



The potential of longitudinal data to inform domestic abuse policy:

a case study exploring the influence of the Millennium Cohort Study on the Domestic Abuse Act 2021

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Abstract

Domestic abuse affects millions of people every year in the UK and can have long-term impacts on those who experience and witness abuse. Research evidence has an important role to play in the development and implementation of policy and practice in efforts to tackle domestic abuse. As an important source of data on young people in the UK, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has been used to conduct research on domestic abuse, particularly the long-term consequences of children witnessing abuse. In this paper, we conduct a rapid review of the use of the MCS in domestic abuse research in the UK, and present a case study of the potential for such research to influence practice and policy. Overall, we found analysis of MCS had contributed to the literature on domestic abuse in the UK, particularly concerning the long-term impact of domestic abuse on children's wellbeing. In addition, research commissioned by Action for Children, a leading children's charity, was marshalled by charity and third sector organisations to advocate for young people and to influence parliamentary debate and decision making around the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. We identified key factors facilitating the use of research evidence in this case including institutional expertise, accessible and memorable research, and the role of wider political and social context. MCS continues to be a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers, including those tackling the long-term impact of domestic abuse on young people.

Keywords: domestic abuse; policy and practice; Millennium Cohort Study.

Introduction

Domestic abuse is an important and complex issue affecting millions of people every year in the UK (ONS, 2024). As well as the devastating impact domestic abuse can have on individuals and families, the Home Office has estimated that the social and economic costs for victims of domestic abuse is approximately £66 billion (Home Office, 2019). Research evidence has an important role to play in the development and implementation of policy and practice in efforts to tackle domestic abuse. Research can provide information on who is affected by domestic abuse, the consequences of experiencing it, and evidence best practice for support and prevention. Research on domestic abuse has been conducted using a wide variety of methodologies, including using longitudinal studies such as the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). MCS is a large nationally-representative birth cohort study of young people born around the Millennium. The study is co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK government and is available to researchers for secondary analysis. As an important source of data on young people in the UK, the MCS has been used to conduct important research on domestic abuse, particularly the long-term consequences of children witnessing abuse.

In this paper, we conduct a rapid review of the use of MCS in domestic abuse research in the UK, and present a case study of the potential for such research to influence practice and policy. We hope this paper will demonstrate the value of such large research resources and highlight facilitating factors in the relationship between research and policy and practice.

Methods

A protocol for the case study methods was published via the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/vzbd9/>).

Rapid Review

Search criteria

We searched Web of Science and PubMed using the following terms: (("millennium cohort" OR "millenium cohort" NOT "veteran" NOT "military" NOT "army") OR ("born

in 2000"AND "UK") OR ("MCS" AND "cohort" AND "UK")) AND ("domestic abuse" OR "intimate partner violence" OR "domestic violence" OR "intimate partner abuse"). Documents were screened for original analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study, and inclusion of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence/abuse as an exposure, outcome or key covariate of the analysis.

Case Study Methods and Analysis

Case study identification

This case study was identified as a candidate for further investigation by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies' Communications and Engagement team. Initial investigation indicated the case was both viable and of interest as per the criteria laid out in the protocol (<https://osf.io/vzbd9/>). As a result, further research was conducted (described below).

Stakeholder interviews

Key stakeholders, including Action for Children and the lead researchers, were consulted and short interviews conducted to establish order of events, actions, and relationships. These stakeholders were also asked to review the final case study to ensure accuracy and veracity.

Desk research

Relevant material was collated from a wide variety of sources. These included the UK Parliament website and Hansard, the UK government website, news sites, Google Scholar, Open Access UK (a platform which indexes lobby meetings with UK Government Ministers), and Overton (a platform which indexes policy documents). These sources were assessed for credibility and integrated into the timeline, mapping and document analysis steps.

Timeline

A timeline was generated using the desk research findings and interviews. Events, people, and documents were placed in chronological order to determine if a sequence could be established between the research and the hypothesised impact.

Mapping

A map of relevant citations was collated using the desk research findings. Documents were mapped in chronological order and a key produced to identify the source (e.g. academic paper, government document), whether original analysis was included in the document, and degrees of separation from original research.

Document analysis

Documents and sources were analysed to establish their purpose, origin and potential biases. In addition, where the research was cited we analysed the form of the citation. For example, whether the mention was simply a citation or whether the research formed part of a more substantial argument. More detail on the document analysis performed can be found in the protocol (<https://osf.io/vzbd9/>).

Rapid Review

Data and Variable Availability

At cohort member age 9 months, 3 years, 5 years, 7 years, 11 year, and 14 years, a question on intimate partner violence was fielded to all adult respondents who had a full-time resident spouse or partner in the self-completion portion of the survey. These respondents were largely the parents or guardians of the cohort member. Participants were asked: “People often use force in a relationship - grabbing, pushing, shaking, hitting, kicking etc. Has your <husband/partner/etc> ever used force on you for any reason?”. Options included “Yes”, “No”, or “Prefer not to say”. The first six sweeps also included questions on partnership quality and satisfaction.

Research Summary 2000-2024

We conducted a rapid review of the literature on domestic abuse conducted using the Millennium Cohort Study and identified 13 relevant records (Figure 1). The literature has been divided into five sections: socioeconomic and demographic patterning, pregnancy and infants, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), children’s health, and externalising behaviours in children.

