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Sexual and violent police perpetrators: the institutional response to reporting victims

Natasha Mulvihill ᴵᴰ[a] and Fay Sweeting ᴵᴰ[b]

ᵃCriminology, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ᵇPsychology, University of Bournemouth, Poole, UK

ABSTRACT

Despite recent high-profile cases of police perpetrated violence against women, academic research in the UK on the nature and prevalence of police officers who are physically and sexually abusive towards female intimate partners is limited. Still less is known about the experience of these victims who seek to report police perpetrators to the police. This study presents the findings from interviews that we conducted in early 2023 with ten female intimate partner victims of male police perpetrators in England and Wales. The experiences shared by participants included the period 2018–2023 in all but one case. Four of the interview participants were themselves police officers. Using thematic analysis, we classify experiences of reporting as 'hostile-obstructive' and/or 'collusive-minimising'. We discuss these findings in relation to the concept of 'institutional betrayal' and consider how the police can demonstrate urgent 'institutional courage' for reform.

Introduction

In the past three years, high-profile media cases in the UK have focused attention on police officers who perpetrate violent and sexual offences. Commonly, this involves male officers and female victims, who may or may not also be officers, and so this fits into wider patterns of gender-based violence within society (Stark 2007, Kelly and Johnson 2008). In this paper, we focus on females who report to the police the abuse by their male intimate partner, who is also a serving police officer.

While 'domestic'/'intimate partner' and 'sexual' violence and abuse are often considered separately in law and policy; in lived experience, there is not uncommonly a sexual element within partner abuse. This may or may not be disclosed by the victim to the police (Lynch 2011). For example, in reviewing the trajectories of 87 English rape cases, Hester and Lilley (2017) found that one-third related to domestic abuse. For this reason, we review both the existing literature on (a) police perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse, and on (b) police perpetrators of intimate partner abuse. The existing academic research is predominantly located in North America, and we present it at length because it offers the most comprehensive insight into police perpetrators. We also identify emerging work in the UK.

We then draw briefly on extant work on victim reporting and police cultures to situate our empirical study, which was conducted in England and Wales in 2023, and which illustrates the experiences of ten victims of abusive officers who reported their perpetrators to the police. Using the framework of 'institutional betrayal' (Smith and Freyd 2013), we demonstrate the double bind that victims may

experience in being abused by society's guardians and then receiving inadequate recognition from the police institution. We draw on these findings to make practical recommendations for policing.

Police perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse

Turning first to sexual violence and abuse, Maher (2003) describes how police officers have unique opportunities to sexually offend because they both embody the coercive power of the state and have relative licence to move unsupervised through public and private spaces. Extant studies of police sexual offending refer primarily to 'sexual misconduct'. Sexual misconduct is defined by Maher (2003) as where a police officer takes advantage of their professional position to engage in sexual acts. It is considered a misuse of public office and an abuse of power. The range of activity considered sexual misconduct is broad and may include,

> non-consensual behaviours such as rape; sexual assault and voyeurism in addition to activities such as consensual sex on duty; initiating sexual relationships with vulnerable victims/witnesses; and sexually inappropriate language and gestures, which may be directed to the public and/or colleagues. (Sweeting and Cole 2023, pp. 245–246)

Barker (2020) cautions that the true extent of police-perpetrated sexual crimes is 'unknown and unknowable' (p. 19). Commonly, researchers look at 'professional standards directorate' or 'internal affairs' data, held by police departments and forces. For example, in the United States, Miller *et al*. (2022) examined internal records relating to 50 professional sexual misconduct incidents between 2000 and 2009 in a large, metropolitan police department. They found that 96% of accused officers were male and 82% of complainants were female. Ninety per cent of the cases involved an officer and a member of the public and, in around two-thirds of cases, the officer and complainant were known to one another (although in what capacity is unclear). This can make it difficult to distinguish between, for example, sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual assault of an intimate partner, which is the focus of this paper (albeit the two groups may overlap where a police colleague is also an intimate partner).

Another route to understanding police officer perpetrated sexual violence is to look at data on arrest and/or court cases and outcomes. For example, Stinson *et al*. (2014) derived data on 771 sex-related arrest cases between 2005 and 2008 relating to 555 police officers at 449 non-federal law enforcement agencies across the United States. Case details were gleaned from published news articles identified using the Google News™ search engine and its Google Alerts™ email update service (Stinson *et al*. 2014, p. 123). Almost all of the cases involved male officers (*n* = 766, 99.4%) and where victims were known, 91.4% were female (*n* = 678) (Stinson *et al*. 2014, pp. 128, 130).

Stinson and colleagues report that very few of the victims were the current or former spouse (*n* = 12, 1.5%) or current/former girlfriend or boyfriend (*n* = 14, 1.8%) of the officer (p. 132). However, in Stinson's arrested officer data set, sexual offences by officers against *adults* were identified in only around 28% of cases; the remaining cases were related to child victims. If we assume that all of those with spousal or partner perpetrators were adult victims, then we might estimate that around 12% of the adult sample involved intimate partner sexual offences. Looking at UK data for the year ending March 2022 on the victim-perpetrator relationship in police-recorded rape cases involving female victims, (and allowing that Stinson's data relates to the US and to 2005–2008), the perpetrator is recorded as an intimate partner in 48% of cases (and in 23% of sexual assault cases).[1]

According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales over the same period, which gathers self-reported data, 57% of female victims of rape or attempted rape, and 32% of female victims of unwanted sexual touching, reported that the perpetrator was their current or ex-intimate partner. The low proportion of intimate partner perpetrators in Stinson's data could be that, at the time of collection, sexual violence by off-duty police officers against adults was less likely to be reported – particularly by current or ex-intimate partners – or less likely to be reported in the news media. Or if the offence was reported, that it was less likely to lead to arrest.

