Understanding police capacity issues in sex offence investigations, and considering a team approach as a solution to (some of) these challenges

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ABSTRACT:

Only a small proportion of reported incidents of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) are fully investigated and prosecuted in England and Wales. Part of the problem is the lack of effective police capacity for the completion of effective investigations. The purpose of this paper was to identify the challenges of meeting this demand and explore whether a team-based solution can address some of the issues.

The research used multiple datasets collected during Operation Soteria Bluestone to establish the capacity challenges in RASSO investigations. Case review analysis and interviews with investigators provided further qualitative evidence.

The findings show that policingâ€™s inability to cope with fluctuations in demand contribute to the lack of completion of investigations. Capacity issues result in the lack of completion of basic investigative actions, the lack of appropriate and satisfactory levels of communication with victims, and negative effects on officers including being detrimental to their wellbeing. The article explores how a team approach to investigating RASSO could create resilience and better continuity, especially in relation to victim support. However, there also needs to be sufficient effective capacity in the policing system to meet demand which can be seen to fluctuate widely over the medium term.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The work identifies two key decisions for police forces. First, it is essential that the resources provided generate the effective capacity that is capable of meeting demand over time. Second, a team-based approach, if adopted, could increase the resilience in the system and improve support for victims.

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Abstract

Purpose

Only a small proportion of reported incidents of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) are fully investigated and prosecuted in England and Wales. Part of the problem is the lack of effective capacity for the completion of effective investigations. The purpose of this paper was to identify the challenges of meeting this demand and explore whether a team-based solution can address some of the issues.

Design/methodology/approach

The research used multiple datasets collected during Operation Soteria Bluestone to establish the capacity challenges in RASSO investigations. Case review analysis and interviews with investigators provided further qualitative evidence.

Findings

The findings show that policing's inability to cope with fluctuations in demand contribute to the lack of completion of investigations. Capacity issues result in the lack of completion of basic investigative actions, the lack of appropriate and satisfactory levels of communication with victims, and negative effects on officers including being detrimental to their wellbeing. The article explores how a team approach to investigating RASSO could create resilience and better continuity, especially in relation to victim support. However, there also needs to be sufficient effective capacity in the system to meet demand which can be seen to fluctuate widely over the medium term.

Practical Implications

The work identifies two key decisions for police forces. First, it is essential that the resources provided generate the effective capacity that is capable of meeting demand over time. Second, a team-based approach, if adopted, could increase the resilience in the system and improve support for victims.

Originality

This is the first study that demonstrates the psychological and operational challenges related to capacity within RASSO policing, and the potential impact of team working on RASSO investigations.

Keywords: Capacity, Rape and Serious Sex Offending, Demand, RASSO, Policing, Investigation, Victims

Introduction

The poor performance of the police in England and Wales in relation to sex offence investigations has rarely left the news headlines in recent years (Dearden, 2023; Siddique, 2021; Topping & Barr, 2020). Rape convictions fell to an all-time low in 2020 (Topping & Barr, 2020) and charge rates for sex offence suspects remains low (Home Office, 2024). This in tandem with the fact that reporting to the police – despite the poor publicity – has continued to increase (ONS, 2023), driven by recent campaigns increasing awareness of sexual violence and the coverage of several high-profile cases (BBC News, 2022). The poor treatment of victims by the police has been well documented, with the investigative process being described as 'secondary victimisation' of the victim (e.g. Campbell, 2008). Work with victims has suggested that reasons for reporting to the police and understandings of justice are more complex than standard measures around convictions, highlighting components such as prevention of harm to others, dignity, and participation (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Daly, 2017; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Problems in police communication, and conversely the importance of good communication, with victims of sexual violence have repeatedly been highlighted as critical to victims' experiences (e.g. Rudolfsson et al., 2024; Sheeran et al., 2023; Smith et al., forthcoming). Recent reports have suggested that the Criminal Justice System as a whole is not equipped to deal with sex offences (Angiolini, 2024; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2022), with the blame for these failings being highlighted at systemic, legal, and socio-cultural levels.

Undoubtedly, austerity in the English and Welsh public sector has affected police forces as much as any other public service. For a decade from 2010 there was a steady decline in the number of police officers employed in England and Wales, from a peak of 172,000 in 2010 to a low point in 2018 of 150,000 officers (Home Office, 2023), a decrease of nearly 13%. This has resulted in forces struggling to meet demand, with austerity affecting capacity at many levels in policing sex offences (Public Accounts Committee, 2018; Stanko, 2022). This lack of capacity can affect the investigation of sex offences at several stages, which we here divide into three distinct phases of work:

Phase 1: Response

When an incident of rape or sexual assault is reported to police three sets of actions may need to occur simultaneously:

i. The victim needs to be cared for, ensuring both their wellbeing and safety, alongside maintaining any opportunities for collection of forensic evidence.

ii. In about 40% of cases the alleged perpetrator is known by the victim and so action can be taken to locate them and bring them into custody (ONS, 2022a). Alternatively, actions can be taken to identify those involved.
iii. Where relevant, the potential scene of crime needs to be secured so that evidence is not lost or removed. This can include finding other witnesses and sources of evidence.