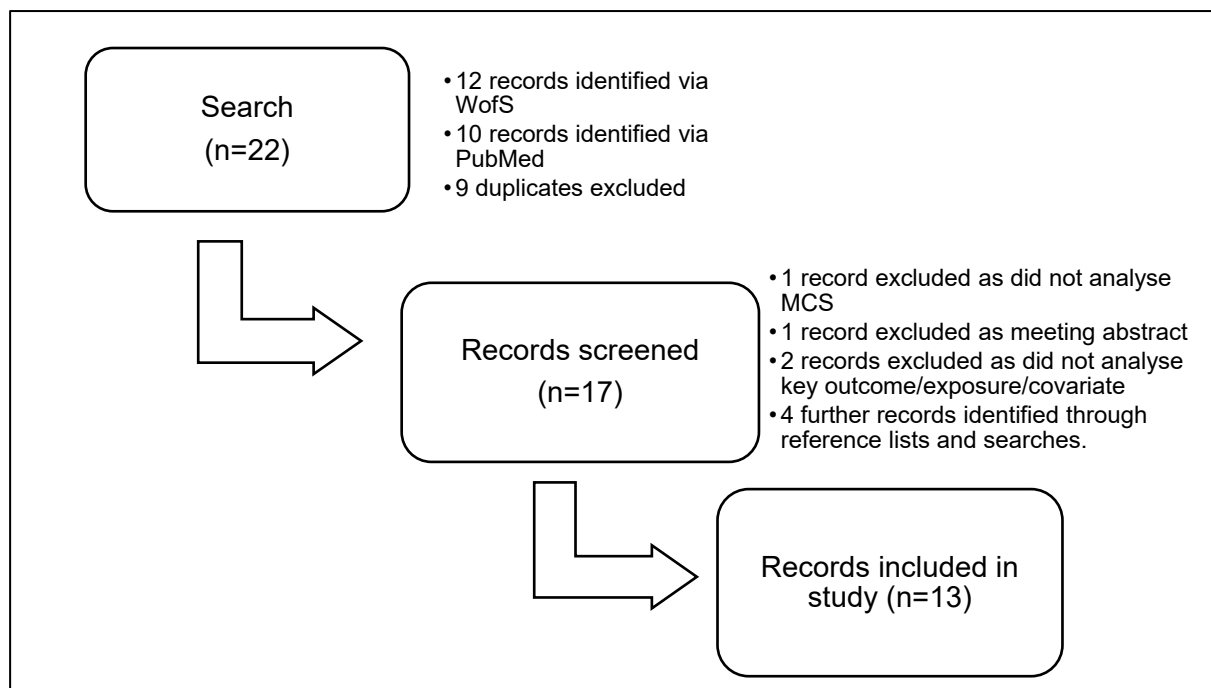


Figure 1: Exclusion graph

All studies used the measure of partner force outlined above to variously measure the distinct but related concepts of intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and domestic abuse. Domestic abuse campaigners advocate for the broader term “domestic abuse” as it incorporates a wide variety of abuse forms including emotional and financial. However, the findings below all employ a report of force used by the respondent’s partner or spouse as the exposure of interest. As a result, I will use the term “intimate partner violence” when referring to specific findings but “domestic abuse” when referring to the field as a whole.

Socioeconomic and demographic patterning

The Millennium Cohort Study is nationally representative and as a result is able to provide estimates of patterning of domestic abuse for those born between 2000-2 in the UK. For example, a 2022 study found around 3-4% of children surveyed in MCS were exposed to parental intimate partner violence with around 3.4% experiencing “persistent” parental intimate partner violence (Adjei *et al.*, 2022). Experiencing parental intimate partner violence appears to be socially patterned with reports more common in socially disadvantaged families (Straatmann *et al.*, 2020; Allen *et al.*, 2024).

Other researchers have explored potential differences by other demographic characteristics. For example, one study explored experiences of parental intimate

partner violence by adolescent sexual identity but found no significant differences (Chandrasekar et al., 2024).

Understanding the prevalence and social patterning of domestic abuse is important for identifying vulnerable groups and potential interventions.

Pregnancy and infants

The review identified three papers which examined intimate partner violence as a factor in outcomes for pregnant women (Pickett *et al.*, 2008; Pickett, Wilkinson and Wakschlag, 2009; Sumilo *et al.*, 2012). The researchers found that women who smoked during pregnancy and mothers with limiting long-standing illnesses were more likely to also report intimate partner violence.

In addition to findings in pregnant people, one paper found 9 month old infants whose mothers reported intimate partner violence were more likely to be distressed by new situations or experiences than their peers (Pickett *et al.*, 2008). This is significant as low tolerance of novelty in infants is linked to behavioural problems in later life (Pickett *et al.*, 2008).

These findings demonstrate the increased risk of intimate partner violence in some groups (i.e. women with limiting long-standing illness), as well the association between intimate partner violence and maternal and infant wellbeing.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The field of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is concerned with the consequences of experiences of neglect, violence, etc in childhood on later-life outcomes such as mental health. As experiences and witnessing of domestic violence and abuse are considered to be ACEs, the review identified a number of papers which disaggregated or explicitly discussed the consequences of intimate partner violence within an ACEs framework (Straatmann *et al.*, 2020; Adjei *et al.*, 2022, 2024; Karamanos and Khanolkar, 2023; Allen *et al.*, 2024; Chandrasekar *et al.*, 2024).