In March 2023, the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) for England and Wales published data on complaints and conduct allegations against the police for the period October 2021 to March 2022. This was described in the press release as a 'first attempt to benchmark the police response to violence against women and girls' (NPCC 2023a). A *complaint* is any expression of dissatisfaction with a police force that is communicated by or on behalf of a member of the public. A *conduct matter* is where a person serving within the police may have committed a criminal offence or behaved in a manner which would justify disciplinary proceedings (IOPC 2020). Generally, complaints are made by someone outside the police, and conduct issues are identified by someone within policing (NPCC 2023b).

The 2023 publication shows that over the period October 2021 to March 2022, 1177 cases were recorded, split between complaints (45%) and conduct ssues (55%). Fourteen per cent of police complaints and 46% of conduct allegations related to sexual matters (sexual assault, sexual harassment or other sexual misconduct; or abuse of position for sexual purpose). No complaints were referred to formal proceedings. Eleven per cent of the conduct allegations were referred to proceedings ($n = 21$), of which 13 resulted in dismissal ('or they would have been dismissed if [the officers] were still in the force' (2023b, p. 20)). Unfortunately, because case outcomes are reported by decision rather than by type, it is not possible to trace the trajectory and outcome of the sexual complaint or sexual misconduct cases specifically. The data implies that individuals from outside the force who make a complaint are less likely to see their case referred to formal proceedings, than if they were a member of police staff lodging an internal conduct issue. But given the higher rate of sexual misconduct as a proportion of conduct cases, this might imply that sexual misconduct is *more* likely to lead to formal proceedings. Without full sight of the data, it is difficult to know.

Police perpetrators of intimate partner abuse

Goodmark (2015) notes that while considerable (and needed) attention is paid to police violence in the public sphere, less attention is paid to the abuse perpetrated by police in their private lives, against their intimate partners. A number of authors have outlined how police officers make particularly dangerous abusers (Johnson *et al.* 2005, Garvey 2015). They are trained in interrogation and use of force; they know how crimes are investigated and therefore how to cover their tracks; and they have access to personal data and details on shelter locations (MacQuarrie *et al.* 2020). There is also evidence that police officers are at a 'higher risk of committing homicide-suicide than civilian counterparts' (Klinoff *et al.* 2015, p. 101), including partners and children.

There are fewer studies of prevalence. Drawing again on a Google News generated dataset, Stinson and Liederbach (2013) identify media stories involving arrests of 324 US police officer perpetrators over 2005–2007 for domestic abuse-related incidents. Ninety-six per cent of the perpetrators in their dataset were male. Eighty-eight per cent of victims were female, with two-thirds being current or former spouses or partners. Around a quarter of the victims were children (Stinson and Liederbach 2013, pp. 609–611). Conviction of the officer occurred in only 42% of the cases involving simple assault but conviction was more likely the more serious the offence (around 87% for both murder and forcible rape). Overall, where officers were convicted, fewer than half lost their job as a police officer (Stinson and Liederbach 2013, p. 613).

In 2020, the Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ), working with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ), submitted a super-complaint[2] alleging that forces in England and Wales were not responding appropriately to cases of domestic abuse perpetrated by police officers. The CWJ and BIJ drew on 19 case summaries of individual women's experiences and 6 accounts from domestic abuse professionals. In 2022, and in response to the super-complaint, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the College of Policing and Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) published a joint investigation. The authors judged that overall, the investigation was effective in 34 out of 56 cases examined (2022, p. 55) and note that, although they could not 'meaningfully compare the effectiveness of [police perpetrated domestic abuse] PPDA investigations with other domestic abuse investigations, it was likely they 'share common weaknesses' (2022, p. 55).

Overall, the authors acknowledge that understanding the prevalence, handling and outcomes of police-perpetrated domestic abuse cases is challenging because data is held in multiple sites and recorded inconsistently (2022, pp. 64–68).

In 2021, Brennan *et al.* (2023) conducted an online survey of around a quarter of staff at an English police force (weighted *n* = 876). Twenty-three per cent disclosed that they had been a victim of domestic abuse while serving as a police officer, and of that group, 27% identified the perpetrator as a member of the force. Female officers were 60% more likely to identify as victims and significantly more likely to experience sexual abuse, than male victims. The authors published a subsequent paper drawing on the qualitative responses to that survey, in order to identify barriers to reporting for police victims (Couto *et al.* 2023).

The police perpetrators identified in this paper abused both police and non-police partners. They demonstrated a range of coercive and abusive behaviours, including serious sexual and violent acts against partners, children, animals and other family members. It is for this reason that we use the term 'sexual and violent police perpetrators', because we wish to underline the grave and multifaceted experience of victims.

Reporting sexual and violent police perpetrators to the police

This second section of the literature review focuses on the problematic interface between the reporting victim and the police institution. We draw together literature on (a) reporting to the police; (b) police culture; and (c) institutional betrayal and institutional gaslighting.

