partner.¹⁰⁰ Coercive control laws encourage victims to seek help by enabling them to seek civil orders of protection after experiencing “coercive control.”

As coercive control laws become more common, officials have to take steps to ensure that these laws are being properly enforced. In some cases, the evidentiary burden on a victim trying to prove coercive control will be more difficult than proving physical harm. After all, physical harm will often leave a trail of evidence like bruises, broken bones, and medical records. While in some cases involving coercive control there may be text messages, financial records, or other documentary support, in other cases there may be limited documentary evidence, if any at all.

Law enforcement needs proper training to recognize coercive control. The outdated perspective on domestic abuse is that a victim will have physical injuries, or be fearful of their abuser, or should “just leave.” Unfortunately, we now know that these stereotypes are rarely true. Coercive control is a very nuanced type of abuse wherein the victim may not have physical injuries yet may nonetheless be fearful of their abuser. Some victims of abuse choose to stay with their abuser because they see no other alternative.¹⁰¹ Victims of coercive control may be isolated from their support system and/or financial resources that would help them to leave.¹⁰²

It is crucial that law enforcement know how to talk to victims and provide additional resources to victims such as helpline phone numbers, counselors, advocacy groups, or housing resources for victims who move out of their home to get away from their abuser. Domestic abuse is not a linear process; it is layered and cyclical.¹⁰³ Some victims may have “good” days and “bad” days with their abuser and may second guess whether they are ready to leave. Regardless, the people they turn to for help should be trained to meet the victim where they are, both mentally and emotionally, to best support them. For example, if a victim isn’t ready to file a police report, or changes their mind, law enforcement still can help the victim come up with an alternative safety plan. This might include packing a duffle bag, discussing safe places to stay after leaving, or obtaining a new cell phone.¹⁰⁴

Statutes also should provide guidance to judges regarding the evidentiary burden of proving coercive control. Can coercive control be proven by a single text message? How can text messages be verified? What if a victim can show that they don’t have access to any bank statements? How does a victim prove that their lack of access to bank statements wasn’t a joint decision made by the couple? These are all issues that judges will have to grapple with on their own, absent guidance from a statute. We also know from the implementation of these laws in other countries that often the best evidence, or the only evidence, is the victim’s testimony.¹⁰⁵ How much weight should be given to this testimony? On the one hand, the laws must protect victims, even if the only evidence is their testimony. But on the other hand, if the new laws impose criminal penalties on

abusers, the system should have safeguards that protect defendants from frivolous and unsubstantiated accusations of abuse.

Lawyers should remain educated on the coercive control laws in their jurisdictions so they can zealously advocate for their clients. Specifically, in family law, lawyers often counsel clients through the most difficult periods of their lives. The mental and emotional anguish that a client feels is only exacerbated by the presence of abuse, including coercive control. As is clear from the breakdown of several current laws across the United States, jurisdictions have slight variations in their statutes that lawyers need to be aware of.¹⁰⁶ Knowing the specifics of the statutory language and requirements, and whether a finding of abuse will create a rebuttable presumption that the parties should not have joint legal custody, can have significant impacts for the strategy and outcome of a case.

Lawyers also need to be educated about best practices in working with clients who are the victims of domestic violence. Some call this “trauma-informed lawyering.”¹⁰⁷ It is important for a lawyer to gain their client’s trust, particularly during emotional proceedings involving abuse. First, lawyers have to recognize that abuse can happen to anyone regardless of our preconceived notions of who a “victim” is. Domestic abuse impacts people regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, or socioeconomic class, etc. When preparing for court, lawyers should be patient while working with their client to put together a timeline of the abuse because trauma impacts memory.¹⁰⁸ This is important in coercive control cases because the victim’s testimony is sometimes the only evidence, or the best evidence, available. Lawyers should remind their client that if the outcome in court isn’t favorable to them, they still have other options when they feel unsafe, such as calling 911 or reaching out to community partners like shelters.