The majority of the literature was concerned with the impact of adverse experiences in childhood on adolescent mental health and behaviours. For example, a 2023 paper found mother's reporting of intimate partner violence when the child was aged between

3 and 11 was associated with mental ill-health and overweight/obesity comorbidity at age 14 (Karamanos and Khanolkar, 2023).

However, some researchers extended their research to explore the clustering and patterning of adversities including domestic abuse. One group of studies explored the impact of “persistent” exposure to intimate partner violence between 9 months and age 14 (Adjei *et al.*, 2022, 2024). They found that persistent exposure was associated with socioemotional behavioural problems, experimentation with alcohol and drugs, and low parental closeness/attachment at age 14 compared to those with low/no exposure to poverty and adversity (Adjei *et al.*, 2022, 2024). Conflict and perceived emotional support were also poorer but did not reach statistical significance (Adjei *et al.*, 2024). Both studies found similarly poor outcomes for persistent poverty, poor parental mental health and persistent parent alcohol use, although specific outcomes varied (Adjei *et al.*, 2022, 2024).

While this review is focused on the specific role of domestic abuse, one study conducted a latent class analysis looking at clustering of adversities and outcomes. They found at age 3, a group consisting of 3.5% of families were more likely to be experiencing intimate partner violence, poor parental mental health or drug use compared to all other families (Allen *et al.*, 2024). These “high adversity” families were younger, lower income, and more likely to rent than other families. Children in this group were also more likely to have poorer mental health outcomes at age 3 (Allen *et al.*, 2024).

The research demonstrates the importance of life-course approaches and the long-term impacts of intimate partner violence on children. This research also highlights the importance of understanding domestic abuse holistically and as existing within a syndemic with other adversities including poverty.

Children's health

As well as the poorer mental health and overweight/obesity outcomes suggested by the ACEs literature (Karamanos and Khanolkar, 2023; Allen *et al.*, 2024), other studies have examined the impact of parental intimate partner violence on mental and physical health in young people.

Children exposed to parental intimate partner violence were more likely to have hearing and respiratory conditions aged 5-11 than those who were not exposed (Jofre-Bonet, Rossello-Roig and Serra-Sastre, 2024). They were also more likely to have a long-standing illness and less likely to have “Excellent” general health (Jofre-Bonet, Rossello-Roig and Serra-Sastre, 2016, 2024). Children exposed to parental intimate partner violence were slightly less likely to receive recommended immunisations in the first year of life (Jofre-Bonet, Rossello-Roig and Serra-Sastre, 2024). These findings suggest parental intimate partner violence may be associated with quality of life and morbidity across the life course.

Externalising behaviours in children

Externalising behaviours is a term from psychology to describe behaviours including aggression, hyper-activity-inattention, conduct problems, peer problems, and disruptive and risk-taking behaviours. Many researchers are interested on the impact of experiencing parental domestic violence on adolescent externalising behaviours. For example, one study found socioemotional behavioural problems were more common among young people at age 14 exposed to parental intimate partner violence between 9 months and age 14 (Adjei *et al.*, 2022).

While the majority of research in this review examined outcomes at age 14, a group of papers looked at the impact of parental intimate partner violence experienced between 9 months and age 11 on externalising behaviours at age 17 (Villadsen and Fitzsimons, 2023; Maras *et al.*, 2024). Researchers found experiencing parental intimate partner violence in childhood was significantly predictive of carrying or using a weapon and cyber offending¹ at age 17 (Villadsen and Fitzsimons, 2023; Maras *et al.*, 2024).

Summary

Overall, a rapid review of the literature on domestic abuse conducted using the Millennium Cohort Study identified 13 publications which meet the inclusion requirements. The publications provided information on the social patterning of

¹ Cyber offending was determined by responses to questions about accessing another’s internet-enabled device without permission or deliberately sending harmful software/malware to others.

intimate partner violence, including its short- and long-term impact on the health and wellbeing of exposed pregnant people and children.

Much of the identified research around domestic abuse using MCS was published since 2021 (Adjei *et al.*, 2022, 2024; Karamanos and Khanolkar, 2023; Villadsen and Fitzsimons, 2023; Allen *et al.*, 2024; Chandrasekar *et al.*, 2024; Jofre-Bonet, Rossello-Roig and Serra-Sastre, 2024; Maras *et al.*, 2024). This likely reflects a rise in interest following the COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in a national conversation around domestic abuse, and perhaps the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act.

A large proportion of the research was grounded in an ACEs framework which emphasises the longitudinal and lifecourse consequences of adverse experiences in childhood. This reflects both interest in the ACEs field and the data structure of MCS as a longitudinal birth cohort.

However, the review has highlighted a number of limitations in the literature. For example, some researchers only considered intimate partner violence experienced by mothers which may have limited understanding of all those experiencing intimate partner violence. Importantly, research using MCS has been unable to capture more complex aspects of domestic abuse such as emotional or financial abuse. All identified papers used a measure of intimate partner violence which represents only one dimension of domestic abuse. The measure itself is also limited as it does not give any indication of severity or frequency of the use of force by a partner.

