

GPS Tagging and Proximity Notification Systems for Domestic Violence Prevention: Protecting Women, Saving Lives

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Abstract

Domestic violence remains one of the gravest public safety and public health challenges in the United Kingdom, with over 1.4 million incidents reported annually and two women killed every week by a current or former partner. The time following a survivor's decision to separate from an abuser is one of the most dangerous periods, as abusers often seek to reassert control and deter survivors from seeking help. Despite reforms such as the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the introduction of Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs), significant gaps in enforcement leave thousands of survivors at continued risk. This paper examines the potential of GPS tagging and proximity notification systems as evidence-led solutions for domestic violence prevention, shifting victim-survivor safety from reactive protection to proactive safeguarding. Drawing on international models, including Spain's COMETA programme, Portugal's nationally coordinated framework, France's bracelet anti-rapprochement, Switzerland's integrated rollout, U.S. National Institute of Justice studies, and Australia's pioneering GPS-based bail monitoring, this study highlights reductions in breaches, improved survivor safeguarding, rapid-response capabilities, and cost-effectiveness compared to imprisonment. Using insights from Queensland's controlled GPS trial, it proposes a framework for a fully resourced, nationally consistent UK model, integrating multi-agency safeguarding, offender monitoring, and real-time law enforcement response. By combining criminology-informed strategies, technological innovation, and policy reform, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on offender management and victim-survivor protection, positioning GPS-enabled solutions as a critical tool to deter reoffending, enhance survivor autonomy, and save lives.

Keywords: domestic violence prevention; GPS tagging; proximity notification systems; offender monitoring; electronic monitoring; Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs); COMETA programme; violence against women; multi-agency safeguarding; intimate partner violence; offender accountability; survivor protection; UK criminal justice reform

Introduction

Domestic violence is one of the gravest public safety and public health crises in the United Kingdom. Every statistic tells the story of a preventable tragedy and a system that failed to protect women when it mattered most.

It devastates lives, fractures families, and imposes significant social and economic costs. In England and Wales, one in four women will experience domestic abuse during their lifetime, and on average, two women are killed every week by a current or former partner (ONS, 2023).

Despite reforms, including the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the system continues to fail many victim-survivors. Restraining orders, non-molestation orders, and bail conditions are frequently breached, leaving survivors dangerously exposed, especially following separation, the period of highest risk. Paper-based protections, limited enforcement, and inconsistent monitoring mean too many women remain vulnerable when they should be protected.

Globally, however, a new solution is redefining victim safety: **GPS-enabled tagging and proximity notification systems**. When embedded in a multi-agency safeguarding framework, these technologies deter offenders, prevent breaches, and save lives. The introduction of Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs), which allow courts to impose GPS monitoring, marks an important step forward, but the UK's pilots remain limited, fragmented, and under-resourced, leaving thousands of women unprotected.

International evidence, from Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, France, Australia, the U.S., and Queensland's 2019 evaluation, makes the case clear: the UK urgently needs a national GPS tagging and proximity notification model, properly designed from day one.

The UK Context: A Persistent Enforcement Gap

DAPOs represent an important shift, combining civil and criminal powers to better protect victim-survivors. But enforcement remains inconsistent, leaving significant gaps in safeguarding.

In 2015, courts issued 23,057 restraining orders, yet 8,395 were breached. Only 36% of breaches led to immediate custody, leaving thousands of offenders free to reoffend (MoJ, 2016). In 2023, police in England and Wales recorded 1.4 million domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes, yet fewer than one in six resulted in charges (ONS, 2023).

Domestic abuse accounts for almost one in five recorded crimes, though response standards still vary widely across UK police forces (NPCC, 2023). Women's Aid highlights that breaches occur in nearly half of all protective orders, showing that paper-based solutions are insufficient. And it is high cost; the social and economic costs of domestic abuse are estimated to be in the region of £78 billion (2022/23 prices) over a three-year average (UK Home Office 2023).

Without modern solutions, survivors remain dependent on systems that react after harm occurs, rather than preventing it.

Why GPS Tagging and Proximity Notification Systems Matter

GPS-enabled monitoring shifts personal safety from **reactive** to **proactive**. Offenders wear a GPS tag connected to secure monitoring systems. Victim-survivors may carry an optional linked alert device. Risk-informed exclusion zones are defined around homes, workplaces, schools, or key safe locations.

In a fully operational setup, if an offender breaches these zones:

- Instant alerts are sent to victim-survivors and monitoring centres, enabling immediate awareness.
- Police are automatically dispatched, ensuring no delays in response.
- Rapid-response protocols activate instantly, prioritising victim safety above all else.

