



# ON THE SIDELINES

The Economic and Personal Cost of Childhood Exposure to  
**Domestic Violence**



## “Domestic abuse is a public health crisis,

with 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men experiencing domestic abuse in their lifetime. However, the millions of children who are exposed to domestic abuse in their homes remain overlooked, considered merely “witnesses” to the abuse rather than victims themselves.

At Hestia we know that the implications for these children can be catastrophic and last a lifetime. Our front-line case workers have told us devastating stories that reveal the immediate cost to children. One 12-year-old boy, living at a refuge in South London, was unable to go to school locally and had to travel through two boroughs to return to his school. He has since been groomed by gang members on his journey to school.

This analysis from Pro Bono Economics shines an important light on the huge personal cost to children – and the £1.4bn economic cost to the taxpayer as a consequence. Yet it is only the tip of the iceberg. There is so little research in this area that the economists have only been able to look at children who have been exposed to severe violence and gone on to develop behavioural disorders.

It does not include the fact that we know that domestic abuse is one of the Adverse Childhood Experiences

“Throughout my time as Chairman at Pro Bono Economics my priority has been to see us engage with different strands of work that showcase the value in pursuing greater levels of societal well-being. More action on domestic abuse is a necessary but alas, not a sufficient precondition if we in the UK are to raise our collective performance here.

The gravity of this issue however is clear. When children are exposed to domestic abuse, they suffer in the short, medium and long-term. As a society we have a moral imperative to ensure protection from the immediate risk of such trauma but also provide support whenever – unfortunately – such exposure should occur.

The justification for action however extends beyond core values. In the long-run the cost to the taxpayer of supporting children who have experienced domestic violence is significant. Current estimates suggest this stands at somewhere between £500 million and £1.4 billion when providing for those that have suffered, up until the age of 28.

While these numbers are striking there is always a need for more robust evidence with which we can enhance our understanding of such issues, from causes

that limits not only people’s chances of getting a job, but also shortens their life expectancy. It has not been able to look at the inter-generational issues (although Hestia research last year found that over half of those who had experienced domestic abuse as an adult had also experienced it as a child). It does not take into account children who have been exposed to other types of abuse, such as coercive control. Nor those children who might internalise their trauma or be impacted by the practical realities of missing out on school or dropping to the bottom of NHS waiting lists when they move homes.

It is for this reason that we have put children at the heart of our work with the UK Says No More campaign. We hope these initial findings will not only ensure more research is done, but also that urgent action is taken by policy makers to focus on these children and ensure they get the support they need to recover from their trauma.”



**Terrie Alafat, Chair, Hestia**

through to effects and solutions. Armed with such information we can better address these concerning social trends. If the next spending review is to make a radical difference it needs to react to evidence like this to redirect spending towards prevention rather than cure.

This report therefore represents an extremely valuable contribution to our current understanding of the scourge of domestic abuse and a timely one at that, given the current salience of this issue within Westminster.

**I therefore commend  
all those involved  
in the preparation  
of this thought-  
provoking report.”**



**Lord O'Donnell, Chair, Pro Bono Economics**

Hestia commissioned Pro Bono Economics to explore the long-run cost to UK taxpayers from the additional use of public services by children that have been exposed to domestic violence.

## What did we find?

The number of children living in the UK that have witnessed severe domestic violence during their lifetime is around:

**500,000**

This exposure to domestic violence could increase the number of children with conduct or hyperactivity disorders by:

**35,000 to 100,000**

The long-run cost to the taxpayer of supporting these children to the age of 28, is potentially in the range of:

**£0.5 to £1.4 billion**

This is equivalent to a cost to the taxpayer per child exposed to domestic violence of:

**£1,000 to £2,900**

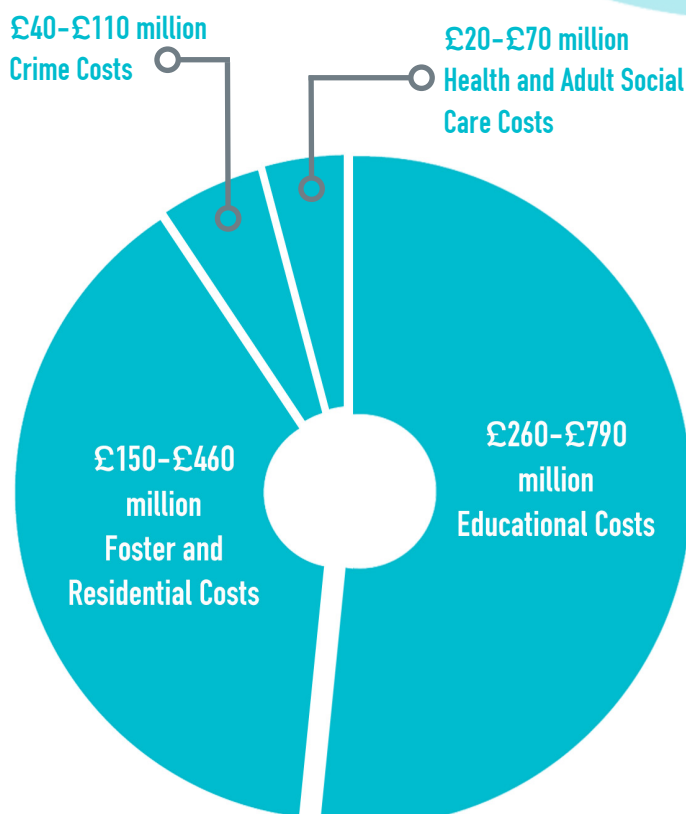
“While these numbers are striking there is a need for more robust evidence with which we can enhance our understanding of such issues”