In addition, although many of the studies utilise longitudinal analyses, it remains difficult to establish the causality of the complex relationship between exposure to domestic abuse and the outcomes of interest. Likewise, many of the outcomes in young people are reported by their parents or guardians. For example, parents experiencing intimate partner violence may perceive their child to have more behavioural problems.

Nonetheless, research using MCS has provided insight into the longitudinal impacts of domestic abuse. The research has underlined childhood as a key period and the impact of persistent exposure to domestic abuse on young people.

Case study

As demonstrated in the rapid review, the MCS has generated findings around the effects of exposure to domestic violence on children's lives. However, our concern here is not only in documenting the range of findings, but also in understanding the potential of these findings to influence policy and practice. The case study below hones in on one piece of research to unpick how longitudinal evidence can be mobilised to inform policy in the area, namely the impact of research using MCS on the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

As of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the UK government defines domestic abuse as abusive behaviour taking place between persons aged 16 or over who are "personally connected" (Home Office, 2024). Abuse directed at a person under the age of 16 is considered child abuse but witnessing or being in a household where domestic abuse takes place has been recognised to impact children (Home Office, 2024). The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was the first time that children were recognised as victims of domestic abuse. This change in legislation resulted from an amendment to the Act and had long been advocated for by children and families charities. During the debate, research using the Millennium Cohort Study was cited by MPs and peers. This case study will describe and evaluate the influence of the research on the debate.

We will first describe the research project, then the progress of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 through parliament. Finally, we will explore the consequences of the Act and briefly outline other uses of the research in policy and practice. This case study covers the period July 2018 to March 2023.

The research

Background

The Children's Commissioner estimates that in 2019-2020 there were 831,000 children in England living in households that reported domestic abuse (Children's Commissioner, 2020). According to data from 2013/14, of the children living in households with high risk domestic abuse, a quarter were under three-years-old (SafeLives, 2015).

Anecdotal experience of those working with families experiencing domestic abuse, including charities such as Action for Children, had indicated a long-term negative impact on children of witnessing abuse (stakeholder interview). This was supported by theoretical and analytical work from the USA and internationally, however there was little to no recent robust evidence quantifying this in the UK (stakeholder interview, Holt, Buckley and Whelan, 2008; Meltzer *et al.*, 2009; Fong, Hawes and Allen, 2019; James, 2020; SafeLives, 2023).

In 2018, Action for Children, a leading UK children's charity, commissioned researchers at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) at University College London to conduct research exploring the consequences of early experiences using the Millennium Cohort Study. CLS was approached in recognition of the quality of research produced by the Centre, as well as the high regard in which MCS is held by the sector (stakeholder interview). The project was designed to explore the relationship between the quality and nature of family and social relationships and the home environment in early childhood, and mental health and wellbeing in adolescence.

The research was conducted by Dr Aase Villadsen, Prof. Praveetha Patalay and Prof. Emla Fitzsimons at CLS.

Methods

The project used the Millennium Cohort Study, a UK-wide birth cohort study and longitudinal ESRC-funded dataset of more than 19,000 individuals born at the start of the twenty-first century (Connelly and Platt, 2014).

A range of family environmental aspects were measured in early childhood when children were 3 years old, including intimate partner violence which was reported by both parents (Action for Children, 2019b). Several outcomes at age 14 were reported by adolescents themselves (depressive symptoms, self-harm, wellbeing, self-esteem, and antisocial behaviour), or by parents (emotional problems and conduct problems). The association between the early childhood family environment and each adolescent outcome was examined in multivariate regression models that included a substantial number of socioeconomic, demographic and other potentially confounding variables.

Missing data, mainly due to study attrition over time, were dealt with using multiple imputation. Sampling design and attrition weights were also used. Together, these methods help ensure that findings are nationally representative of adolescents born in the UK around the millennium.

Findings

The analysis was published in Action for Children's *Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse* report and provided evidence of the association between witnessing domestic abuse and children's outcomes (Action for Children, 2019b). Key findings were:

- At age 14, children whose parents reported experiencing domestic violence when the children were aged 3 reported 30 per cent higher than average antisocial behaviours.
- At age 14, parents who had previously reported experiencing domestic violence reported 13 per cent higher than average conduct problems for their children.

Within MCS, the definition of conduct problems in adolescents includes fighting with or bullying other children and regularly losing their tempers. Antisocial behaviours include committing physical assault, shoplifting, and being noisy or rude in a public place. These are classified as externalising or aggressive behaviours. There was no significant association between domestic violence and the other, largely internalising (e.g. symptoms of anxiety and depression), adolescent outcomes examined. The fact that associations were found just for externalising behaviours indicate that aggressive behaviours that children witness when growing up may lead to an intergenerational transmission of violence.

Previously the relationship between witnessing domestic abuse in early life and wellbeing in adolescence in the UK was largely anecdotal, however the research broke ground in providing quantitative evidence using a large nationally-representative longitudinal study. As seen in the literature review, research on the long-term impacts of witnessing domestic abuse on children using MCS has since expanded rapidly.