Coercive control laws also will have a major impact on custody disputes.¹⁰⁹ Some states, such as Massachusetts, have statutes stating that finding a “pattern or serious incident of abuse” creates a rebuttable presumption that it is not in the best interest of the child to be in the custody of the abusive parent.¹¹⁰ Coercive control by its very definition is a pattern. Should this mean that any finding of coercive control is enough to deny an abuser legal and/or physical custody of their children? Like many issues in the family law realm, judges are given wide discretion in making such determinations; even when there is a rebuttable presumption, it may still be rebutted. However, broad judicial discretion makes laws unpredictable and inconsistently applied.

Another issue is the mental health of both victims and abusers. While it is obvious that victims of abuse have suffered trauma that requires support from a mental health specialist, abusers may need mental health intervention as well.¹¹¹ Some abusers—

including Rachel Williams' partner, Keira Kagan's father, and Jennifer Dulos' ex-husband— have died by suicide.¹¹² Intervention by a medical professional could prevent the pattern of coercive control from continuing and causing more mental, emotional, and physical harm to both the victim and the abuser.

IV. Recommendations

Based on this research and analysis, more can be done to protect victims of coercive control:

- 1 Statutes should provide clear guidance to lawyers and judges regarding the evidentiary burden to prove coercive control.
- 2 Statutes should mandate domestic abuse trauma-informed training for law enforcement.
- 3 Law enforcement should be given additional resources to handle the large numbers of domestic disputes they deal with.
- 4 Statutes should provide greater protection for children, whether they are directly or indirectly impacted by coercive control.
- 5 Lawyers should participate in continuing legal education to improve their skills in representing victims of abuse.

Conclusion

Current domestic violence laws are insufficient because many of them do not recognize coercive control as a form of abuse. Coercive control is often one of the first signs of escalating abuse. Expanding the statutory definition of abuse is just the first step in protecting victims before abuse becomes physical. Legislation must be carefully drafted in order to be both victim-focused and well-integrated into the current criminal justice system. Lawmakers in the United States should look at the successes and shortcomings of laws in other nations when drafting their own coercive control laws.

On March 18, 2024, Evan Stark passed away at his home in Woodbridge, Connecticut.¹¹³ However, his work has shaped the field of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence on a national and global scale. The justice system owes it to victims to ensure that the law is crafted precisely to intervene before coercive control can become physical violence. It is up to the legal system, and the lawyers within the legal system, to advocate for workable,

victim-protective legislation and to understand the nuances of all forms of abuse, even subtle ones, in order to zealously advocate for victims.

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67. Carrie N. Baker, *California Court Grants Restraining Order Based on Coercive Control*, Ms. MAG. (Aug. 31, 2023), <https://msmagazine.com/2023/08/31/california-court-coercive-control-restraining-order-domestic-violence/>.
68. *Id.*
69. *Id.*
70. *Id.*
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72. *Id.*
73. CAL. FAM. CODE § 3044(a); see also *id.* §§ 3044(c) (defining a person who has “perpetrated domestic violence” and referencing grounds for issuing a civil protective order), 6320.
74. Legislative Counsel’s Digest, 2020 Cal. Legis. Serv. ch. 248 (S.B. 1141) (West) (“By adding coercive control to the bases for the ex parte orders described above, the bill would, for purposes of a family court determining child custody in those proceedings, create a rebuttable presumption that an award of child custody to a party who has engaged in coercive control is detrimental to the best interests of the child.”).
75. See generally Chadwick & Sloan, *supra* note 3; *Children as an Abusive Mechanism*, NAT’L DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE, <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/children-as-an-abusive-mechanism/> (last visited Sept. 10, 2024).
76. NAT’L DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE, *supra* note 75.
77. See Chadwick & Sloan, *supra* note 3, at 38–39; NAT’L DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE, *supra* note 75.
78. Pub. Act No. 21-78, S.B. 1091 (Conn. 2021); Michelle Kirby, *Jennifer’s Law (Conn.)*, OFF. OF LEGIS. RSCH. (Apr. 24, 2023), <https://cga.ct.gov/2023/rpt/pdf/2023-R-0107.pdf>.
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97. See *Power and Control*, NAT'L DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE, <http://thehotline.org/identify-abuse/power-and-control/> (last visited Sept. 15, 2024).

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https://www.americanbar.org/groups/family_law/resources/family-law-quarterly/2025-december/redefining-domestic-abuse-coercive-control/