The reporting victim

Many individuals who experience intimate partner violence, coercion and abuse, or sexual violence, do not report their experience to the police (Brooks-Hay 2020). For those who do, there is a well-established literature on the importance of 'procedural justice' (Hohl *et al.* 2022). This requires that police respond to individuals reporting a crime with dignity, fairness and impartiality, which in turn inspires trust (Tyler 2006). Similarly, Mulvihill *et al.* (2019) describe how the initial encounter and ongoing engagement with the police are important elements for victim-survivors of what can be termed 'interactional justice'. This is enhanced where police officers treat those reporting with empathy and with validation, and where those officers outline clearly the next steps and provide timely updates (Mulvihill *et al.* 2019, pp. 650, 652).

In the UK, there is minimal academic research on how reporting incidence changes when the perpetrator of sexual violence or intimate partner abuse is a police officer, or what that experience of reporting is like. There is some US research on barriers to reporting for victims (see, for example, Pidel (2022) and Maher (2008)) who are also officers themselves, but the analysis is not rooted necessarily in victim testimony. It is important to know also the experience of those reporting from *outside* the police, especially given the data discussed above on the different trajectories of complaint (external) versus conduct (internal) allegations through the police disciplinary system in England and Wales.

In an ideal scenario, victims of abuse would feel able to report to the police and would trust the decision-making of both the officer and the wider force. The victim reporting would have confidence that those procedures were externally scrutinised and accredited, and that policing organisations reflexively learn from experience and improve practice (Schafer 2013, Koerner and Staller 2022). Such transparency and reflexivity must be supported by the organisational culture.

Police culture

'Culture', whether within a group, institution or wider society, is not a given. Rather, it rests on shared meanings: a collective view of the world underpinned by a collective language (Hall 1997). In this way, meaning and practice are interlinked and some meanings gain authority over alternatives, i.e.

'become the dominant culture' at a given time. Commonly, police culture is defined in relation to hege-monic forms of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Loftus 2010). However, we identify two further themes in the academic literature on police culture which help to make sense of how officers may respond to reports of domestic and sexual abuse by their colleagues: compliance and exceptionalism.

First, Silvestri (2017) argues that, while the 'cult of masculinity' thesis may in part be enacted through physical and sexual dominance, it is also demonstrated by unstinting commitment to the job through 'extreme/over work' and an 'exaggerated sense of mission' (2017, p. 293). This is echoed in work by Bikos (2023), who explores how conformity and assimilation pressures exist in Canadian policing, and their relation to gender and ethnicity. Drawing on Goffman's (1961) definition of the 'total institution', Bikos analysed 116 in-depth interviews and survey responses from 727 serving officers at different ranks. She argues that, 'protection of peers and institutional reputation' (2023, p. 2) are key messages during new police recruit training in Canada and that, once on the job, some 'supervisors used fear to stifle and silence complaints, reminding officers of the personal and professional risks' (2023, p. 9).

Trust in colleagues is a critical element of police work (Lambert *et al*. 2022). It is important to know that in situations of threat, police colleagues 'have your back' (Miller *et al*. 2006). But it is possible to see how organisations which demand such loyalty and obedience, sometimes termed 'greedy insti-tutions' (Coser 1974, see also Peterson and Uhnoo 2012), can serve to yoke their members into a culture of homogeneity and of complicity. This suggests that whatever intersecting identities (in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, education or sexuality, etc.) may define an individual officer, inclusion and acceptance within the police tends also to require a high degree of concession and *compliance*. This can make it difficult for those who seek to question police conduct, whether they are within or outside the force (Bikos 2022).

A second belief which can mitigate against recognising and escalating domestic and sexual abuse by police colleagues is the idea of 'exceptionalism'. Writing on the response to scandal and wrong-doing within the Australian military, MacKenzie and Wadham (2023) describe a cultural belief in the inherent nobility of the soldier figure (MacKenzie and Wadham 2023, p. 301):

> The 'good' soldier represents the national character and embodies gender and racialized values that place white able-bodied men as the most esteemed members of society, and the presumed protectors of the nation (Wadham, 2017). White male soldiers are more readily associated with romantic notions of soldiers as smalltown, heartthrob heroes (MacKenzie, 2023) and are given greater liberty to express rage, make mistakes, and be 'out of control' while still being seen as 'good soldiers.' (Razack 2004)

The idea of 'exceptionalism' reframes illicit or harmful behaviours by soldiers as a natural corollary of the burden and traumas of being guardian of the people (MacKenzie and Wadham 2023). It can imply holding soldiers – or in the context of this paper, police officers – to different, more forgiving, standards and fits with the 'unorthodox but effective' trope in popular culture portrayals of policing (Dowler 2016). While police officers and others in high stress-physical danger roles may need close and empathetic supervision (see, for example, Miller 2006), this cannot be exculpatory. Failure to hold individual officers to account undermines the guardianship role of the entire police institution. It can also represent an institutional betrayal for reporting victims.