The journey to impact

“Patchy, piecemeal and precarious” report

The research was initially commissioned to coincide with Action for Children’s “Choose Childhood” campaign launched in July 2019 on the charity’s 150th anniversary (stakeholder interview, Action for Children, 2021). However, following the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Bill to parliament in mid-2019, the decision was made to hold back the findings for a more targeted campaign on domestic abuse (stakeholder interview).

The report was written by Action for Children over summer 2019 using the MCS research and research from the University of Stirling on support service availability (Action for Children, 2019b). The CLS researchers provided feedback throughout the process to ensure their findings were communicated accurately and in-line with scientific best practice (stakeholder interviews). In addition, Action for Children encouraged the CLS researchers to translate the findings from coefficients to percentages so they could be more widely interpreted (stakeholder interviews).

In November 2019, the Action for Children report *Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse* was published on the charity’s website and shared via social media (Action for Children, 2019b, 2019a).

The Domestic Abuse Bill

The Domestic Abuse Bill was a significant commitment of the UK Conservative Government between 2019 and 2021. Following a 2018 consultation, the Bill was introduced to Parliament in July 2019 under Prime Minister Theresa May (Ministry of Justice, 2018; Allen, Lipscombe and Wilson, 2024). However, as a result of the suspension of Parliament for the December 2019 general election, the Bill was dropped.

However, the Conservative government’s continued commitment to the Bill was included in the party manifesto and, after the election, announced during the Queen’s Speech in December 2019 (Allen, Lipscombe and Wilson, 2024). Under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, an amended Bill was re-introduced to the House of Commons by Victoria Atkins MP, Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office in March 2020 (Hansard, 2020c).

At the First Reading (Commons) of the Bill, Liz Twist MP (Lab.) cited the MCS analysis (Hansard, 2020a):

“I have already mentioned that domestic abuse can result in long-lasting impacts on a child’s health, development, ability to learn and wellbeing. That is on top of increased risks of criminal behaviour and interpersonal difficulties in future intimate relationships and friendships. *Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study shows that children whose parents reported experiencing domestic violence when children were aged three reported 30% higher than average antisocial behaviours at age 14, a finding that should be seen in the context of the trauma suffered by children who are affected by domestic abuse.*”
(emphasis added)

At the Second Reading (Commons) of the bill in April 2020, multiple MPs from both Labour and the Conservatives mentioned the importance of including children in the bill, including specific mentions of the work of Action for Children (Hansard, 2020d).

In June 2020, the bill entered the committee stage. Action for Children cited the MCS findings in their written evidence to the Committee to support their recommendation that the statutory definition of domestic abuse be amended so that children who experience domestic abuse are recognised as victims in their own right (Action for Children, 2020). At the Third Sitting of the Committee Jess Phillips MP (Lab.) put forward amendment 50 which proposed that children were recognised within the statutory definition of domestic abuse (Hansard, 2020e). The amendment was worded exactly as had been submitted by Action for Children (Action for Children, 2020) and specific mention was made of the MCS findings in Phillips’ statement (Hansard, 2020e):

“The consequences of these childhood experiences are well known, ranging from brain development being negatively affected and cognitive and sensory growth being impacted, through to people developing personality and behavioural problems, depression and suicidal tendencies. *Children who experience domestic violence from the age of three onwards reported 30% higher than average antisocial behaviours at the age of 14 [...] The children*

who have suffered report 13% higher than average conduct problems, such as fighting with their peers.” (emphasis added)

Action for Children, who had met with ministers throughout 2019 (Open Access UK, 2019a, 2019b), continued their work behind the scenes discussing the proposed change with MPs and Members of the Lords in 2020 (Open Access UK, 2020c, 2020b, 2020a). Their work, supported by the MCS findings, included a roundtable with the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, and advocacy in the media (stakeholder interview). According to those working on the bill for Action for Children at the time (stakeholder statement):

“having clear, new evidence, changed the direction of key conversations with Ministers and was crucial to the campaign’s success.”

At the Third Sitting Liz Twist MP (Lab.) mentioned Action for Children’s influence on the debate (Hansard, 2020e):

“Last Friday, the Minister kindly met me virtually, along with the children’s charities Action for Children, the NSPCC and the Children’s Society. We specifically discussed including children in the definition. [...] The charities told the Minister that they and the wider sector were agreed in their wish [...] to support this amendment to include a wider description of children.”

Following the completion of the Committee Stage debates, Victoria Atkins MP (Con.) and Alex Chalk MP (Con.) wrote to Jess Phillips MP (Lab.) to confirm that Government had accepted amendment 50, and had changed the proposed statutory definition of a victim of domestic abuse to include children (Home Office, 2020). At the report stage and Third Reading (Commons), Victoria Atkins MP (Con.) announced the new clause 15 which was welcomed by MPs from across the political spectrum (Hansard, 2020b).

The next day, the Bill moved to the Lords where it was debated and in committee between July 2020 and March 2021. At the sixth sitting of the House of Lords Committee Stage, Baroness Meacher cited the MCS findings in her introduction of Amendment 180, which sought specific support for children who witness domestic abuse (Hansard, 2021). However the amendment was not moved.

Finally, in April 2021 the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 received Royal Assent and was passed into law.

After the Domestic Abuse Act 2021

The passing of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 with the inclusion of children in the definition of victims of domestic abuse had a number of wide-reaching consequences (see Figure 2).