This technology fundamentally transforms the dynamics of safety. For survivors, protection is no longer tied to a specific location; it travels with them. Knowing that breaches will trigger an immediate response restores independence, rebuilds confidence, and offers the freedom to live without constant fear.

Electronic monitoring also provides prosecutors with concrete data to prove violations of protection orders, deters abusers from reoffending, and reduces reliance on ‘he said/she said’ testimony.

Benefits include:

- **Deterrence:** Offenders understand breaches will be detected.
- **Early intervention:** Alerts give victims and police critical minutes to act.
- **Mobility and autonomy:** Survivors remain protected wherever they go.
- **Evidence-led prosecutions:** GPS logs enable “victimless prosecutions.”
- **Cost-effectiveness:** GPS monitoring is five to six times cheaper than imprisonment (NAO, 2019).

Technology alone isn’t enough, though. Success depends on embedding GPS within joined-up safeguarding frameworks where monitoring centres, trained staff, police, courts, and survivor services work together seamlessly.

Spain’s COMETA Programme: A Proven Global Model

Spain’s COMETA system (“Control of Offenders via Telematic Means”) is the gold standard for GPS-enabled domestic abuse monitoring. Introduced in 2009, COMETA operates nationwide, combining 24/7 monitoring centres, judicially defined exclusion zones, and integration with VIOGEN, Spain’s national domestic violence risk-assessment system.

Key results from COMETA demonstrate its effectiveness:

- **Zero feminicides:** Not one woman under COMETA's active GPS protection has been killed [(Arenas, 2019)].
- **Rapid response:** Police intervene within 5–7 minutes of a breach.
- **High compliance:** Only ~5% of monitored offenders attempt deliberate breaches.
- **Victim reassurance:** Over 80% report feeling safer and maintaining daily routines without relocation.
- **Scalability:** Monitored pairs increased eightfold between 2009 and 2018.

COMETA succeeds because it integrates technology, infrastructure, and human response. Trained operators triage alerts, communicate directly with police, and ensure rapid intervention. The UK can replicate this proven model, provided we invest in monitoring centres, trained personnel, and local response capacity.

Portugal: Regional Expertise, National Success

Portugal launched its GPS-enabled monitoring programme in 2009, pioneering a “reverse-tagging” model where an offender’s GPS tag is actively monitored against victim-centred exclusion parameters. Courts can impose electronic monitoring to enforce no-contact conditions under the country’s domestic violence framework (Lei n.º 33/2010).

Operationally, the programme is administered through regional probation units that run 24/7 monitoring centres. Analysts familiar with local geography assess alerts in real time, phone survivors when needed, and request immediate police intervention. National oversight by DGRSP ensures uniform standards, while the locality principle allows for rapid response and greater contextual understanding.

With 97% successful completions and only 3% revocations (DGRSP, 2020), Portugal demonstrates the effectiveness of combining regional expertise with national coordination, guided by the country’s multi-sector National Strategy and 2023–2026 Action Plan on Domestic Violence, which prioritise early intervention and electronic monitoring as central tools for safeguarding victims (Council of Europe GREVIO, 2025).

France: Innovation and Operational Lessons

France rolled out its bracelet anti-rapprochement (BAR) nationally in 2021, pairing an offender’s GPS tag with a linked device for the survivor. If an offender approaches a pre-set exclusion zone, simultaneous alerts go to both the survivor and police (Reuters, 2021).

Early implementation was slowed by an initial requirement for mutual consent, an approach quickly abandoned. A Ministry of Justice evaluation concluded that GPS monitoring works best when paired with dedicated rapid-response police units trained to act within minutes (French MoJ BAR Report, 2024).

For the UK, France demonstrates the value of removing procedural friction and funding specialised, trained response teams, ensuring alerts trigger swift, decisive action.

Switzerland: Building Confidence Through Technology

Switzerland legislated GPS monitoring for domestic abuse offenders in 2021, with rollout beginning in 2022. The system integrates geofencing conditions with restraining orders, linked directly to cantonal police responses.

Early evaluations show high offender compliance, marked improvements in victim confidence, and strong judicial support (Swissinfo, 2022). By embedding GPS as part of a broader safeguarding package, including rehabilitation programmes and coordinated victim services, Switzerland delivers a holistic, evidence-led approach.

For the UK, Switzerland demonstrates the scalability of GPS monitoring when national standards are combined with local operational control.