Institutional betrayal

Smith and Freyd (2013) define institutional betrayal as 'when an institution causes harm to an indi-vidual who trusts or depends on that institution' (p. 578). Reviewing the failure of police in the US to routinely submit sexual assault forensic evidence for testing (thereby missing the opportunity to identify or confirm the identity of sexual perpetrators), Campbell *et al*. (2024) further describe how:

> Institutional betrayal occurs when individuals reach out for assistance, safety, and/or accountability, expecting to receive help, and instead are hurt, harmed, and/or blamed by the institution for what they have experienced. Institutional betrayals may be acts of omission or commission; furthermore, some acts may appear to be isolated events, others may be systemic in nature. (pp. 2–3; see also Smith and Freyd 2013, 2014)

Importantly, institutional betrayal can refer both to how individuals who experience harm can be betrayed by the institution in which they work, live or receive a service (see, for example, Monteith and colleagues' 2021 study of women who experience sexual assault in the military; also Bikos 2023) *and also* by those organisations to which they turn for help, recognition and accountability. The police and wider justice systems are good examples of this second context. Indeed, Smith and Freyd (2014) describe how victim-survivors of harm may experience betrayal *even where* they had low trust in the institution to start with, because they must unavoidably engage with the institution, as part of their route to accountability or justice.

The nature of the betrayal has been developed further by scholars who identify how organisations may engage in institutional 'gaslighting'. This term, used commonly to describe coercive intimate relationships, describes how perpetrators engage in manipulation and psychological control. These behaviours undermine an individual's perception of reality and may indeed lead them to doubt their own beliefs, memories and sanity. Where an institution has the power to offer expert recognition or redress – as Sebring (2021) describes in their account of seeking a medical diagnosis – the capacity to gaslight, and the impact of such behaviour, can be profound (MacKenzie *et al.* 2023).

Research aims

In summary, we have emerging (but not especially robust) quantitative data on police perpetrator prevalence, and good knowledge of the barriers facing victims of gender-based violence in general engaging with the criminal justice system. However, less is known about the qualitative experience of victims of sexual and violent police perpetrators who report their experience to the police in England and Wales. In particular, how it feels to 'fail to be protected by the protectors'. This paper contributes to addressing that gap.

Method

The first author of this paper is a criminologist, specialising in gender-based violence research. The second author is a psychologist, specialising in police sexual misconduct, and is a former police officer. Research participants were recruited through a gatekeeper – known to the second author – who convened an online mutual support community for victims of police-perpetrated partner abuse. Ethical review for this work was sought and provided by the University of Bournemouth (UK) in November 2022. A participant information sheet, consent form and question schedule were circulated by the gatekeeper to the group. Women interested in taking part in a semi-structured interview were able to contact the second author to register their interest, and/or ask for more information.

Ten interviews were arranged and conducted online during January and February 2023. Nine of our ten participants identified their ethnicity as white, and one as Asian. At the time of interview, participants were aged in their thirties ($n = 3$); forties ($n = 3$); fifties ($n = 3$); and twenties ($n = 1$). Four of the ten participants were police officers at the time of the abuse. It is important to underline that this is small-scale in-depth study, where we had to be especially careful to protect the anonymity of our participants (and their perpetrators). The data does not allow either for intersectional analysis or to compare meaningfully the experience of victims who are police officers and those who are not. We recognise this limitation.

The paper authors, both experienced qualitative researchers, split the interviews and carried out each individually, but met regularly to debrief. Each interview lasted between one and three hours. Participants were given the option to leave their camera on or off; were encouraged to ask for breaks as needed; and forwarded sources of support. No participants exercised their right to withdraw from the research. All participants asked to be kept up to date with publications arising from the work. Table 1 summarises the profile of participants and their reporting experience. The events shared by participants included the period 2018–2023 in all but one case. Their experiences included serious violence (including threats to kill), coercive control and/or sexual abuse against the participants and others (including children and companion animals).

Table 1. Participant overview table.

Participant experience										
Participant code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Events include or relate to 2018–2023?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Participant was a police officer?	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Reporting										
Participant code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Participant reported perpetrator to the police?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Perpetrator threatened to report participant to the police?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Perpetrator actually reported participant to the police?	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Perpetrator reported participant to e.g. social services, school?	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Perpetrator remains a serving officer (or remained until retirement)?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table 2. Quote distribution.

Participant code	Total word count of interview transcript	Interview word count as proportion of total word count for all 10 interviews	Total times quoted in this paper	Number of quotations per participant as proportion of total ($n = 22$)
1	6111	5%	2	9%
2	12,115	10%	2	9%
3	25,809	21%	2	9%
4	6357	5%	3	14%
5	9047	7%	2	9%
6	17,212	14%	3	14%
7	9843	8%	1	5%
8	8464	7%	3	14%
9	9359	8%	1	5%
10	18,527	15%	3	14%

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and then carefully anonymised. To further protect the anonymity of our participants, and recognising the sensitivity of their testimony, we have not labelled their quotes in the following analysis, given the risk of piecing these details together to infer their identify. Instead, we show in Table 2 how their quotes were used. It should be noted that some interviews may have focused more on their experience of abuse (paper in preparation), rather than the institutional response, so interview length does not necessarily tally with number of quotes used.

Analytical themes were generated inductively by the first author. The second author analysed the same data using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn 2003) for a separate paper on victim experiences. In both cases, the authors started the analysis process by working together to analyse one transcript using each approach (i.e. thematic and IPA). After completing their respective coding, both authors came together again to discuss their coding and to agree themes iteratively, before writing up the analysis (Morgan and Nica 2020).

Findings

This section is split into three parts. The first two sections consider types of institutional response experienced by the participants in our dataset, which we term (1) hostile-obstructive response and (2) collusive-minimising response. In the third section, participants reflect on their experience of institutional betrayal.