Firstly, the inclusion of children in the definition represented a conceptual shift in who and what is considered by services responding to domestic abuse. As Nickie Aiken MP (Con.), a member of the Domestic Abuse Bill committee, commented in an article for Conservative Home (Aiken, 2021):

“Working closely with charities like Action for Children and Women’s Aid, we were all able to change the conversation so the needs of children are not overlooked [...] recognising [children] for what they are – victims, and not just witnesses [...] Now their perspectives, their experiences, and their need for support will have to be taken into account by the frontline professionals working with their families.”

Secondly, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 amendment had an impact on national policy and practice. Children are now explicitly included in the Statutory Guidance on Domestic Abuse and in 2023 the Home Office allocated over £17 million to programmes across England and Wales to support children impacted by domestic abuse (Home Office, 2022, 2023).

The move towards targeted and explicit support for children is demonstrated by regional Safeguarding Children Partnerships and local authorities which in turn have used the Action for Children report and MCS research as a resource (Leeds SCP, 2020; Coventry Council, 2021; Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2021; Doncaster SCP, 2022; West Berkshire Council, 2022).

As well as additional Home Office funding, the new statutory requirement has influenced subsequent activity in government (Home Office, 2023). For example, Mims Davis MP (Con.) drew attention to the widening of scope facilitated by the Domestic

Abuse Act 2021 in the March 2023 debate on the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act 2023 (Hansard, 2023):

“The Domestic Abuse Act brings children into scope, which is incredibly important. We know that abuse affects not just partners but whole families.”

Likewise, the amendment has been referenced by Barnardo’s and Action for Children and their coalition in their written evidence submissions to the Select Committee on the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 to improve provisions for children (Barnardo’s, 2022; NSPCC et al., 2022).

