



National Audit Office



REPORT

Tackling violence against women and girls

Home Office

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Key facts

**over
1 in 4**

women will be a victim of sexual assault or attempted assault in their lifetimes

20%

of all police-recorded crime was related to violence against women and girls (VAWG) in 2022-23

**at least
1 in 12**

women are victims of VAWG-related offences every year

- 97%** of perpetrators of sexual offences were male in the year ending December 2023, with a high proportion known to the victim
- 86%** of victims of sexual offences were female in the year ending March 2022, according to police-recorded crime data
- 158** the mean number of days from police referring a rape case to the Crown Prosecution Service and the Crown Prosecution Service authorising a charge in April to June 2024. This is compared to a mean average of 46 days for all crime
- £84 billion** equivalent annual economic and social cost of domestic abuse in 2024-25 prices. This has been uplifted to current prices from a 2016-17 estimate produced by the Home Office
- £57 million** Home Office budget to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG), including domestic abuse in 2024-25
- 13** departments and other government bodies with commitments in the 2021 “Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls” Strategy (the VAWG Strategy) and the 2022 “Tackling Domestic Abuse” Plan (the Domestic Abuse Plan)
- 78%** percentage of commitments made across both the VAWG Strategy and Domestic Abuse Plan that had been met by July 2024 (the latest data available from the Home Office)

This report focuses on the Home Office’s leadership of the government’s response to violence against women and girls (VAWG). The terms ‘women’ and ‘victims’ are used interchangeably to reflect the gender-based nature of these crimes, although we acknowledge that women and girls do not represent all victims of VAWG-related offences. The term ‘victim’ is used as opposed to ‘survivor’ throughout the report.

We understand that some people may find the issues raised sensitive or upsetting and we have provided a list of organisations and services that are available to offer support at the end of this report.

Summary

1 Definitions of the term ‘violence against women and girls’ (VAWG) vary, but the government defines it as “acts of violence or abuse that we know disproportionately affect women and girls”. It covers crimes including rape and other sexual offences, stalking, domestic abuse, ‘honour’-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage and ‘honour’ killings), ‘revenge porn’ and ‘upskirting’.

2 Over one in four women are estimated to be victims of sexual assault or attempted assault in their lifetime, and one in 12 women are victims of VAWG each year, although the actual number is likely to be much higher. The National Police Chiefs’ Council reported that, in 2022-23, 20% of all police-recorded crime was related to violence against women and girls. The victim was female in 86% of all police-recorded sexual offences in the year to March 2022. In the year ending December 2023, over 97% (23,723) of people convicted of sexual offences were male, and crimes are often committed by someone known to the victim.

3 Violence against women and girls can have long-term impacts on victims, affecting them physically, mentally, socially and financially. It is estimated that the economic and social cost of domestic abuse could be as high as £84 billion. The Home Office last estimated the societal cost of rape cases in 2018, based on 2015-16 data, when it estimated that the 122,000 rape cases reported that year could have a societal cost of around £4.8 billion.

4 In 2021, the then government introduced its strategy, “Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls” (the VAWG Strategy), which outlined a series of commitments focused on:

- prevention – to deliver long-term cultural and societal change;
- supporting victims – to increase support for victims and survivors including providing support services that are run by and for the communities they serve;
- pursuing perpetrators – to transform the criminal justice response to ensure all perpetrators of offences against women are brought to justice; and
- building a stronger system – working with multiple government departments to develop a joined-up system across health, justice, law enforcement, housing, social care and education.

In 2021, the Domestic Abuse Act received Royal Assent, and in 2022 the Home Office published a separate “Tackling Domestic Abuse” Plan (the Domestic Abuse Plan).

5 The Home Office leads on the government's response to tackling VAWG, including domestic abuse. However, achieving progress requires the commitment of multiple government departments. There are important roles for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Justice and other parts of the criminal justice system, the Department for Education and NHS England in, for example, identifying victims and supporting them to feel safe, educating young people in safe relationships and ensuring justice through the courts and prison systems.

6 The new government has committed to halve the prevalence of VAWG within a decade as part of its 'mission' to make streets safer. The Home Office will lead this mission and is developing a new VAWG strategy. In this report, we have examined the Home Office's leadership of the 2021 "Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls" Strategy (the VAWG Strategy) and the 2022 "Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan" (the Domestic Abuse Plan), to identify lessons to support the delivery of the government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls.