Note that about half of all cases are reported more than a fortnight, and potentially years, after any incident has occurred (Walley, 2023a). These cases may offer less opportunity for evidence gathering, but pursuing relevant investigative actions alongside ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the victim and others who may also be vulnerable is still critical.

Phase 2: Investigation

The most intense phase ideally starts within the first 24 hours, and involves taking initial details, may involve a handover depending on whether a first responder has been involved, creating an investigative strategy, and collecting time critical material. All relevant material must then be identified, collected, and summarised in an investigator's case file. This process can sometimes be completed quickly, within, say, 48 hours, but this work can take many weeks or months depending on the complexity of the case. This includes interviews with suspects, victims, and witnesses, alongside collection of other forms of material such as phone records, video from security cameras etc. A key aim throughout this process is to establish and maintain a positive working relationship with the victim that considers their agency and ensures they are appropriately safeguarded. Much of this work must be done simultaneously.

Phase 3: Prosecution

Once a case file is prepared there is work to do to bring the case to trial, including file review and liaising with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which should ideally have started during the investigation phase using Early Advice. This can involve some rework and further evidence gathering at the request of the CPS, prior to a charge decision, as well as post-charge work. A task left to investigators is to maintain contact with victims to ensure their ongoing safety and to maximise the chances of cooperation with future court testimony.

Because many of the actions outlined in these three phases may need to occur simultaneously and within a limited timeframe, a lack of capacity at this stage may hinder these actions' completion, at all, effectively, or within the appropriate timeframe. It is estimated there are over one million instances of sexual assault in England and Wales each year, with around 196,000 of these being reported and recorded as crimes by police (data to March 2022, ONS, 2022b). This equates to an average of 12 cases per day arriving at a typical force. Random variation,

however, can mean that demand can double from one day to the next. There is also some slight seasonal variation based around day-of-week, with some events (e.g. festivals) creating other spikes in demand. Consequently, an individual investigator may have many cases to work on at any one time, across all stages of the process, with little control over when work can be carried out. This involves considerable multitasking.

Because officers are being asked to conduct complex investigations and often to multitask between several different, time critical elements, the issue of capacity is not solely about the number of officers, but how many *appropriate* officers there are to handle cases. This, in practice, involves having enough officers that hold the requisite experience and are suitably trained to undertake the role. Austerity has impacted both these factors, such as the impact of addressing capacity issues through recruitment programmes. While there have been several initiatives to try to resolve some of the recent policing capacity problems including the 'Uplift' programme that recruited 20,000 officers into forces, not only is the total number of extra officers much smaller when capacity reductions caused by those leaving are included, critically, the workforce also becomes younger and less experienced as many new officers are recruited into post at once (Institute for Government, 2023; Police Federation, 2024). Further, during the period of austerity, many of the specialist units that were specifically designed to have ringfenced resources to investigate rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) were disbanded, leaving RASSO investigations to be integrated back into general Criminal Investigation Department (CID) operations (Home Affairs Committee, 2022). In the early 2020's, only a minority of forces in England and Wales had specialist units for sexual offences (George and Ferguson, 2021; Siddique, 2021). These factors related to officer efficacy are likely to have influenced the way RASSO investigations are conducted.

In addition, high levels of burnout have been identified amongst RASSO investigators (Sondhi et al., 2023) which are comparable to that experienced by some healthcare professionals during the Covid pandemic, and manifest as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, or a lack of personal accomplishment. Sondhi et al. (2023) demonstrated that excessive job demands, creating poor work-life balance, were seen as an underlying factor in both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. The consequence of such burnout is that investigators lack empathy with victims, leading to a poor response and lack of victim engagement. Sondhi et al. (2023) suggest that the wellbeing of these officers can be enhanced by improved team cohesion, which speaks to the way RASSO investigations are staffed and capacity issues addressed.

All the above circumstances contribute to the way in which officers investigating RASSO cases currently operate. They will, for instance, typically work alone on cases, with one Officer in Charge (OIC) responsible for the course of the investigation. Some forces may employ different officers / staff to undertake different roles, in which case forces may have officers working together with their roles split between either being focused on the investigation or victim care. As noted above, they will likely have many cases to handle at once, and these many involve other RASSO cases, or other types of offences, depending on whether the officer is working in a specialist unit where their time is ringfenced or not (Walley, 2023b).

The changes to policing capacity – the absolute decrease in numbers, as well as the decrease in dedicated time and experienced resources – is likely to have had a profound effect on the efficacy with which RASSO cases are investigated. The aim of the current study, therefore, was to explore:

- What current capacity looks like, how it is managed, and a framing of current challenges related to capacity;
- Whether there any observed impact on the progression, efficiency, or completeness of cases;
- Whether these is any observed impact on victim treatment.

Method

This paper used multiple datasets collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB)[1]. The first stage of OSB was a research programme across five police forces in England and Wales that investigated the current state of how RASSO investigations were conducted (January 2021 – September 2022). This paper draws on datasets from four of the six Pillars of research conducted[2]; Pillars 1 (suspect focused investigations), 2 (disrupting repeat suspects), 3 (procedural justice approach to victim engagement), and 4 (learning, development, and officer wellbeing). Due to space constraints here and the number of datasets drawn on in this article, the datasets are discussed in turn rather than following a traditional Methodology format. Ethical approval was granted by the respective Pillar's institutions. Further details of each dataset can be found in related published works, referenced by each dataset title. Except for the demand and process dataset, all other data collected included material relating to demand and capacity, but also included data collection relating to broader topics around RASSO investigations.