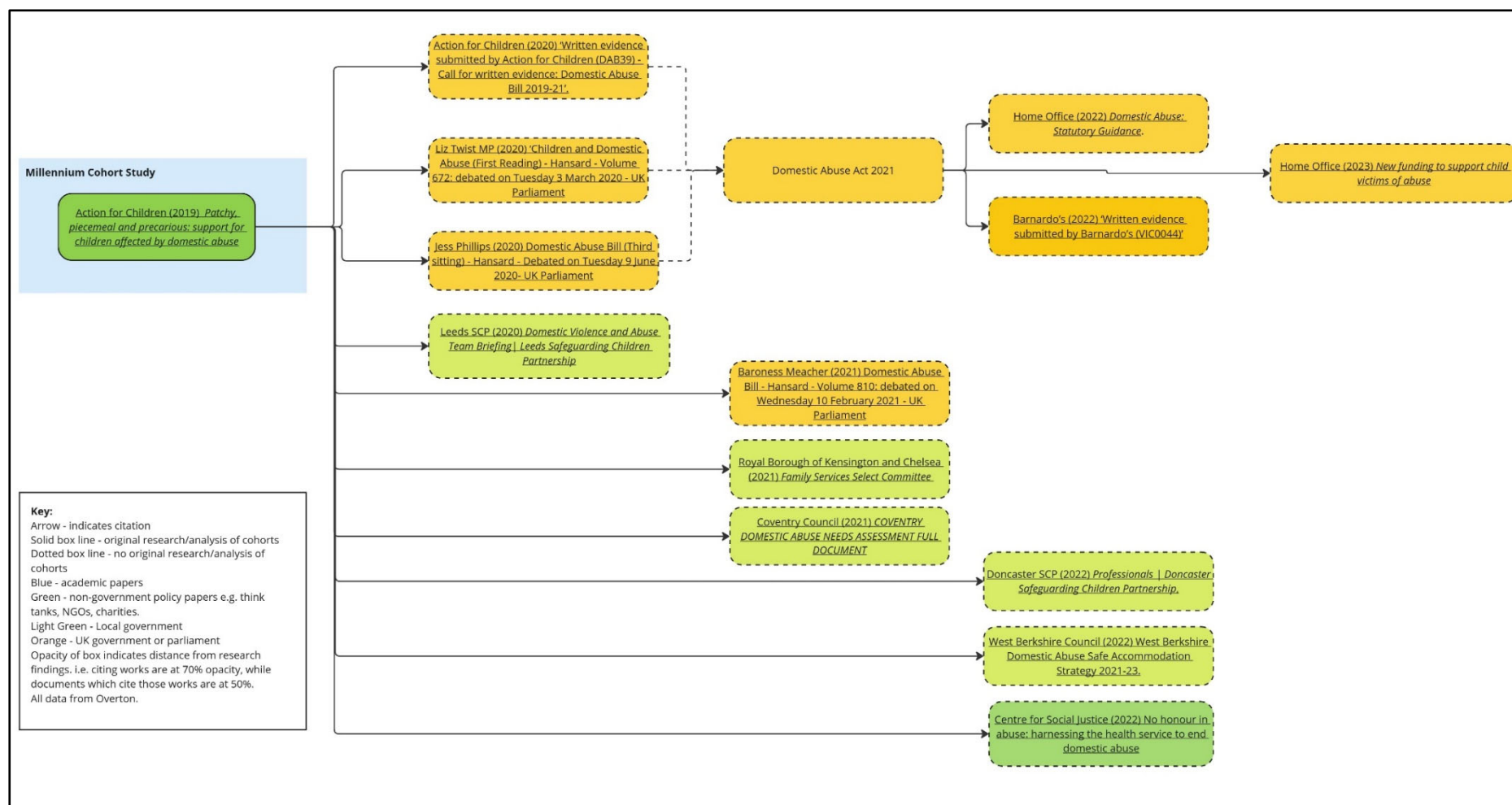


Figure 2: Citation Map

Discussion

As the case study shows, research using MCS was commissioned and then leveraged by Action for Children in their campaign to influence the Domestic Abuse Bill as it journeyed through parliament. The charity and their partners were successful in advocating for an amendment to the bill specifically identifying children as victims of domestic abuse. In the following section, we will discuss factors which facilitated this change and evaluate the role of research. This section is summarised in Box 1 for easy reference.

Action for Children

Action for Children, a leading UK children's charity, were a key player in the progress of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 through parliament. The charity has existed since the late 19th century and has a long legacy of campaigning alongside their service provision. As a result, they are a respected voice in children's issues and have extensive experience in advocacy.

Their expertise is particularly evident in the decision to release the MCS domestic abuse findings in a targeted report to coincide with the Domestic Abuse Bill's journey through parliament. While the effectiveness of the timing was weakened by the closure of parliament for the election in late 2019, the report was still recent by the time the Bill was reintroduced in March 2020.

The report itself is designed to be accessible to policy audiences, as well as the public. While relatively long at 58 pages, the report is written in clear plain language with summaries and figures throughout. The report contains testimonies from those affected by domestic abuse, as well as the quantitative research findings. Crucially for the MCS research, findings were summarised into two key memorable percentages (13% and 30%) and highlighted in graphics to aid accessibility. The translation of the research into percentages by the researchers was requested by Action for Children to aid interpretation and was likely instrumental in their use in debates (stakeholder interview).

While the report was responsively timed, the charity's advocacy work was also persistent and long-term. For example, Action for Children, alongside other children's

charities, met regularly with Ministers, MPs, and peers throughout 2019 and 2020 to petition for children as the bill passed through parliament. As well as using the report and findings in those meetings, the coalition of women and children's charities, including Action for Children, also cited the research in written submissions to Bill committees ensuring the findings were included in evidence gathering exercises (stakeholder interview). It is likely that the 13% and 30% figures were picked up from these efforts by MPs and peers as the numbers and findings appear in the committee and debate discussions that followed.

Overall, Action for Children were deliberate in their use of the MCS findings in their advocacy work on the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. They used the findings to underline their experience as service providers and to support qualitative testimonials (stakeholder interview). The presentation of the research and report was likely instrumental in the wide uptake of the findings by MPs and peers.

The UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Millennium Cohort Study

The source of the research itself also contributed to its uptake amongst MPs and others associated with the Bill.

The research was conducted at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) which is housed at University College London (UCL). The university is a widely recognised Russell Group institution with a reputation for high-quality research nationally and internationally. CLS itself is influential and well-regarded in the field of longitudinal studies, and hosts a number of well-known cohort studies alongside the Millennium Cohort Study. The researchers themselves were experienced, with particular expertise in the cohort and children's mental health and development. The team included the principal investigator of MCS, Prof. Emla Fitzsimons, adding further authority to the findings. As a result, the research was seen to come from a source associated with high-quality and reliable research.

Similarly, the Millennium Cohort Study is the largest study of young people in the UK and has contributed to scientific research across multiple disciplines. For example, the study has been used in over 1,600 research publications since its inception (CLS, 2025). The dataset is uniquely suited to answering research questions such as those considered above. MCS is well-recognised and well-regarded by those working with

children and families (stakeholder interview) and is nationally-representative so is able to speak to population-level national trends and patterns. Likewise, as a birth cohort, the study is able to examine longitudinal patterns and the lifecourse making it a unique resource for researchers interested in the long-term effects of childhood experiences. MCS captures the social and emotional wellbeing of young people and their families across time, as well as important topics such as domestic abuse. Additionally, the data are structured in a way which allows for robust quantitative analyses such as the multivariate regression models used in the research. These factors mean the researchers were able to produce robust, nationally-representative, longitudinal findings on the impact of domestic abuse from a highly-regarded source. Together the institution and the study added weight and authority to the findings which likely facilitated their introduction into debates and evidence submissions.

Wider context

While the activities and context discussed above were likely instrumental to the uptake and use of the Millennium Cohort Study findings in the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act debates and discussions, it is important to consider the wider context of the Act.

As described in the case study, the Domestic Abuse Bill was a 2019 general election commitment of the Conservative party which they introduced and supported when in government. As a result, the bill had substantial political will behind it and, as can be seen from the debates, significant cross-party support. While the original bill did not include children under its definition of victims of domestic abuse, the amendment introduced by Jess Phillips MP (Lab.) also had cross-party support and was included in the final wording. While the MCS findings and Action for Children report were cited in the discussion of this amendment, it is unclear the extent to which the findings were a decisive factor in the debate.