Lord O'Donnell

## What does this mean?

The damage to children's mental health from exposure to domestic violence could potentially result in a significant increase in the cost of public services. This highlights the need for access to effective mental health support to help these children and mitigate the long-run cost to society.

Our study has also highlighted the need to invest in the evidence base on the impacts of childhood exposure to domestic violence. The Home Office's own study “The economic and social costs of domestic abuse” highlighted the lack of good quality longitudinal studies in this area. We believe that government support for building this kind of evidence is critical to tackling these difficult issues in the longer term.



**Total costs**  
**£480-£1,400 million**

## Michelle's\* story

When I first met Jenny, she was very sweet. She was complimentary and caring towards me and my two-year-old son, Michael. I thought I was the luckiest person to have met someone who wanted to help me raise my child.

After six months, our relationship changed. I didn't recognise it at first. We argued and shouted at each other more; she started drinking during the week. It came to a head one Christmas when she flew into a rage in front of my son, trashing the house completely.

I didn't want to admit that anything was wrong. She would always apologise and buy us gifts to say sorry. She told me her behaviour would change and I believed her. It was all lies.

Before long, I was finding myself having to defend her behaviour to my friends, even when she physically attacked me in the pub in front of them. I brushed it all aside and thought Michael was too young to know what was going on. I didn't realise how much abuse my child was seeing.

One day, when Michael was seven-years-old, I went to the gym and Jenny looked after him. When I came back, I noticed a mark on his eye.

The next day, I got a call from his school. His eye had bruised and it was black and blue. When I got to the school, a police officer and social care worker were present. I broke down, telling them about Jenny's abuse. A doctor said it looked like he had been punched.

I never wanted to see her again. Our relationship was over, and she moved out immediately. That week, Michael slept in my bed. He didn't want to leave my side. One night, he took a knife from the kitchen and put it under his pillow, saying it was to protect himself from her.

His behaviour became challenging. He would pick fights at school and was rude to teachers. He was removed from class, distanced himself from his friends and started having 1-2-1 sessions with his teachers.

Eventually, his behaviour became so bad that he was expelled.

I had no idea what to do. I couldn't home-school him and I couldn't afford a private teacher. He had an appointment with a child and adolescent mental health service and was diagnosed with Complex Trauma. I didn't think the abusive behaviour he witnessed at such a young age could have such an impact. Following this, he was given an Education, Health and Care plan and gained a place at a special education needs school.

Michael is now 11 and has been at his new school for two years. I can see improvements in his behaviour but it's taken a long time. He doesn't talk about Jenny anymore and our relationship is getting stronger.

I thought that keeping him in his room when Jenny was violent was enough to protect him, but children really do see and understand everything.





## Sumaya's\* story

I arrived in one of Hestia's domestic abuse refuges just before Christmas a couple of years ago with my daughter, Azra.

We'd fled domestic abuse by Azra's father. I met him at university and we married shortly after. At first everything seemed OK. He was a little possessive and controlling, but at the time I thought he had reason to be.

The years went by and I slowly lost contact with my family, becoming more and more isolated. When I became pregnant he refused to let me see my parents and when Azra was born it got worse. I lost my friends. I wasn't allowed out of the house alone, unless it was to take Azra to nursery.

It was the nursery staff who picked up on the delay in Azra's speech development and they told me that she needed to see a speech therapist. I managed to get her referred and she was put on a waiting list.

The abuse continued to escalate and both the police and social services became involved. I was told to leave my husband and find a refuge, otherwise I would risk having my daughter taken away.

I took the leap of faith. I contacted a Hestia refuge and within 24 hours I was there.

I registered with a new GP and waited for Azra to get a speech therapy appointment. After six months of living in the refuge, we were still waiting. Azra had turned five and I was preparing for us to leave the house, but there were no housing options available for us in that local area.

The window of opportunity to treat her speech development was running out and I really didn't know what to do next. Moving borough would mean a home for us, but it also meant a new waiting list and starting again with trying to get Azra to see a specialist.

Knowing that our situation, as a result of the abuse we experienced, could affect Azra for the rest of her life made my heart break. I feel let down and I constantly worry for Azra. I know that if the system was different, she could have had the professional support she so desperately needed.