[1] This research was conducted as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone, funded by the UK Home Office. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.
[2] Please see Stanko (2022) for a full outline of the OSB Pillars.

1) Demand and process dataset (from Pillar 4; Walley, 2023a)

Work was conducted to understand the investigation process and the demand entering the system. Data for this were collected from the Incident Reporting system in one OSB force for all RASSO incidents that were reported between January 2018 to December 2021, provided in anonymised format to the researchers. This included any reports that came into the system via 999, 101, were passed from other forces, or were from other public services. In the dataset, 6,947 separate incidents were included, but these incidents may have included more than one offence and other non-RASSO offences. Over 40 separate variables were collected in the sample, in the following categories:

- The crime number, Home Office offence codes and sub codes, and qualitative descriptive details of each offence;
- The timeline of the offence, including when the incident was reported, how it was reported, when the incident occurred, when the investigation started, and when the case concluded;
- Details of the police process, such as whether an offender was identified, whether suspects were interviewed, charging decisions, and disposal outcomes etc.;
- Limited details about suspects and victims, e.g. ages at the time of the offence. No data that might be used to identify a victim or suspect were included in this dataset.

Three sample incidents were then taken and interviews conducted with investigators from the force to identify the necessary steps that had been completed to progress the investigation as far as it could have been taken. These cases were used to produce a generic map of the investigation process to understand the workload (amount and timing) involved in protecting and engaging with the victim, the identification and full investigation of the offender, and the workload involved in case preparation and bringing a case to trial.

2) Case review dataset (Pillars 1 and 2; Norman et al., 2022)

A case review dataset was generated by creating a template for officers to complete in the five OSB forces. Using non-probability quota sampling, 72 closed cases dated between 2019 and 2022 were requested from each force. Identified by officers, the included cases aimed to comprise of an equal number of classification types based on victim-suspect relationship (stranger, acquaintance, and domestic) and a range of outcomes in line with current Home Office outcome codes (victim declines to prosecute, no further action [police or CPS decision], charged). A total of 253 case reviews were completed across the forces, ranging from 33 to 59 per force, and comprised of two levels of review. All officers received training on using the case review tool from the research team and were split into two groups depending on rank:

- First reviewers ranged from Detective Constables to Detective Inspectors. In phase one, first reviewers provided a summary of the case, including a log of investigative actions taken, as well as critically reflecting on several areas of the investigation: initial investigative focus, direction, decision-making, and completion; risk assessment and management; victim engagement; supervisory oversight; considerations around the suspect including any repeat perpetration; liaison with the CPS and other services; and time management;
- Second reviewers held the rank of Detective Inspector and above. In phase two, second reviewers critically reflected on the same areas of the investigation as in phase one, but also reviewed the initial review conducted by first reviewers.

Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative section of the reviews. Descriptive statistics were calculated from the quantitative data on timeliness of investigative milestones.

3) Interviews with officers dataset (from Pillars 1 and 2; Barbin et al., 2024)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 officers from the five OSB forces ranging from 10 to 17 per force. Officers ranged from Police Constable to Senior Policing Staff, including victim focused officers. The interview schedule covered key areas, such as: officer experience and training; investigative challenges; intelligence used in RASSO investigations; named suspects; repeat suspects; how the police work with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) on RASSO investigations; and the process of conducting suspect-focused investigations. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020).

4) Ethnographic observations dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)

Ethnographic observations were conducted over 40 shifts (324 hours) across 14 investigation teams in four forces. Purposive and opportunistic sampling was used to ensure force structure and shift patterns were reflected. Observers made field notes using an ethnographic reflexive approach (e.g. Eriksson et al., 2012).

5) Review of BWV footage and Achieving Best Evidence interviews dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)

Body Worn Video (BWV) footage captured by police in first response to RASSO cases was reviewed, covering 16 cases across three forces totalling 14 hours. Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews with the victim were also reviewed, covering 31 interviews across three forces totalling 34 hours. Pro forma prompts to capture basic contextual details (e.g. who was

present) and key aspects of the qualities of the victim-police interaction were completed by researchers while reviewing the footage.

6) Interview and focus group dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)

Focus groups were conducted with Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) and support practitioners (six online focus groups, 27 participants, across four forces) and police officers (16 online focus groups, 69 participants, across three forces). Eight interviews were also conducted with support service strategic leads or managers across three forces, and eight interviews with senior RASSO leads across four forces. For service focus groups and interviews, purposive and self-selecting sampling was used to reflect main support services in force regions, and the researchers asked to include specialist practitioners for minoritised and marginalised victims where possible. Purposive and self-selecting sampling was also used to identify officers for focus groups and interviews, with the use of a force liaison to assist in the identification and invitation of relevant participants, which depended on local structures (e.g. included investigators, first responders, call handlers etc.). For all focus groups and interviews, semi-structured topic guides were used and drawn up on the basis of literature then developed iteratively through the project.