In addition to the existing support for the bill and amendment, the entire passage of the Domestic Abuse Bill through parliament took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which began in early 2020. Due to subsequent restrictions and lockdowns, the majority of people were confined to their homes for many months with only short periods of time allowed outside. COVID-19 restrictions remained in place throughout 2020 and into 2021. Between April 2020 and March 2021, the NSPCC reported that calls to their helpline about domestic abuse increased by a third compared to the same period in

2019/20 (NSPCC, 2021). This increase in demand for support was also experienced by charities and support organisations, as well as the police and fire services (ONS, 2020). As a result, both government and public attention were drawn to the issue of domestic abuse, including the consequences for children in the household. The Domestic Abuse Bill was debated against this backdrop of clear evidence of need and the broad support for measures tackling domestic abuse.

The existing political will and the increased visibility of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 restrictions resulted in a wider context for the Domestic Abuse Act and amendments which facilitated their uptake across parliament and passing into law.

Further reflections

As discussed, the research was published to coincide with the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Bill to Parliament. The research was rapidly taken up by MPs and other stakeholders and so the time from publication to influence was very short. However, while a rapid route to impact for the researchers and Action for Children, from the perspective of the Millennium Cohort Study dataset the case study represents over a decade of work. While the research occurred in 2019, the analysis made use of data from MCS sweeps at age 3 (collected in 2003/05) and age 14 (collected in 2015/16). As a result, the case presented above represents a time gap of at least 5 to 6 years between data collection and the policy change. This reflects the longer timescales of longitudinal and birth cohort studies, and the specific challenges of capturing and evaluating impact resulting from those studies (Bridger Staatz, Tabor and Kneale, under review)

In addition, it is likely too early to tell the real impact of the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act, and specifically the inclusion of children under the definition of victims. As described above, the change represented a conceptual shift in how children are considered in cases of domestic abuse, and could translate into shifts in service and support for children in such situations. While the change was celebrated as a victory by families and children's charity groups, there was also a sense that more could have been done (stakeholder interview). For example, charities noted the lack of specific commitment to improving support provision for children effected by domestic abuse (NSPCC *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, the Act represents a shift in the UK's response to domestic abuse

and expanded support and provisions in areas such as housing and health (Women's Aid, 2024).

Summary

The case study and discussion above have aimed to evaluate a link between the findings on the impact of domestic abuse on children in MCS published by Action for Children and the inclusion of an amendment including children as victims of domestic abuse in the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act. While temporally linked, it remains unclear if a causal link can be established.

We have evidence that the 13% and 30% figures from the MCS analysis received multiple specific mentions by MPs and in the Lords in debates and committee meetings. We have discussed a number of factors which may have facilitated the uptake of the MCS findings by MPs, peers and officials during the passage of the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act. Namely, that advocates at Action for Children shared the published findings with numerous individuals and groups involved in the process through presentations and sharing of their report. In addition, the research institution, charity, and dataset of origin are all widely held in high-regard and considered to produce high-quality evidence. Likewise, the research was recent, and presented in an accessible and memorable form by Action for Children. All of these factors contributed to the selection and appearance of MCS findings in the Bill debates and discussions.

However, the amendment, and the bill as a whole, had cross-party support and political will behind it. This is especially evident as an amendment proposed by a Labour MP, Jess Phillips, following a landslide victory for the Conservative government. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic also raised public interest in the bill, including the consequences for children witnessing abuse. Likewise, Action for Children and its partners had been calling for explicit recognition and provision for children with the amendment testament to their long-term advocacy.

Nonetheless, while not wholly responsible, the MCS research provided crucial and timely evidence to policy-makers that facilitated the amendment of a transformative piece of legislation.

Conclusion

Overall, we have shown the value of research conducted using the Millennium Cohort Study to provide evidence on the impact of domestic abuse, particularly on children. As shown in the case study, this evidence has been marshalled by charity and third sector organisations to advocate for young people and to influence parliamentary debate and decision making. While a diversity of evidence is essential to inform good policy, we have here highlighted the unique contributions of longitudinal data such as MCS. The dataset continues to be a resource for researchers and policy makers and to support high-quality research into the long-term impact of domestic abuse on young people.

Limitations: while all effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and validity of the evidence included in our analysis, the author may have missed or misinterpreted evidence in the collation of the case study. In addition, we were not able to speak to all stakeholders involved in the case, and information may be lost due to the time period passed since the events described. Nonetheless, it is hoped the methods described here expand the methodology employed to construct case studies for describing research impact.

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Box 1: Facilitating factors

- Action for Children is a high-profile, well-respected children's charity which engages extensively with other charities, Parliament and the government.
- UCL and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies are well-regarded institutions known nationally and internationally for high-quality research.
- The Millennium Cohort Study is an internationally known birth cohort which is held in high regard by those working in advocacy for families and children.
- The Millennium Cohort Study is a nationally-representative, longitudinal study of young people and therefore uniquely suited for studying the impact of domestic abuse across the lifecourse.
- Research was presented in memorable and simple figures i.e. 30% and 13%.
- Research was published in an open-access, engaging, and accessible report on Action for Children's website.
- Issue had widespread parliamentary support and political will, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The release of the report in late 2019 was timed to coincide with the re-entry of the Domestic Abuse Bill to Parliament in early 2020.
- Figures were used by Action for Children in meetings and presentations to MPs and Lords before, during, and after Parliamentary information gathering exercises such as the Select Committee submissions.

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