\*all names have been changed to protect the identity of those involved

# How were these impacts estimated?

Our analysis focuses on a chain of evidence that links exposure to domestic violence in childhood to the prevalence of conduct disorders and hyperactivity disorders and the associated additional cost of public service usage. Our approach comprises four key steps:

## STEP 1

We estimate the number of children in the UK today that have been exposed to domestic violence based on an NSPCC survey and ONS population data.

## STEP 2

We establish a baseline prevalence of conduct and hyperactivity disorders using data from the 2017 NHS Digital survey.

## STEP 3

We estimate the increase in the prevalence of conduct and attention disorders as a result of exposure to severe domestic violence based on academic literature.

## STEP 4

We estimate the long-run cost to the government from this increased prevalence of childhood disorders drawing on academic studies.

# What are the limitations?

Our estimates are based on the best available evidence however there remain some important limitations that should be considered. In particular, the evidence is insufficiently strong to robustly establish the extent of a causal relationship between exposure to domestic violence and childhood disorders. In addition, there is significant uncertainty around the taxpayer costs of childhood disorders with notable gaps for hyperactivity disorders.

Furthermore, the impacts of childhood exposure to domestic violence are complex and wide-reaching. There may be other costs and effects not captured by our analysis, for example: other impacts affecting the educational and emotional outcomes of children, impacts on well-being, the inter-generational impact on the likelihood of becoming a future victim or perpetrator of domestic violence and the effects of other forms of domestic violence such as economic abuse, coercive control or threatening behaviour.

As a result, our analysis should be treated as indicative and subject to a high degree of uncertainty.

## Key definitions

**Exposure to severe domestic violence:** based on parental responses to “has the child ever witnessed one parent being kicked, choked or beaten up by the other parent”.

**Conduct Disorders:** we use the World Health Organisation ICD-10 F91 classification. This incorporates symptoms such as: frequent or severe temper tantrums, arguing with adults, actively defying rules or excessive fighting.

**Hyperactivity Disorders:** we use the World Health Organisation ICD-10 F90 classification. This is characterised by abnormal levels of inattention and restlessness that are pervasive across situations and persistent over time.

Further details of this analysis are available on our website: [www.probonoeconomics.com/publications](http://www.probonoeconomics.com/publications)



## HESTIA

At Hestia, we support adults and children across London in times of crisis. Last year we worked with more than 9,000 people including women and children who have experienced domestic abuse, victims of modern slavery, young care leavers and older people. From giving someone a home to helping them to get the right mental health support, we support and enable people at the moment of crisis.

Hestia is the largest provider of domestic abuse refuges in London and last year we supported 3,657 people to recover from the trauma of domestic abuse including 668 children. We provide families refuge accommodation, dedicated children and family support, IDVA (Independent Domestic Abuse Advocates) and MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Centre) support and community group support.

Hestia is also the home of UK SAYS NO MORE, a national campaign to raise awareness of domestic abuse and sexual violence across the UK.

[hestia.org](https://hestia.org)    [@hestia1970](https://twitter.com/hestia1970)

## UK SAYS NO MORE

UK SAYS NO MORE is a national campaign focused on raising awareness of and preventing domestic abuse and sexual violence.

The campaign is facilitated by London charity Hestia and delivered in partnership with 330 organisations, charities, community groups and Parliamentary Champions across the UK, who are all working together to bring an end to domestic abuse and sexual violence. UK SAYS NO MORE unites and strengthens a diverse community of members of the public and organisations nationwide to actively take a stand against domestic violence and sexual assault under one powerful, visual symbol. The campaign provides open-source tools and resources for individuals and organisations to take action and get involved in ending domestic violence and sexual assault.

Together we are challenging the myths and misconceptions around these issues, sharing resources and information, and ultimately working together to make real positive change.

[uksaysnomore.org](https://uksaysnomore.org)    [@UKSAYSNOMORE](https://twitter.com/UKSAYSNOMORE)

## PRO BONO ECONOMICS

Pro Bono Economics helps charities and social enterprises understand and improve the impact and value of their work, matching professional economists who want to use their skills to volunteer with charities. Set up in 2009, Pro Bono Economics has helped over 400 charities large and small, covering a wide range of issues including mental health, education, employment and complex needs.

Pro Bono Economics is supported by high-profile economists, including Andy Haldane (Bank of England), Sir Dave Ramsden (Bank of England), and Clare Lombardelli (HM Treasury) as Trustees, and Diane Coyle (University of Cambridge), Kate Barker, Lord Jim O'Neill, Robert Peston, Martin Wolf and Lord Adair Turner as patrons. Lord Gus O'Donnell has been Chair of the Board of Trustees since September 2016.

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UK SAYS  
**NO MORE**  
TOGETHER WE CAN END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & SEXUAL ASSAULT

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