Data were analysed thematically (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), with weekly research meetings to identify and test emerging themes before the collaborative development of a codebook. Findings were sense-checked with victims through expert by experience panels. For broader discussion of the systemic injustices experienced by rape victims in police investigations see Smith et al. (forthcoming) and Smith et al. (2022).

Results

The combined analyses of the datasets showed that issues relating to capacity and demand impacted on the investigation of RASSO at several levels, including issues completing necessary investigative actions, poor frequency and quality of victim contact, and negative effects on officers themselves.

Investigative actions

Data from the case reviews (Table 1) suggest that some fundamental functions of RASSO investigations were not undertaken in reviewed investigations. When considering this alongside the demand analysis, this could be explained due to the demand varying partly randomly on a day-to-day basis, meaning that some days are quieter than average and some considerably busier. Even if a system has the capacity to cope with average demand, there

will be periods where there is insufficient capacity, which results in required actions not being taken.

Table I: Investigative milestones of cases with named suspects by and across four forces

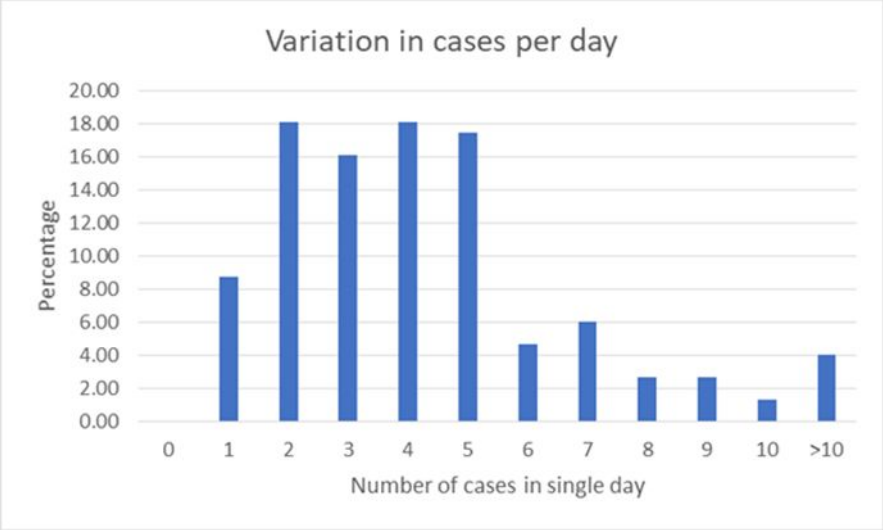
Investigative milestones	Viability of action	Total across all forces	Range
Safeguarding	Should occur in all cases.	95 (65.1%)	17 – 29 (50- 72.2%)
Suspect interview	Should occur in all cases except where victim said they do not want to proceed before the suspect is interviewed.	88 (60.3%)	17-28 (47.2-76.5%)
Forensics	Should occur in all cases where forensics are available.	80 (54.8%)	17-26 (47.2-59.4%)
Suspect intelligence	Should occur in all cases.	67 (45.9%)	14-22 (38.6-68.8%)
Victim interview	Should occur in all cases where victim is willing to engage with the police process.	66 (45.2%)	8-23 (22.2-52.3%)
Offender risk management	Should occur in all cases.	50 (34.2%)	5-22 14.7-50%)
Victim intelligence	Should occur in all cases.	45 (30.8%)	5-15 (13.9-46.9%)
CPS engagement	Some type should occur in all cases at a minimum early advice.	45 (30.8%)	7-19 (21.9-43.2%)
Total cases		**146**	**32-44**

Figure 1 shows how the number of cases arriving each day varies considerably (and analysis shows this is not likely to be a seasonal pattern of variation). Figure 1 shows that, in a system that is expecting 4-5 cases per typical day, the system may receive nine or more cases on some days in the year, hence the demand on some days is double what investigators would

routinely expect. The high caseloads and the subsequent time they could dedicate to each case were noted by officers and supervisors themselves:

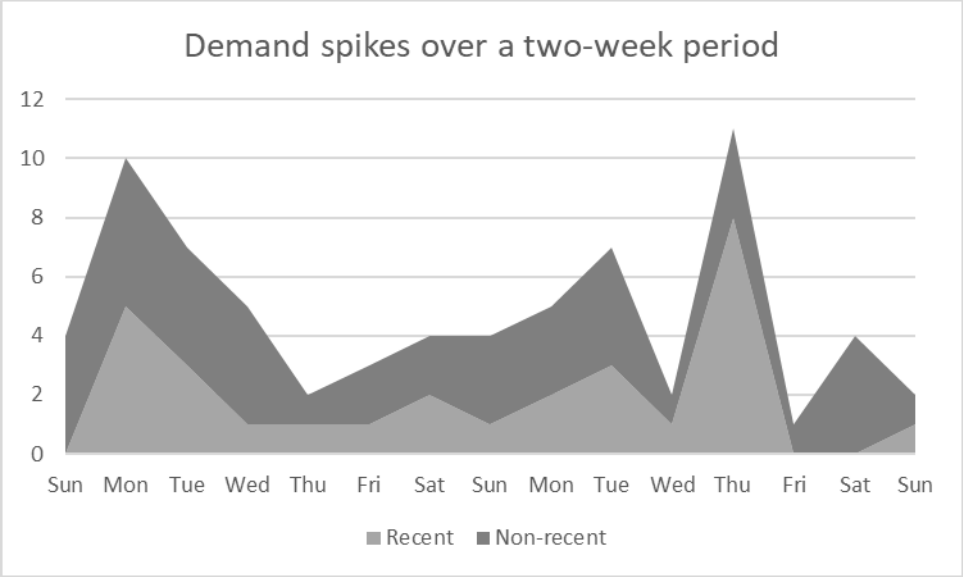
> *"I'm carrying 21 cases at the moment … so you've got 40 hours in a week, and we deal with prisoners as well so that might be two days gone. So that leaves me 3 days to work on my caseload. So that's 24 hours to deal with 20 cases. So that's about an hour and 10 minutes for each case a week." (Force B, Officer 2)*