1. Hostile-obstructive response

The participants in our data experienced hostile and obstructive responses from the initial report through to the close of the investigation. For participants who were also serving officers, they

endured additional workplace intimidation from selected colleagues and/or senior officers. Turning first to the initial report, three participants described feeling like they were the perpetrator, rather than their abusive partner. For example:

> And eventually the police did come. And there were absolutely loads of them. There were at least 8 officers in my house, at least. […] I was told to pack some clothes, which I did. […] Apparently, according to the male police-man, he said that my husband was literally emptying out the bags in front of everybody [downstairs], on the floor to see what was in there. And one of the bags contained all my underwear. And he was allowed to do that […] And afterwards I thought, really, I am treated like the perpetrator, I am told to leave my house. And, you know, they [*the officers*] were one in front of me and one behind, the whole time. I couldn't go anywhere. And then when I did go downstairs, everyone was just looking at me. (Quote 1)

Three participants also described how they were discouraged from proceeding with their report at this early stage. Looking in retrospect, they felt that the officers had deliberately sought to narrow their choices. The following two examples relate to officers visiting the participants in their home, after the initial report:

> I said, 'I'm not sure if I want to, but I think I want to go with it [criminal charges]'. But the domestic abuse inves-tigator, she basically just totally turned my opinion around to not bother with it. [She] basically told me that, 'If he's going to get prosecuted you need to give xyz' – this long list of different things – 'and you can't pick and choose. If you're going to give me something you have to give me all of it.' So she changed my mind about going through with the investigation. I told them I'm not ready to proceed. (Quote 2)

Another described repeatedly being asked by two officers from the Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit if she 'really' wanted to pursue criminal charges. They suggested it could be dealt with internally. She described in the research interview that she simply wanted the sexual violence to stop: so she agreed, explaining that she trusted the officers.

Research participants found that a common tactic used both by their perpetrator and by police colleagues was to position them as 'mad' or unstable. Some felt that the perpetrator would tell col-leagues that their partner was 'crazy' in anticipatory defence, should she later report the abuse. Two participants describe here their experience of giving a victim statement at the station, which they felt more akin to an interrogation:

> While I was in that station, he [investigating officer] questioned me for five, five and half hours, and in the end, I was sobbing. And he was just saying, 'You are not coping, it's your mental health'. And I'm thinking, no, it's because I have been here for five hours! I have been here for five hours with a cup of water, and you keep talking about my mental health. (Quote 3)

> So, there was a young officer who took me into one of these rooms. And I was explaining what was happening. I can remember saying that, 'I just want it to stop. I just want him not to come in the night anymore.' And I was crying. And he went into, he left, and he said, 'I am going to get you some tissues.' But the walls between these little rooms must have been so thin that when he was in the next room, I could still hear him. And he was either on the phone or on the radio to someone. And he was saying, 'She's really upset, I have sniffed and I can't smell any drink on her. I don't think she's on drugs. But I'll ask. I'll get a bit closer and check.' He must have meant my pupils or something. And then he was like, 'And we should speak to her GP.' And I am sitting in the next room, thinking, 'He [husband-perpetrator] was right. They don't believe me. They don't believe what I am saying. If their first response is, "Am I drunk, am I high, do I have the mental capacity?"' (Quote 4)

Three of the four victims who were also serving officers in our dataset, experienced animosity and threats from colleagues and/or senior managers. For example, after reporting intimate partner abuse by a fellow officer, one interviewee was placed on a 'supportive plan'. This was overseen by a sergeant and an inspector in her station – an inspector that the interviewee elsewhere describes as a 'drinking buddy with my ex'. The interviewee felt the plan was a bureaucratic tool to keep her quiet and, ideally, manage her out of the organisation:

> But the inspector did say to me, 'I'll make sure that you are out of this job.' So, he made his intentions really obvious. I was told that I cannot speak out about an officer without any evidence. That I need to stop talking. That was part of the supportive plan – they call it a supportive plan, it's obviously the 'you'll do this, or you'll get sacked plan.' (Quote 5)

Another interviewee reported physical and sexual assault by a more senior officer with whom she had been in an intimate relationship over some months. She received a call at her desk from her chief inspector:

> He said, 'Wait for me up in the conference room.' So, I sat in the conference room on a Friday afternoon and it was only supposed to have been the Chief Inspector but then the Superintendent showed up as well. So I got there, I'm sitting there waiting, and they sit either side of me. The Chief Inspector sits to the front and the Superintendent sits to the right of me. It's a massive room with a huge table, sterile environment. And it goes down the line of, 'We need to let your ex resign: he has offered to resign.' He's gone to them, basically said, 'Hey, I'll resign if you drop all criminal charges.' He's still not been arrested at this point. So he's suspended, but not arrested. So they said, 'Let's just let him resign and make this go away,' and I said, 'No, he's committed serious offences.' [The Chief Inspector] was saying to me – 'You're a student officer. You are a probationer. You need to remember that you're in your probation and it would be a shame for two officers to lose their jobs instead of one.' (Quote 6)

A further participant was admitted for gynaecological surgery due to a violent rape by her partner. She requested to log the incident on her police file, in case anything happened to her subsequently – so that there was a record somewhere – but that no action be taken. Lying in hospital, she received a phone call on her mobile from a senior officer who had investigated her previous (and only) report against her police officer partner:

> And the same guy rang me, and said, 'It's you again, isn't it?' I was like, 'Sorry?' And he said, 'You again. Are you reporting this officer?' And I said, 'I haven't reported any officer.' And he said, 'Well, just so you know, I am not doing anything about it.' And I said, 'I didn't ask you to do anything about it. I just wanted it logged somewhere. I don't want any contact from you,' [I am thinking] like, please go away! And he said, 'Well, I am retiring in a year, so if you want to report anything further, wait until after I have gone.' (Quote 7)

The above examples evidence how more senior [male] officers leveraged rank and access to information to threaten the victim, explicitly or implicitly.

