

UNDER PRESSURE

NON-FATAL STRANGULATION ● *KNOW THE SIGNS*

POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY BRIEF: NON-FATAL STRANGULATION

AUTHOR

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Non-Fatal Strangulation (NFS) is a serious crime, with victims eight times more likely to be murdered by their partner if there is an instance of NFS beforehand. While there are preconceived notions about NFS—namely, that it only occurs as an act of ‘choking’ in relation to pornography or sexual intercourse—NFS occurs in a myriad of contexts and methods. Although NFS was criminalised as a standalone offence in 2023, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) does not currently have any robust reporting on the issue. By creating a specialised report on NFS crime statistics that is updated at regular intervals, the PSNI is uniquely situated to collect critical, context-specific data to inform other stakeholders such as legislators, medical professionals, and academics in their lines of work. The current system, whereby statistics are requested by Freedom of Information Requests, is both costly and time-consuming for the PSNI. Further, this reporting would help counteract erroneous assumptions about how NFS occurs and who it affects. The creation of a specialised report on NFS data from the PSNI is a critical step in preventing future homicides, thereby alleviating some of the burden on the PSNI. Further, it would set a regional precedent that could encourage other police jurisdictions to establish similar reporting procedures.

The Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) made NFS a standalone offence in 2023, with those convicted of NFS facing up to 14 years in prison. Since NFS has become a standalone crime, there have been 2,300 arrests and 250 convictions in Northern Ireland.

NFS occurs when someone intentionally applies pressure to the throat or neck of another person, affecting their ability to breathe or the flow of blood to their brain. Even if no visible sign of strangulation is present, NFS can have long-lasting impacts with delayed onset, including stroke, brain injury, difficulty breathing, headaches, and behavioural changes.

In recent years, key data points have emerged that illuminate the severity of NFS:

- **36% of femicides in the UK between 2009-2022 were from strangulation and asphyxia**
- **A 'key findings' report from the Home Office, which examined 124 Domestic Homicide Reviews that took place between October 2019 and October 2020, found that in 25% of homicides, the method of killing was strangulation (the Home Office included asphyxiation, pressure to neck, strangulation, and suffocation in their definition).**
- **Recent data from the National Police Chiefs' Council Vulnerability and Knowledge Practice Programme (VKPP) report found that 20% of suicides following domestic abuse had been subjected to non-fatal strangulation prior to their death**

These statistics demonstrate that addressing NFS as a serious crime is a critical step in homicide, particularly femicide, prevention and overall societal wellbeing.

PSNI and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) conduct robust data analysis surrounding recorded crime in Northern Ireland, following the National Crime Recording Standard and the Home Office Counting Rules. This partnership yields comprehensive crime statistics that allow for trends to be identified over time and in relation to key pieces of legislation or other nationally relevant events. For example, the Police Recorded Crime Bulletin (PRCB) notes that the Home Office National Crime Recording Standard was introduced in 2001, and overall crime rates steadily fell until about 2017. Of course, correlation does not equal causation, but improved data practices allow stakeholders to identify trends and make decisions as to where to allocate limited

resources most effectively. This ethos is clearly reflected in the work already completed by PSNI and NISRA's reporting.

At present, PSNI and NISRA do not report on NFS in a holistic, public manner. Instead, instances of NFS are likely counted only in the Domestic Abuse Bulletin (DAB), in the "violence, with or without injury" sections or as part of "sexual offences" section, depending on the context. Other instances of NFS outside of a domestic context are likely included in the PRCB datasets, particularly in "Violence Against the Person" or "Sexual Offences" reporting. Because NFS is not a separate dataset, nor are there clear demarcations of where this crime falls in reporting statistics, the full picture of NFS instances in the context of Northern Ireland is obfuscated.

NFS is often a precursor to homicide. Survivors can experience long-lasting impacts on their mental and physical health. PSNI and NISRA have already cultivated an environment that values thorough reporting, as evidenced by their work producing bulletins specific to domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour, and hate crimes. By collecting data, legislators, medical professionals, and academics are able to make more informed recommendations. Currently, this data is likely reflected in the PRCB or the DAB. The lack of NFS specific data coming from PSNI, updated at consistent and regular intervals, puts other stakeholders at a disadvantage.

CORE RECOMMENDATION

Improve data collection around NFS by creating a detailed report, updated bi-annually in an identical schedule to the PSNI's other official statistics.

While 2,300 arrests related to NFS may seem comparatively low compared to other crimes like homicide or theft, it represents an ideologically complicated and legally novel crime. Therefore, there is an immediate need to create holistic reporting practices. Given PSNI and NISRA's current production of detailed reports on Anti-Social Behaviour, Hate Motivation, and Stop and Search, there are already systems in place to develop highly specific datasets that are updated at regular, specified intervals.

Given the pervasive assumption that NFS occurs predominantly in the domestic sphere, the PSNI and NISRA are uniquely positioned for data collection to create a fuller, detailed picture of NFS instances. By creating a robust report on instances of NFS in a way that spans domestic and non-domestic instances, the PSNI can combat preconceived notions about NFS and help legislators, medical staff, and academics more effectively develop prevention and educational resources for the public. This will in the long-term help delink the false association of NFS with sexual intercourse and pornography.