Figure 1. The variation in the number of RASSO cases arriving per day for one force



Detailed analysis of these spikes in demand showed that some of the spikes had a high proportion of cases reported immediately after the incident, therefore needing immediate response both to safeguard the victim and preserve the evidence. The variation in demand from one day to the next could be highly significant. As Figure 2 shows, the second Wednesday had just two reported incidents, one of which required an immediate response. The following day there were 11 incidents, eight of which were reported very soon after the incidents had occurred. These data show how RASSO teams have to cope with sudden increases in urgent demand, with the current system not having the capacity to do this effectively during these spikes in demand.

Figure 2. Data showing the number of RASSO incidents for a two-week period in one force



Data from interviews with officers demonstrated a clear link between issues with capacity and how much of the fundamental investigative process they can work through:

> *"The biggest challenge for me is resource … And then maybe we're losing investigative opportunities because things are being missed." (Force B, Officer 1)*

It was noted that capacity issues means that officers are 'firefighting', meaning that investigations were not given the attention they deserved, and take longer to investigate than they otherwise would:

> *"We want to help victims the best we can and there are difficulties with giving our best because of the time constraints we have because of lack of officers … you're firefighting every day and when there are new cases reported it becomes difficult to give that case the focus is deserves. And victims are becoming unhappy because of the amount of time it takes for an investigation to take place, which can be months or years." (Force D, Officer 2)*

Officers noted that staffing issues also affected the availability of officers *with relevant expertise* to conduct RASSO investigations:

> *"I don't think the makeup of our teams is effective. As an organisation, we have lost an awful lot of experienced staff, and the force is made up of very young staff now. I personally don't think it is appropriate that we have staff put onto complex teams with very little experience of any other investigation type and then expect them to be able*

to deal effectively with rape and sexual offences with minimal supervision." (Force C, Officer 3)

This lack of thoroughness was also deemed to be exacerbated when there are time sensitive aspects of the case which mean multiple actions must be completed at the same time:

> *"A lot of the investigation can actually be completed very early on if you have the resources. Say if a job came in and you had your DS and you had four DCs available, you had a couple of [victim focused officers], you could go out, and maybe a couple of civilian investigators, and you go out and get everything done really quickly. But when it's maybe, you know, you've got a DC, maybe another one can help you out a little bit, and a [victim focused] officer, then you're kind of limited. Then you're always playing catch up with that investigation." (Force A, Officer 9)*

While there may be other reasons as to why basic investigative actions are not undertaken, such as a lack of perceived importance placed on their completion, the data outlined here demonstrates the impact capacity issues have on officers' ability to adequately complete required basic investigative actions.

Frequency of contact with victims

At a basic level, capacity issues may mean victims are not communicated with enough. One ISVA service estimated that in their caseload less than 30% of officers were providing updates every 28 days (P3: ISVA FG), which is supported by case review data (see Table 2) which shows that victim contact was only apparent in just under 75% of the cases sampled. One officer suggested to an observer however that lack of capacity might affect their ability to record on their systems when contact with victims was happening, but that contact might still be going ahead:

> *"[the officer] tells me they don't always update the notes, so [the officer] spoke to the victim that morning and that was contact but [the officer] didn't record it" (P3: Observations)*

Explicit links were made between lack of capacity and lack of communication with victims:

> *"It is notable how often I [the observer] hear officers having to apologise to victims for how long it has been since they last spoke to an officer. I hear [the officer] saying 'due*

to the volume of our work we can't always update you … I appreciate its quite a while.'" (P3: Observations)

Capacity issues around victim communication could be compound, where officers became hesitant to communicate with victims when they had been unable to make progress on cases in other ways. One manager reported:

"I hear from my officers all the time 'I'm scared of ringing my victims and telling them I haven't got an update for them, you know, it's soul destroying' and that, that basically boils down to because they haven't done anything on the case because they've been too busy dealing with other stuff. And, you know, that's a bugbear with officers." (P3: Police)

One police officer discussed how the police are focused on certain types of outcomes (e.g. convictions), but the victims' needs may be more around safeguarding and ongoing support, however, *"that type of work and those types of outcomes ('soft stuff') are not measured or recognised." (P3: Observations)*. This lack of recognition and measurement of victim contact as an important policing activity may be a reason why officers struggle to prioritise or feel embarrassed about making victim contact when they do not have investigative progress to convey, alongside a lack of capacity to do so.