United States: Proven Deterrence and Behavioural Change

An NIJ-funded evaluation led by Erez, Ibarra, Bales & Gur (2012) compared GPS-monitored domestic abuse defendants with those on traditional house arrest. Results were striking:

- Significantly fewer programme violations among GPS-monitored offenders.
- Fewer victim contact attempts and greater overall compliance.
- Offenders monitored under GPS were substantially less likely to reoffend (NIJ Report, 2012).

The study highlights GPS's role not only as a tracking tool but also as a driver of behavioural change. When offenders know breaches will be detected and acted upon, compliance improves dramatically, reinforcing the value of GPS as both deterrence and enforcement.

To see the emotional reality behind the data, we should consider the experience of Gina Ehsani, a survivor based in Nashville, Tennessee, USA:

Gina Ehsani vividly illustrates the crushing emotional toll of living under constant threat. When she received an alert that her ex-husband's tracker was within 1,000 feet, "right across the street," she quickly locked her six-year-old daughter and four-year-old son in the bathroom and turned it into a game to keep them calm. She got them to help secure all the doors and windows, then challenged them to see who could organise the drawers and cabinets the fastest while she quietly called 911. Gina tried to hide her terror so it wouldn't become theirs, but the children sensed something was wrong. "Don't cry," they told her softly, "you're brave." When the police arrived, they took a report and assured her a domestic violence detective would follow up (Nashville Banner, 2024). Her story highlights why robust GPS monitoring, combined with rapid police response, is essential to give survivors confidence and protection.

Australia: Preventing Harm Before Conviction

Australia leads globally in using GPS for pre-conviction safeguarding. In New South Wales, ankle-bracelet monitoring is mandated for high-risk defendants released on conditional bail, creating exclusion zones around survivors' homes, workplaces, and schools (New South Wales Government, 2024).

Several states also integrate victim duress alarms linked to monitoring centres, ensuring bilateral safety without placing the burden of alerting solely on survivors. In Tasmania, GPS monitoring now extends to bail conditions for accused offenders, further widening early protection.

This proactive model offers a vital lesson for the UK: While prison is essential for the most dangerous offenders, GPS tagging can play a critical preventive role in other high-risk cases, enabling close monitoring, gathering evidence, and intervening before serious harm occurs.

Implementation Lessons: Queensland's 2019 GPS Trial

Queensland Police Service (QPS) ran a controlled simulation in 2019 to evaluate GPS monitoring before live deployment. The findings provide invaluable lessons for the UK.

Key insights:

- 51% of scenarios succeeded fully, while 23% partially succeeded.
- 26% failed outright, meaning one in four breaches triggered no alert.
- Victim-carried proximity devices succeeded only ~35–38% of the time.
- Overall, just 49% of alerts functioned as expected (QPS, 2019).

Far from discouraging adoption, Queensland's results prove the need for robust infrastructure. Their report highlights success depends on:

- Building 24/7 monitoring centres staffed by accredited analysts.
- Establishing drilled police response protocols before rollout.
- Prioritising offender-side GPS tagging; survivor devices should be optional reassurance tools.
- Using short ping intervals (≤ 10 seconds) to prevent "blind spots."
- Ensuring redundant communication systems for rural or GPS-poor areas.

Spain and Portugal demonstrate that, with these measures in place, GPS reliability and victim safety rise dramatically.

Conclusion

Every avoidable breach, every preventable death, reflects a systemic failure, never the failure of women.

Spain's COMETA programme proves zero feminicides are possible when GPS, infrastructure, and rapid response converge. Portugal, Switzerland, and Australia demonstrate adaptability across diverse justice systems. Queensland offers the UK a roadmap for success by showing how to design an effective system from the start.

The UK now stands at a crossroads. The decisions we make today will determine whether more lives are lost or more women are protected:

- Persist with outdated, inconsistent protections, continuing to rely on fragmented systems, slow responses, and under-resourced interventions that leave victim-survivors exposed and allow offenders to exploit gaps in enforcement.
- Build a modern, evidence-driven safeguarding system by using GPS technology to monitor offenders in real time, deter breaches, provide immediate alerts, gather critical evidence, and ultimately save lives.

Women deserve more than promises. They deserve guaranteed safety backed by innovation, integration, and decisive policy action.

Every delay, every half-measure, and every underfunded pilot carries a cost measured in women's lives. The evidence from Spain, Portugal, and Australia proves that when GPS monitoring is fully resourced and properly integrated, lives are saved. These systems empower survivors to take immediate protective action upon receiving alerts, rather than depending entirely on police response times, which can be inconsistent.

The UK cannot afford to wait for another tragedy to act. Protecting women is not optional; it is a moral, legal, and political obligation. The cost of inaction is measured in lives, and we cannot afford another preventable death.

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