Finally, where the cases proceeded beyond the initial report to some form of investigation, participants found the process hostile and inadequate. A number had collected evidence, or could provide evidence (e.g. audio recordings; neighbour's CCTV; phone messages; medical records), which was not used. Or they gave detailed descriptions of places and witnesses, which were either not followed up, or followed up incorrectly. Commonly, cases were designated 'no further action' (NFA).

> I didn't even get a letter telling me: it was an e-mail quoting the officer who had made the decision. Saying that, although he was coercive and controlling, there was not a realistic prospect of prosecution, so there would be no further action taken. I was like, this was an 18 month long investigation, for you just to turn around and say, 'Yeah, it's bad behaviour but we're not going to do anything about it.' So I really feel for these people who are victims of this newly found out man, David Carrick. I hate that the police say that opportunities were missed because, I can absolutely guarantee, the opportunities were not missed – they were *ignored*. (Quote 8)

2. Collusive-minimising response

This section details institutional processes and behaviour by officers, which were experienced by our participants as collusive, minimising and concealing. First, four interviewees reported that their perpetrator was 'tipped off' by a colleague when they reported the perpetrator's abuse. This put the interviewee at significant risk of harm. For example, one participant put in a request to move station, in order to get some distance at work from her abusive partner and colleague, and as a first step to extricating herself from the relationship:

> Unfortunately, the person that I trusted to help me do this, which was one of the line managers at our station, he decided to tell him [*the perpetrator*] all about it, which was not helpful, obviously, and he [*the perpetrator*] went completely nuts at me when he found out that I'd done that. (Quote 9)

Another participant, after a number of years of abuse, decided finally to report to the police. She went into the garden to call the neighbouring force, which is where her husband worked.

… And I was shaking so hard that I could barely type on my phone. And I contacted them [*neighbouring police force*], and they kept saying, 'We need to know his name,' And I said, 'If I tell you his name, he is going to go spare.' And they said, 'Well, we can't do anything unless you tell us his name.' (Quote 10a)

Eventually, she disclosed his name but repeated to the telephone operator a number of times that they must not send anyone out, as it would put her at risk. A short while later, she returned indoors:

The next thing I know, I walk in the house and he [*her husband and perpetrator*] is livid. He is is livid. Because I had contacted the police. And I said, 'I don't know what you are talking about.' I was trying to make a cup of tea. And he said, 'You have phoned the police and [*the home police force*] are on the way.' And I said, 'How on earth do you-, what makes you think that?' He said, 'Because my boss just called me and told me.' (Quote 10b)

A second common experience to this group was feeling that their report was being minimised. For example, this participant recounted her partner's physical and sexual violence to an investigating officer:

The copper that was interviewing me says, 'We all get upset sometimes. Sometimes I throw dishes.' […] He said that he would pass the details on to the sexual investigator and they'll get back to me, but nobody got back to me at all. (Quote 11)

A further participant described how she called the police when she felt her life was in imminent danger. She and her police officer partner had recently separated, following a long period of violence and rape. One night, he tried to break into the rear of the property, because she had changed the locks. Within two or three minutes of her calling emergency services, the police called her back to say no response car would be sent because, they claimed, it was a civil matter. Distraught, she picked up her sleeping child and left through the front of the house. She was never able to return or retrieve her belongings. Her partner took control of the property and sold the contents. Having taken refuge in a new property, the perpetrator repeatedly appeared, sitting outside in a car for long periods. When she called to report this behaviour to the police, she was told it was a public road and so no offence had taken place. For the participant then, the framing of both the house incursion and the post-separation harassment as 'civil matters', was a minimisation. Later in the same phonecall, the officer demonstrates a weak grasp of abusive relationships by suggesting that the force send him (the perpetrator) – in his uniform – to the house, to discuss the matter with her.

Minimisation would also occur where colleagues and senior officers responded to the victim's informal disclosures of abuse by stressing what a great officer the perpetrator was, or emphasising his seniority or achievements: For example: 'They said […] he's our top guy and he's been given a commendation' (Quote 12). In other words, the heroic public role that officers undertook was used to exceptionalise and – from the victim's perspective – *dilute* wrongdoing in the private sphere.

What is striking in hearing the testimonies of survivors of sexual and violence police perpetrators is the sense of there being 'nowhere to turn'. For many in the general public, the police are society's guardians. For the participants, the police are a tight-knit, homosocial group, who tend to look after their own. After a violent incident, this participant recalled:

So [*name of police force*] attended. So, I heard the male officer talking to him [*participant's husband*] in one room, female officer was talking to me in another room. All I could hear were gales of laughter from my husband and this other officer, coming from down the house. Appalling. And they just left again. They just left. (Quote 13)

One participant is found in a public place by police, intent on self-harm, because she feels trapped and desperate in the abusive relationship. When the police intervene, she thinks that they may take her to safety.