Officers' ability to contact victims might also be affected by wider resourcing issues. One observer noted lots of issues with access to cars, or to car keys, which *"seems to be very time-wasting"* and how this might affect victim contact as an officer was unable to leave to visit a victim until a different officer had come back with a car (P3: Observations, Force C).

Police failures to contact victims regularly may be particularly acute where police find victims harder to reach and officers need more time, knowledge, or skills to maintain effective contact (examples given included victims who: are sex workers; have mental health needs; from minoritised communities). It was also noted that victim contact could 'tail off', leading to poorer victim contact as the investigation progressed:

"[Officer] and [officer] talked about Soteria. They said [...] Officers complain that they can't give victims the time needed. [...] Initial contact with victims is usually good but it then tails off because they don't have enough time to dedicate to contacting victims." (P3: Observations)

Aspects of how police work was being organised in the face of capacity challenges could have particularly detrimental impacts on contact with victims. One example was where police structures and capacity pressures meant that live cases were prioritised over ongoing cases:

> *"If a 'live' job comes in everything else gets put on hold and the team have to prioritise that. He tells me that there are times when they have an ABE booked but a call comes in and it's an 'acute' and so they have to cancel the victim." (P3: Observations)*

Another example was high turnover of staff, with concerns around victims not being kept informed of changes:

> *"There's been five different officers, and each time she's not been informed that the officer in charge has changed, up until I've made contact and tried to find out what's going on with the case." (P3: ISVA)*

Examples were given where staff turnover or prioritisation of 'live' cases meant other cases were not touched for long periods (e.g. 12 months, 18 months), suggesting victim contact during these periods may be lacking. The consequences of infrequent contact with victims, taken together with the length of cases, may impact on the likelihood of cases progressing. When asked why they thought victims cease to engage with investigations, one ISVA responded that *"90% of them are dropped because it's taking too long and they haven't been given any updates." (P3: ISVA)*. This is a stark finding which suggests that capacity issues are at least in part responsible for victims feeling unable or unwilling to progress through the investigative process.

Quality of victim contact

There were examples where failures to fit police processes with victims' needs were explicitly linked to capacity, such as where a victim expressed the need for an officer of a particular gender. In one case where BWV was reviewed (P3, BWV), the victim repeatedly requested a female officer. The police force was unable to provide this and, rather than giving the victim options around what was possible, proceeded against the victim's repeated objections, which appeared to have detrimental impacts to the relationship between police and victim and limitations on the quality of information the victim was able to provide. The researcher reviewing the footage described the overall interaction as *"chaotic and unproductive"*.

Unfortunately, even where victims' needs were known, they were not always followed, for example communications being made directly with victims who had asked for communication

to go through their ISVA, calls being made and voicemails being left late at night or just before an officer went on leave, causing victims anxiety and preventing them from being able to ask questions to fully understand the information. This included communication about critical decisions, such as to take 'No Further Action' on cases. While inferred, it is possible that capacity issues, such as officers having to 'finish up' tasks before shift end or leave, causes a decrease in the quality and thought behind victim contact.

An overarching theme around the impact of capacity on the quality of communication with victims is that building up rapport with victims takes time. There were examples of good practice, such as where a victim came in to complete a process but was rethinking her decision and was offered space to "*just have a chat" (P3: Observations)*. There were also examples of good practice in ABE interviews, where victims were encouraged, for instance, to take their time and take breaks. Other times, however, communication was observed to be focused on police processes and lack space for building rapport (or ensuring victim safety):

> *"I hear as he makes a call to a victim. It is very transactional and he does not ask how the victim is and if they are ok to talk. He says things like 'You rang in yesterday for a call back', 'Nothing from forensics back', […] 'I'll try and give them a call and see if there's an update' […] 'If you don't hear from me just assume there's no updates'." (P3: Observation)*

One officer described challenges where only one response officer was available to attend a report of RASSO, meaning they were unable to be focused on the relationship with the victim *"which again isn't ideal because you'll need someone to be liaising […], somebody solely there to speak to the victim and again I think that can damage rapport if you're constantly going off on your radio." (P3: Police).* Another example was lack of preparation time for victims' recorded ABE interview. One observation followed a scheduled interview with a victim, which had to be cancelled when an intermediary and an interviewer who had not previously met the victim were not able to engage effectively, resulting in the victim becoming distressed:

> *"The officer says that 'if they had the resources, it would have been nice to be able to just meet [the victim] and have a chat with the [vulnerable adult] interviewer and intermediary ahead of the assessment'." [P3: Observation]*

As well as issues around time with victims, a range of problems were identified around having appropriately trained officers (e.g. vulnerable adult interviewers) as well as gaps in related services (e.g. ineffective interpreting or translation services, long waiting lists for ISVAs).

There may be situations where lack of capacity creates more work for police, as well as poor experiences for victims. As noted above, agreements with victims around how to communicate were not always adhered to, including where the victim had expressed a preference for the police to communicate with her ISVA rather than directly. This might be expected to save police time as more of the work building rapport with the victim would rest with the ISVA. Part of the reason this may be happening is that officers lack capacity to build relationships with ISVAs, with ISVAs citing issues around high turnover of staff meaning they no longer have relationships with officers, while both ISVAs and officers pointed to a lack of specialism in the police meaning that officers do not have relationships with ISVAs.