Key Findings

Progress against the 2021 strategy

7 Violence against women and girls is a serious and growing problem.

In 2023-24 the prevalence of sexual assault against women aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales (the percentage of the population estimated to have suffered a sexual assault each year) was higher than in 2009-10 (4.3% and 3.4% respectively). Conversely, the prevalence of domestic abuse against women was lower (9.2% and 7.4% respectively). Over the same period incidents of rape and sexual assault against women and girls recorded by police have increased almost fourfold, from 34,000 to 123,000, although this can in part be explained by improved recording of these crimes. The societal landscape against which these crimes are committed has also become increasingly complex and in recent years online harms (such as revenge porn) have been recognised as crimes in themselves (paragraphs 1.2, 1.4, 1.7 to 1.9 and Figures 1 and 2).

8 To date, the Home Office has not led an effective whole-system response.

Successfully addressing the harms caused by VAWG requires the coordinated effort and commitment of many government departments. But the cross-departmental governance in place did not ensure all departments were prioritising the VAWG Strategy's aims and were pulling in the same direction. The Home Office created a dedicated team to lead the VAWG Strategy, but it has found it challenging to get buy-in from other government departments. The Home Office's Officials' oversight group, established to progress the Strategy, did not meet until a year after the VAWG Strategy's launch. The Home Office has since revised its governance, which has been welcomed by some departments. While strong ministerial support can encourage cross-government working, the Ministerial oversight group for the VAWG Strategy only met four times in three years (paragraphs 1.10, 3.4 to 3.8).

9 The Home Office has not had a full understanding of the scale of resources committed to tackling VAWG across government, limiting its ability to prioritise efforts. As the lead department for tackling VAWG, the Home Office needs to understand the capacity and resources other bodies are committing to the VAWG Strategy so it can effectively coordinate and oversee their work. The Home Office has not centrally coordinated funding for VAWG across government and, in contrast with the 2021 illegal drugs strategy, the relevant departments did not prepare a joint spending review bid during the period of implementing the VAWG Strategy. Our analysis suggests other government departments spent at least £979 million between 2021-22 and 2023-24. The Home Office has historically underspent its own budget allocated to the VAWG Strategy, by an average of 15% between 2021-22 and 2023-24 (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.9 and Figure 7).

10 The lack of a consistent definition for VAWG across public bodies and their approaches to measuring the scale of VAWG crimes has made it difficult to measure progress in a consistent way. The Home Office's definition of VAWG includes all victims, across all ages and genders, whereas police forces only include women and girls. The Home Office told us it uses estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales to measure prevalence, which does not include children under the age of 16, even though they are included in the Strategy. The Home Office does not consider police-recorded crime an accurate indicator of the prevalence of VAWG, since it is likely to under-report crimes: the police only record one crime per victim/perpetrator relationship, even where multiple VAWG crimes are committed. This, in addition to gaps in data for some VAWG crime types such as 'honour'-based abuse, limits the data available to measure progress. A consistent definition and approach to measuring the scale of VAWG crimes across all of government and policing would help to create a better shared understanding of the scale of the challenge the government is trying to address (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.21 and Figure 12).

Developing the strategy

11 By July 2024, the Home Office had delivered 78% of the commitments in the VAWG Strategy. Several commitments made in the VAWG Strategy were not new, but a continuation of pre-existing activities. Most of the commitments relate to inputs (such as additional funding), activities (such as holding meetings), or outputs (such as the publication of new guidance). In July 2024, there were 25 of 126 commitments still to deliver (excluding two which were stopped and one which was an ongoing commitment), most of which were the responsibility of the Home Office. The Home Office originally planned to implement all commitments by December 2024 but has not been on track since the beginning of the VAWG Strategy (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.4, Figure 6 and Appendix Two).

12 The Home Office did not develop the VAWG Strategy based on an understanding of what works. It has published three VAWG strategies since 2010, all with consistent aims, but we found little evidence that the Home Office had applied learning from previous strategies. The Home Office produced the 2021 VAWG Strategy at speed, largely based on work that was already in train. Despite commitments made in earlier strategies, the Home Office and wider government have a poor understanding of what works to prevent and tackle VAWG. As part of the 2021 VAWG Strategy, the Home Office spent at least £4.2 million from the 'What Works' fund, but the projects it funded are still in progress and have yet to provide insights to inform any future interventions (paragraphs 1.11, 1.12, 2.3 and 3.10 to 3.11).

13 The Home Office has not made the most of the available expertise and knowledge to inform the VAWG Strategy. The Home Office engaged with third sector stakeholders during the development of both the VAWG Strategy and Domestic Abuse Plan. However, stakeholders told us that it was not clear how this engagement informed the Home Office's approach. The ministerial governance board overseeing the VAWG Strategy has not consistently included the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Victims' Commissioner, National Police Lead for VAWG or third-sector specialists. The Home Office has held both minister- and official-led meetings with the third sector, although attendees noted that the invitee list for the more recent roundtables was large, limiting the scope for discussions about issues which disproportionately impact victims from marginalised groups. Although there are examples of local areas innovating in their approach to tackling VAWG, the Home Office has not had a mechanism for identifying and sharing good practice with other areas (paragraphs 2.15 to 2.18 and 3.5).