As soon as they realised who my husband at the time was, they were like, 'Oh, we'll take you back.' And I thought they meant, to a place of safety, like a hospital, or I don't know. No, they put me in the car, and even after I had said, 'Please don't take me back there', they took me back to the house, knocked on the door and then explained. And my husband [*police perpetrator*], he shook their hands and he was like, 'Oh, it's alright, I'll sort her out from here.' So they literally just, they physically handed me over to him. And I was like, I can't … how do I get out of this? (Quote 14)

Participants felt that there was evidence of collusion and concealment. Too often, their perpetrators were investigated by colleagues or managers or an officer with whom they socialised or played sport. Half of our participants had tried reporting to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), a national regulatory body in England and Wales, but all had found their cases referred back to the force where they had originally lodged their complaint. Participants struggled to see any oversight or independence in the how cases were handled. More seriously, four participants experienced evidence either going missing, or not being logged in the first place.

> … the family court asked the police to disclose everything. They found everything in the [*force one*] system, but in [*force two*], they didn't find anything, […] even to the CAD [*computer aided dispatch*] number, so it looks like it never happened. (Quote 15)

> At that point I put a subject access request in. […] And you know what, they couldn't find anything. There was nothing on HOLMES [*Home Office Large Major Enquiry*] … his PNC [*Police National Computer*] conviction had disappeared! It disappeared at the point his suspended sentence had ended at two years. It was taken off years ago. So I was like, well where is everything? (Quote 16)

Another participant secured the possibility of an external review of her case, only to discover that all the physical evidence that she originally submitted had gone missing from the police store. She was told that it had last been signed out by someone at the police station where her perpetrator worked, but there was no further trace.

Finally, participants voiced concern that their partners were not sanctioned, but rather moved roles within the force or were transferred elsewhere (commonly, in our sample, to another specialist unit). This included where there had been previous allegations against the officer, a practice which calls to mind the movement of Catholic priests accused of sexual abuse to different parishes. For at least one participant, the officer was given restricted duties for a period, but then returned to their role. Three of the ten perpetrators in our dataset were firearms officers. Nine out of the ten perpetrators either continue to serve today in the force, or served until retirement.

3. Institutional betrayal

All of our participants continue to lack confidence in the police on the issue of police perpetrators, and this includes the four serving officers in our dataset. We interviewed participants in January and February 2023, between the interim and final report of the Baroness Casey review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the London Metropolitan Police Service, and as the tenor of media commentary was heightening over the cases of Wayne Couzens, David Carrick, and the exchange of misogynist WhatsApp messages between English police officers. A number of participants independently stressed that the media coverage was positioning this is an issue with the Metropolitan police, when their experience suggested it was a *national* problem. When asked what they would advise current victims to do, seeking support from a domestic abuse organisation was suggested over reporting to the police.

> I should be able to say, as advice if this happens to you [*i.e. you are a police officer abused by another officer*], you report it. You go straightaway to your counter corruption unit, or your inspector, or the head of the domestic abuse team. I should be able to say that, and I can't. (Quote 17)

They expressed deep frustration at statements by senior officers and raised concern that too often the response on social media was to position police perpetrators as just a 'few bad apples' tagging phrases such as 'Blue Lives Matter' or 'Not all officers'. There was incredulity that powers were not available to remove officers found to have been abusive:

> I don't believe words – I believe actions. They can say the words 'domestic abuse is a priority, victims are a priority' – but it's just lip service. (Quote 18)

> I think the police need a whole shakeup of the system. I know that probably seems like a really big task but, you know, I've come across so many corrupt police officers. Yes there are some genuine ones, and I have friends

[*officers*] who are genuine hard-working people, but there are just so many out there that are getting away with it. (Quote 19)

… with respect, Mark Rowley [*Metropolitan Police Commissioner*] actually said, we just have our hands tied, we can't get rid of them [*in an interview on BBC Radio 4, 12 January 2023*]. Well, sorry, no, […] You better get that law sorted next week! (Quote 20)

Believe that it does happen; accept that it does happen. Listen to people when they say that it has happened to them, rather than saying, 'I don't know anyone that would do that,' or 'None of my police friends would do that.' You don't know. (Quote 21)

Two of our participants had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), though had sought to remain as serving officers in order to 'try and make the changes needed'. One was told by the doctor diagnosing that:

… the offender has caused PTSD by his actions and the force have then reconfirmed it, because they've continued to perpetuate the same behaviour throughout my service. So what it's effectively caused … .it's like a betrayal trauma. So I've got … . you've got an expectation that your partner is going to behave in a certain way, and an expectation that the police are going to behave in a certain way: and neither have done that. (Quote 22)

Other participants described the lack of closure and ongoing threat that they were faced with, because their perpetrators – who continue to serve as police officers – leverage the power of their position to make criminal allegations against the victim; to track their car and new home address details; and/or to make divorce or child contact proceedings profoundly difficult.