> *"I wouldn't even know where to find an ISVA's phone number." (P3: Police)*

As with the issues relating to investigative actions, specialist expertise was relevant here too, with problems highlighted around the appropriateness of generalised response officers attending first contact with a victim who has reported a RASSO, rather than specialist officers being responsible for first and ongoing contact. Investigative officers noted issues where the first contact carried out by response officers (untrained in responding to RASSO) was done poorly, e.g. basic contact details not collected, resulting in investigators having to go back out and repeat work, while response officers commented on pressure from their supervisors to get a crime number on and pass it on 'as fast as you can', suggesting that victims would experience this time pressure.

The effects on officers

Challenges relating to capacity affected officers on several levels. Officers felt they were spread too thinly, particularly in relation to having to routinely prioritise resources elsewhere, meaning not enough resources being dedicated to RASSO:

> *"I might have a rape, and I think to myself, 'I'm going to go in tomorrow, I'm going to concentrate on that rape.' And I walk through the door and there could be a robbery, and there could be three people in the cells, and that rape's gone for the day, and maybe the next two or three days because that takes precedence at that moment in time … perhaps it needs a specialist unit to give rapes the attention that they need, because they are long, protracted inquiries." (Force B, Officer 3)*

Officers noted that these capacity issues were having a direct impact on their wellbeing, with officers noting the amount of additional work they felt they had to do just to stay on top of their caseload and the burn out they face:

> *"I probably do 10 to 20 hours on top of my 40 hours a week to manage what's going on. And that's not unique to me; that's the same with my staff. Even with their additional hours, they put in a lot of hours in their own time. They take their laptops to work from home. They'll come in on their rest days." (Force C, Officer 4)*

Officers also made the link between their own wellbeing, and that when this suffers it has a knock-on impact on their ability to effectively engage victims:

> *"[the officers] talk about having 'victim fatigue' which is a term I [the observer] hear several times throughout the day, where they feel desensitised to cases come in. [...] you don't feel as much for victims anymore, not like when you used to hear about it at the beginning" (P3: Observations)*

These effects on officers are compounded by a lack of supervisory capacity:

> *"I think we have a supervisory issue again because of the volumes of workload. Our central team has, on paper, 34 staff and it is carrying 600 plus crimes. Now it is impossible, especially when we haven't got a full complement of sergeants, for folks to effectively supervise those." (Force C, Officer 3)*

This means that officers who are uncertain on the course of action to take – likely compounded by high levels of inexperience – are unlikely to be appropriately supported. Consequently, mistakes or omissions are less likely to be identified and rectified, or poor victim care addressed.

Discussion

The data provide clear evidence that the investigation system capacity in the policing of RASSO is insufficient to either meet long-run demand or cope with short-run demand spikes causes by demand fluctuations. The consequences of this include the failure to address the most basic investigative actions or provide proper victim care. Considering these basic failings, it is also fair to assume that any more strategic, long-term, or proactive ways of disrupting sex offending, and particularly repeat and pervasive sex offence suspects, are very unlikely to occur. Challenges around capacity relating to the inexperience of officers and the lack of time

for them to develop appropriate expertise compounds these issues, as do associated issues with a lack of supervisory capacity which means that investigative and victim care errors and omissions are less likely to be rectified.

The management literature on demand and capacity management can be used to help develop practices that meet demand economically (Klassen & Rohleder, 2002). Capacity strategies usually anticipate predictable seasonal peaks and troughs in demand, a practice known as a 'chase' capacity strategy (Sasser, 1976). This practice has been seen in some aspects of police work (Ritchie & Walley, 2015). Most demand, however, also exhibits natural random variation which means that processes need to be flexible enough to cope with unpredictable, short-run changes. The presence of this demand variation creates conditions for queues to build up. Queue theory literature shows these situations need capacity provision to be greater than average demand if long queues and work backlogs are to be avoided (Shortle et al., 2018). The greater the demand variation, the more 'spare' capacity is needed to absorb the variation. The variation can be inadvertently increased by management interventions such as work prioritisation systems that reserve capacity for urgent cases. Specialist skill sets also create the conditions for higher levels of variation which means that work backlogs more readily form. Walley and Adams (2019) have highlighted that police forces' understanding of demand and the impact of practices such as prioritisation is patchy, at best. This means that many forces have limited understanding of what demand there is and how it might be dealt with.

RASSO work is often split between 'recent' demand, where a case comes in that has recently occurred (although how recent is defined varies from force to force), and 'non-recent' demand where significant time has elapsed before reporting, preventing most forensic investigation. This is too limited in its perspective because it does not address all the nuances of types of demand and how to respond; for example, much demand comes in a domestic abuse or familial context, where events occur repeatedly over time (ONS, 2022a). Even some rapes involving perpetrators unknown to the victim are part of a pattern of repeat offending that can remain undetected unless the demand is studied carefully. This needs time and resource.