PSNI AND NISRA SHOULD MEASURE, REPORT, AND PUBLISH ON:

- **INSTANCES OF NFS AND THEIR CONTEXTS, BOTH INCIDENTS AND RECORDED CRIMES.**
- **PROFILE OF VICTIMS OF NFS, INCLUDING AGE AND GENDER, AKIN TO WHAT IS MEASURED IN THE DAB AND ON PAGE 14 OF THE PRCB.**
- **WHETHER OR NOT THE MOTIVATION IS LINKED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, AKIN TO THE REPORTING IN THE HOMICIDE SECTION OF THE PRCB (P.14)**
- **METHOD OF NFS, INCLUDING WHETHER PRESSURE WAS APPLIED MANUALLY OR WITH A FOREIGN OBJECT. THIS DATAPOINT WILL HELP COUNTERACT THE PREDOMINANT VIEW THAT NFS IS ONLY MANUAL STRANGULATION.**

The creation of this report would help create a robust dataset that is specific to Northern Ireland, allowing for all stakeholders to make regionally contextualised policies moving forward. It would set an example for the Home Office of England and Wales, creating a template for lasting regional commitment to combating NFS.

¹Police Service of Northern Ireland. "Non-Fatal Strangulation." Police Service of Northern Ireland, www.psnι.police.uk/safety-and-support/advice-and-information/non-fatal-strangulation. Accessed 8 May 2026.

²Torney, Kathryn. "Non-Fatal Strangulation: 2,300 PSNI Arrests and 250 Convictions since it Became a Specific Crime Belfast Telegraph, 4 Feb. 2026, www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/2300-psni-arrests-and-250-convictions-since-non-fatal-strangulation-became-a-specific-crime/a2130494215.html.

³Femicide Census. "Femicide Census Publishes 2022 Report." The Femicide Census, www.femicidecensus.org/femicide-census-publishes-its-annual-report/. Accessed 7 May 2026.

⁴Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) (2025) UK Prevalence of Non-Fatal Strangulation. Updated May 2025. Available at: <https://ifas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/UK-Prevalence-of-Non-Fatal-Strangulation-April-2025-1.pdf> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2026) Police Recorded Crime Bulletin: Period Ending 28 February 2026. Belfast: PSNI. Available at: <https://www.psnι.police.uk/system/files/2026-03/1558923081/Police%20Recorded%20Crime%20Bulletin%20Period%20Ending%2028%20February%202026.pdf> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

⁷Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2026) Domestic Abuse Bulletin: Period Ending 31st December 2025. Belfast: PSNI. Available at: <https://www.psnι.police.uk/system/files/2026-02/1650849924/Domestic%20Abuse%20Bulletin%20Period%20Ending%2031st%20December%202025.pdf> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

⁸Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2026) Police Recorded Crime Bulletin: Period Ending 28 February 2026. Belfast: PSNI. Available at: <https://www.psnι.police.uk/system/files/2026-03/1558923081/Police%20Recorded%20Crime%20Bulletin%20Period%20Ending%2028%20February%202026.pdf> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2026) Domestic Abuse Bulletin: Period Ending 31st December 2025. Belfast: PSNI. Available at: <https://www.psnι.police.uk/system/files/2026-02/1650849924/Domestic%20Abuse%20Bulletin%20Period%20Ending%2031st%20December%202025.pdf> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

⁹Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2026) Official Statistics. Belfast: PSNI. Available at: <https://www.psnι.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics> (Accessed: 7 May 2026).

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WHO ARE WE?

NON-FATAL STRANGULATION: KNOW THE SIGNS

The starting point of this project was a simple statistic. People who are subjected to non-fatal strangulation (NFS), are 750% more likely to subsequently be murdered by that same perpetrator^[1]. The lived reality of this statistic is that many organisations working to combat domestic abuse (DA) and/or intimate partner violence (IPV), consider NFS as the last 'warning shot' before fatalities occur^[2].

Whilst we are aware that statistics can often silence complexity, our research into NFS, particularly in Northern Ireland (NI), does not mirror this. For us, it rapidly became clear that NFS was more common than it was understood.

- ▶ NFS is in the conversations with peers and friends that equate this crime with a kink, namely choking, during sex.
- ▶ NFS is ubiquitous in pornography, where violence against women and girls is being normalised and men's control over women's bodies is rehearsed and performed.
- ▶ NFS is also a pattern occurring in the violent deaths of women in Northern Ireland. Non-fatal strangulation or death by strangulation was a feature in 52% of all femicides in Northern Ireland since 2020.^[3]

THUS, THIS PROJECT SEEKS TO:



RAISE AWARENESS OF NON-FATAL STRANGULATION



OFFER IMPARTIAL ADVICE AND AVENUES FOR SUPPORT



PRESENT RESEARCH-LED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE TO TACKLE NFS

This project was undertaken by the following students undertaking the MA in Conflict Transformation and Social Justice at Queen's University Belfast:

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**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
AND STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATIONS**

[1] Training Institute for Strangulation Prevention; Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc.

[2] Alliance for Hope International, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/training-institute-on-strangulation-prevention/online-courses>

[3] Where details of cause of death are known. The real figure could be much higher (Mc Morrow, forthcoming)