14 The Home Office does not know what effect the government's work is having on VAWG. The Home Office has been working to reduce VAWG since 2010, but the prevalence of sexual assault was higher in 2023-24 than 2009-10, while the prevalence of domestic abuse was lower. While the Home Office has undertaken some small pieces of evaluation, it did not allocate any of the funding dedicated to its VAWG work to evaluation. The Home Office developed a 'theory of change' for the Domestic Abuse Plan and retrospectively applied this to its VAWG Strategy. However, it has no plans to use this to evaluate the impact of the VAWG Strategy or Domestic Abuse Plan. The Home Office told us it would be difficult to attribute any changes to the VAWG Strategy due to the number of factors affecting VAWG (paragraphs 1.8, 1.11, 3.13 to 3.15 and Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 11).

15 The Home Office has made little progress developing measures to prevent VAWG. The VAWG Strategy and Domestic Abuse Plan aimed to increase confidence in the police and levels of reporting. However, stakeholders have raised concerns about the capacity that exists to manage increased demand. The criminal justice system is already under significant pressure and victim support services, including refuges, are unable to meet demand, underlining the importance of preventing VAWG. Most prevention activities to date have focused on reducing reoffending rather than avoiding initial offences. Departments leading prevention activities in the VAWG Strategy told us that their greatest focus was on supporting victims (paragraphs 3.9 to 3.11 and Figure 5).

16 The Home Office is conducting a review to improve its ability to tackle VAWG, in parallel with developing a new strategy, due in spring 2025. The review aims to identify gaps in data, improve understanding of what works to tackle VAWG, and gather insights into cross-government capability. The review will predominantly involve consolidating existing evidence from across the Home Office and wider government rather than conducting primary research. The Home Office intends to use the review's findings to inform a new theory of change to underpin a future strategy. Despite the review being due to complete in spring 2025, the scope of the review was still evolving in November 2024. The Home Office will need to ensure that the findings from the review are fully integrated with the development of a new strategy to enable the benefits of this work to be realised (paragraph 3.22 and Figure 13).

Conclusion

17 Violence against women and girls is a significant and growing problem, affecting one in 12 women and causing significant harm. The Home Office leads the government's efforts to address VAWG, but to date these efforts have not improved outcomes for the victims of these crimes or the safety of women and girls more widely. The Home Office is not currently leading an effective cross-government response. It has a limited understanding of the extent of resources devoted to addressing VAWG across government and the impact this is having. Without this knowledge, the Home Office cannot be confident that the government is doing the best it can to keep women and girls safe.

18 The new government has set an ambitious target to halve violence against women and girls within the next decade. To meet this ambition the Home Office will need to lead a coordinated, whole-system response that addresses the causes of VAWG. The Home Office's review of the existing evidence base could provide a foundation from which to develop the next strategy. But it will need to maintain a focus on continuous evaluation to ensure it can capture learning from local innovation and adapt its approach. The Home Office also needs to quickly establish the structures and incentives necessary to align all delivery partners behind the goal of reducing the significant harms caused by violence against women and girls.

Recommendations

19 Meeting the ambition to halve violence against women and girls will require strong cross-government leadership and the commitment of all departments that have a role in preventing and reducing VAWG. The Home Office, as the lead department for the Safer Streets mission and tackling violence against women and girls, should:

- a** establish a shared vision for how the government's target to halve violence against women and girls will be met, by:
 - agreeing a common definition of VAWG across government and policing and identifying the data that will be used to measure this; and
 - developing a system-level plan for halving VAWG that is informed by an evidence-based theory of change, places a greater emphasis on prevention, and is clear what all delivery partners must contribute.
- b** strengthen accountability for delivering against the government's target by:
 - establishing a cross-government team, based in the Home Office, to lead on the implementation of the new strategy;
 - reviewing existing governance structures and adapting these to align incentives and sharpen accountability for delivering; and
 - coordinating available funding for tackling VAWG, including through considering a joint spending review bid for the strategy.
- c** embed learning and evaluation through the new strategy by:
 - developing and embedding a long-term evaluation plan into the strategy backed by appropriate resources; and
 - encouraging local innovation, particularly on preventing VAWG, and learning from this to identify opportunities to scale up effective interventions.