Discussion and recommendations for practice

Existing literature on reporting to the police suggests that the initial response to victims is critical to securing confidence and a sense of justice (Murphy and Barkworth 2014, Mulvihill *et al*. 2019). The participants in our dataset had reporting experiences which we have classed as 'hostile-obstructive' and 'collusive-minimising'. While victims of gender-based violence broadly may experience unacceptable responses from some officers (HMICFRS 2017, pp. 26–29, HMICFRS 2021, pp. 23–25), we suggest this is compounded for victims of police abuse by a tacit norm that the reputation of the force, and of fellow officers, should be protected at all costs (Bikos 2023). This may be intensified by a belief that officers do a tough job and therefore deserve some leeway and loyalty from colleagues (MacKenzie and Wadham 2023).

After experiencing violence and sexual abuse perpetrated by officers, victims who then receive 'hostile-obstructive' or 'collusive-minimising' responses when they report that abuse to the police, perceive a double betrayal (Smith and Freyd 2013). Victims feel 'gaslit' (MacKenzie *et al*. 2023) by an institution that takes their statement in one room, only to hear through the walls that their mental health and alcohol use are being questioned. They are disillusioned and endangered when they call the police out of desperation, only to find their police perpetrator is immediately tipped off by a colleague. Drawing on the findings above, we want to explore here how institutions which demand so much loyalty from their employees (Coser 1974, see also Peterson and Uhnoo 2012) can maintain the morale and mutual fidelity required for police work, while at the same time be willing to self-scrutinise, to be transparent and to find the institutional courage to reform (Smidt *et al*. 2023).

Institutional courage is a means of providing 'accountability, transparency, actively seeking justice and making reparations where needed' (Smidt *et al*. 2023, p. 3). It does not necessarily mean replacing one set of coercive behaviours with another (e.g. introducing compelled disclosure or lowering the threshold for dismissal). Instead, creating such courage requires putting in place processes to allow people safely to voice wrongdoing and mistakes; to commit to learning from those; and

then demonstrating timely change. It needs action at both the interpersonal and the organisational level. And it involves shifting internal beliefs through ongoing dialogue; not just external compliance. We make five recommendations here.

First, police forces should recognise and articulate police perpetrators as a real (rather than an imagined, or minimal) problem, which undermines victim and colleague safety, policing effectiveness, and public confidence. Second, encouraging diverse recruitment to the police and addressing recent vetting failures (HMICFRS 2023) continue to be critical, but will not alone promote reflexivity and transparency, because 'new institutional workers [may] continue to operate according to existing norms and systems of governance' (MacKenzie *et al*. 2023, [authors' addition]). Third, Murji (2023, p. 22) rejects the idea that 'deeply embedded structural problems can be solved through the fix of culture change programmes or the appointment of a heroic new leader'. Instead, internally and externally appointed scrutiny partners should work productively in every area and tier of policing, to ask difficult questions and allow space for honest answers. This means engaging police, police staff, victims, witnesses and local communities in a permanent process of collective problem-solving, rather than infrequent and top-down inspections. Particular attention should be paid to specialist and isolated units, which our data suggest may have specific issues with local oversight and conduct. Fourth, each force should publicly and regularly report action and commentary on independently agreed measures. Examples might include: 'In this force in the last 12 months: (a) how many officers have been have been reported for sexual misconduct and what was the outcome trajectory for each case? (b) What action has been taken to listen to victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence perpetrated by police officers or police employees, and to use their experience to change and improve force practice? (c) What proportion of force staff expressed confidence that if they, or someone outside of the police, reported violence or abuse by a colleague, it would be handled fairly?', and so on. Ongoing and transparent publication of data is required because, as Skogan (2003, in Maher, 2010) perceptively observes, professional groupings have a 'remarkable ability to wait out efforts to reform them' (pp. 278–279).

Finally, police officers themselves are each catalysts for change. Existing research suggests that officers support disciplinary and reform processes which they see as fair, and are more likely to speak out if they see peers and senior managers breaking the 'code of silence' about colleague wrongdoing (Kutnjak Ivković *et al*. 2018, pp. 185–186) within or outside of the force. In addition, Miller *et al*. (2022) conclude that officers perceive sexual misconduct as serious and reportable if sanctions are consistently robust and upheld (see also Sweeting *et al*. 2022). In other words, *peer and senior endorsement within the policing institution are critical*. Officers should not be required to 'do more', to tick boxes or to game monitoring systems. Instead, police leaders should demonstrate and facilitate authentic ethical practice. We suggest that, without urgent and tangible action on police perpetrators – as well as on other pressing injustices in policing – forces will continue to lose public trust, prompting a more radical re-envisioning of the police institution.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge the small sample size of this study. This meant we could not carry out effective analysis in relation to intersectional identities or role status, including the differences for victims who are also police officers or police staff. We recognise too that we interviewed only those participants who had a negative experience of reporting. There may be individuals who have a positive story to tell and we would encourage forces to celebrate and share good practice. However, in cases of under-studied injustice, it is through examining these failings and listening to less-heard voices, that learning and insight can begin. These are significant gaps but also opportunities for future research on police perpetrators in England and Wales. This work will be facilitated where police forces and oversight bodies can provide greater transparency and access to data.

Notes

1. See England and Wales, year ending March 2021 and year ending March 2022 [note 1], Worksheet 21, available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2022.
2. A super-complaint is a complaint that 'a feature, or combination of features, of policing in England and Wales by one or more than one police force is, or appears to be, significantly harming the interests of the public' (section 29A, Police Reform Act 2002).

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ORCID

Natasha Mulvihill 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4459-9057
Fay Sweeting 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0334-578X

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