



VICTIMS' VIEWS ON POLICING PARTNER VIOLENCE



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Abstract: The latest Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for England and Wales (HMIC) report (2014), *Everyone's business: improving the police response to domestic abuse*, highlighted that police forces across the United Kingdom were not responding satisfactorily to victims of domestic abuse, and have little understanding of coercion and control. The report suggested forces find more innovative ways of training officers to improve responses. A 1-week snapshot of domestic abuse was carried out at Durham Constabulary, which involved interviewing victims who had reported domestic abuse to the police, as well as police and support organisations. Twenty-four victims were spoken to about their recent experiences with the police. Responses were mixed, with victims reporting positive, negative and satisfactory experiences. A number of police who were interviewed reported their knowledge of coercive and controlling behaviours was more limited than that of general domestic abuse, and they found it difficult to identify these behaviours when responding to incidents. Organisations also called for police to receive further training on coercion and control. Findings from all interviews will be considered side by side to help shape a new drama-based training programme, which will be rolled out to police to address gaps in knowledge.

Keywords: policing; coercion; intimate partner violence.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is a crime of huge scale. Between August 2012 and 2013 there were 269 700 DVA crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales, with someone contacting the police regarding DVA on average every 30 seconds (HMIC, 2014). This research focuses on DVA between partners or ex-partners, and will therefore, going forward, be referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV). Considering IPV from a feminist viewpoint, Johnson (2011) states how it can be split into three separate areas: intimate terrorism, violent resistance and situational couple violence. Violent resistance often involves a woman fighting back towards her male partner, and situational couple violence is where both partners in a couple become aggressive towards each other (Johnson, 2011). Intimate terrorism, which involves a pattern of violent coercion and control in which someone is oppressed and their freedom limited (Stark, 2007), is the primary area that this research will consider.

Anyone can be a victim of IPV, however most reported cases involve a male perpetrator and a female victim (Women's Aid, 2014). Myhill (2015) states that when research finds that abuse is mutual between genders, this is because it is taking into account situational couple violence and not focusing on coercive and controlling intimate terrorism, which is highly gendered. Coercive and controlling behaviours are the newest additions to the Home Office definition of domestic violence within the United Kingdom, and are set to become a criminal offence in the United Kingdom in the near future. For this reason, it is important that police officers have sufficient knowledge of and are trained in how to recognise these behaviours and respond appropriately when responding to IPV. Myhill (2015) states that in order to identify if someone is experiencing coercion and control, appropriate questions need to be asked. He proposes that if someone answers 'yes' to both have they 'repeatedly belittled you to the extent that you felt worthless' and 'frightened you, by threatening to hurt you or someone close





to you', that this could be classed as coercive control. Myhill's suggestion was used to help shape relevant questions to identify coercion and control in this research.

Within the United Kingdom there is a small pool of research that specifically considers police response to domestic abuse victims. Research carried out by Robinson and Strohine (2005) in Cardiff, United Kingdom has considered the importance of expectation fulfilment on levels of satisfaction that victims feel when reporting domestic abuse to the police. The authors conducted structured interviews with 222 victims of domestic abuse to consider factors that contributed to their satisfaction. They found that when (1) what victims expected police to do and (2) how they expected police to act correlated with what police actually did, satisfaction levels were higher. The researchers also found that when police appeared concerned and listened to the victim these behaviours were correlated with higher levels of victim satisfaction than any police behaviours such as making an arrest. These findings of victim expectations correlating with victim satisfaction have also been alluded to previously (e.g. Reisig and Chandek, 2001).

The aim of this research is to evaluate the current police frontline response to IPV victims by means of interviews with victims, police officers and support organisations, and to identify 'weak' areas to be included in new, drama-based training to be rolled out to front line officers at a police force in the North East of England. This paper outlines the steps taken so far, up to and including the findings from the interviews with the three groups mentioned above.

METHODOLOGY

In order to collect representative data for the research, interviews were carried out with victims who had reported domestic abuse to Durham Constabulary within a 1-week period in February 2015. The snapshot approach has been used previously with success (e.g. Westmarland, Hester and Carrozza, 2005), and consists of gathering data from a specific time period that is seen to be roughly representative of other time periods.

INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS

The snapshot data was gathered via police systems at Durham Constabulary. This involved identifying every incident that was reported as a domestic (or had a domestic 'qualifier' ⁽¹⁾ on) during the target week. This data was then sorted into those that met the research criteria (partner and ex-partner cases) and those that did not (family violence, no safe number to call, deemed too risky to call). The researchers followed a safety protocol that outlined criteria that each case must meet to be classed as safe to call. If there were cases that a researcher was unsure about, a discussion would follow, including liaison with the safeguarding team if needed.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

An interview schedule was devised with input from the researchers, staff within Durham Constabulary and ideas from the Home Office. Each eligible person within the snapshot was contacted by telephone a maximum of three times; if there was no response after the third attempt no further contact was made. For those who agreed to take part, the questions focused on asking victims how happy they were with their recent response from the police, questions to identify if they were experiencing coercion and control, and rating scales to measure various aspects of satisfaction, such as being believed and treated with respect. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes.

FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

One-to-one interviews were also carried out with police and support organisations. Emails were sent out to invite people to participate, as well as an internal message to police officers. Nine police officers and eight members of support organisations were interviewed. Questions to police included asking what actions they take to make victims feel safe, how they identify controlling and coercive behaviours when responding to incidents and questions to support organisations focused on their opinions of police response to IPV victims based on their client work. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes.

⁽¹⁾ A qualifier shows that the incident was not initially reported as a domestic incident, but it meets some of the criteria of a domestic.





LIMITATIONS

The snapshot only focused on 1 week of domestic incidents, so generalisability must be approached with caution. However, the week was chosen as it was thought to be roughly representative of a typical week. Family violence was also excluded from the snapshot, and so any findings may not be applicable to these incidents.

As all interviews were carried out on a voluntary basis, it is also possible that only police officers who were confident that they respond effectively to domestic abuse expressed an interest in taking part in the research. Similarly, when contacting victims, those who did not answer the telephone or refused to take part may have had particularly negative experiences of police response and be fearful of speaking to us. We attempted to alleviate this when speaking with victims by stating that we were from Durham University, not the police, but it is possible that victims may still have had concerns about speaking to us. These limitations must be taken into account when considering the findings.

FINDINGS

Overall, victims were happy with the response they received from the police, and when asked this question ratings ranged from 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely unsatisfied, and 10 being completely satisfied (mean = 8.3, median = 10, mode = 10). Similarly to results found by Robinson and Strohshine (2005), the majority of participants in this research reported that having the police listen and reassure them was the most useful thing that they did, more so than physical behaviours such as taking statements and removing the other person. 75 % of participants also said they would call the police again if they were in a similar situation. In terms of negative findings, 62 % of participants could not recall the police leaving them with details for support organisations following the incident, and 25 % were not told what would happen after the officer left.

Participants were also asked why they called the police on this occasion when they may not have before, and the most common responses were that the incident involved physical violence, or that calling was a last resort. This suggests that victims may experience IPV on more than one occasion before they decide to report it, and that

they believe that physical violence will be dealt with more effectively by the police.

Participants were asked a final three questions designed to examine whether they were experiencing coercion and control in their relationships. A high number of victims gave the maximum score of 10 for these questions, indicating that coercion and control behaviours were high in this sample. This was apparent for those in current relationships as well as those who reported IPV from ex-partners. Though 18 out of 24 victims indicated that coercion and control were present in their relationships, the police had recorded only 3 out of 24 of these incidents as involving coercion and control on their systems, suggesting they did not always pick up on these behaviours when responding.

Police who were interviewed mostly indicated that their knowledge, experience and confidence with responding to controlling and coercive behaviours was lower than for domestic abuse generally. More than half also felt it is difficult to identify these behaviours when responding to incidents. Professionals from organisations stressed that victims find it difficult to report IPV to the police and that they need to be believed and referred onto appropriate support agencies. Professionals also felt that non-physical forms of abuse are the hardest for police to respond to, and their knowledge of coercion and control is low, with reasons including lack of understanding about myths, personal prejudices and lack of awareness around what coercion and control is.

CONCLUSIONS

Victims are generally happy with the first response received by Durham Constabulary, although there are still mixed responses based on individual officers, suggesting more consistency is needed within the force. Victims see police as a last resort and are more likely to call if they have experienced physical violence, and coercive and controlling behaviours are not picked up on by many officers when risk assessments are being carried out. Police and support organisations agree that knowledge of coercive and controlling behaviours needs to be improved. More training is needed to educate officers on how coercion and control are perpetrated in intimate relationships, and ways of responding to victims experiencing these behaviours.





NEXT STEPS

The findings from this stage of the research have been used to develop an innovative, drama-based training programme to be rolled out to all officers within the North East force. Working with a theatre group who are proficient in the dynamics of coercion and control and using

drama to portray these issues, victim and police voices have been used to shape the content of the programme, which aims to increase frontline police officer's knowledge of and confidence with responding to these subtle aspects of IPV. A snapshot will be repeated in February 2016 to assess the impact of the training on police response to IPV victims.

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