If management theory is applied, the following types of intervention are required in addition to further training in RASSO investigation:

1. Capacity needs to be increased through additional recruitment so more officers are available meaning workloads decrease sufficiently to the point where they can spend significantly longer on any one case. Currently, effective capacity is usually insufficient to meet average demand levels consequently with many cases being abandoned

quickly. This will improve the levels of activity in the investigation stages shown in Table 1;

2. The capacity also needs to cope with the variability of demand, whereby spikes in demand can be absorbed more readily without compromising the effectiveness of the investigations;
3. Scheduling of staff based around demand levels, so that capacity is available when demand enters the system, is an essential component of the solution. In particular, the research noted that some investigation departments operate five days per week, Monday to Friday. The immediate implication is that the demand that occurs from Friday afternoon through to early Monday morning is not addressed until the start of the Monday shift. The investigators are then confronted with an urgent, two-day work backlog, with more demand coming in.

The data presented in this paper suggests that understanding capacity must be informed by a balance of the needs of victims as well as the requirements of investigative tasks. One of the issues with considering capacity purely from the perspective of absolute numbers is that it does not address the fact that often actions need to be taken quickly and simultaneously, something which was highlighted as a challenge in our data. The inference here is that one officer working on a RASSO investigation may be simply insufficient to get through the appropriate actions within the timeframes required. The solution to this issue was mentioned by officers themselves; that a wider group of officers and staff working simultaneously on one investigation are needed to better cope with the demands of RASSO cases, particularly when multiple actions are required that are time sensitive, or when cases are complex and may make demands on officers time to think more strategically about disrupting repeat offending, as well as conducting the immediate investigation. Working in a team should create a resilience in the system because it is less likely that an entire team are simultaneously unavailable to meet urgent requests or be responsive to a victim, mitigating some of the issues as outlined above. A team approach would help simultaneously provide victim support and focus on suspect investigation and disruption; in essence, having a team to work on RASSO cases may provide a solution to some of the specific capacity challenges identified here.

There is some evidence that a team approach to investigations is used in some forces, such as the allocation of both an investigator and a victim liaison officer to one case. There is debate, however, as to whether a targeted approach to multiskilling should take place within RASSO teams. Prior research makes strong recommendations for fully trained and highly focused investigators that have specialist skills in RASSO (Williams et al., 2022). It may be useful to have specific focus on roles within RASSO investigation, for instance, to provide a

clear point of contact with victims, or to have one officer whose role it is to liaise with the CPS. There are also, however, advantages to officers having the ability to switch from one role to the next in different investigations, as opposed to specialising in one type of role consistently (as is the norm in major crime investigations, National Police Chiefs' Council Homicide Working Group, 2021). Capacity is one such advantage, allowing for more flexibility for officers to take on roles according to demand. There are also advantages in terms of officers' understanding of the importance of all roles within the RASSO investigation; specialising in one specific area of the investigation runs the risk that officers become deskilled or unmotivated to work in other areas (such as not wanting to work with victims), or the establishment of a hierarchy or dissonance between different roles in the team (Stanko, 2022).

Team working can also play a significant part in developing the right capacity strategy. The ability to critically reflect on decisions taken using peer support is increased if a team is working on one investigation, something which may mitigate a lack of supervisory oversight due to supervisory capacity challenges identified. A team approach may also facilitate the sharing of expert knowledge, which is particularly relevant in the face of an inexperienced workforce or staff that do not have capacity for appropriate training (although this is clearly not a long-term solution to this problem).

There are also possible wellbeing benefits of a shared workload. Wellbeing of officers should be a priority and alleviated in general terms through the better provision of manageable caseloads, in line with the findings supporting increased reporting in general (Harding et al., 2024). Working as a team may provide added benefits in terms of alleviating the stress associated with making complex and high-stakes decisions alone, which could be mitigated through their decision and joint decision making in a team. As noted above, poor officer wellbeing can be mitigated by increased team cohesion (Sondhi et al., 2023) and working in a team provides more opportunities for officers to debrief with each other, which is particularly salient when working on RASSO investigations which have the potential to be highly distressing in nature (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022).

Our findings suggest that not only does demand need to be better met and capacity more carefully considered within RASSO policing, but that the organisation and setup itself needs to be considered, particularly how working as a team on RASSO investigations – with officers maintaining the flexibility to fill different roles as required – could mitigate many of the capacity and associated challenges outlined. While this may seem more organisationally complicated or resource intensive, this idea does not equate to, say, the doubling of staff if two officers work on a case simultaneously. This is because efficiency in such a case increases with more

actions being able to be taken simultaneously, shared and flexible workloads allowing for the investigation to be progressed more effectively, and the potential for more strategic disruption of repeat offending increased. In theory this should decrease the demands made on policing as prolific offenders might be more effectively prevented from re-offending. These findings have implications for how forces organise their RASSO resources, considering not just the amount of resources dedicated to investigating this type of offence, but how those resources are deployed.

The datasets included in this paper were drawn from some of the same and some different police forces in England and Wales who were part of OSB; some datasets were based on one force, others three to five. This could be seen as a limitation of the data due to the variability introduced, however, we argue this is a strength and that the themes identified were found in each dataset, despite their differences. Another limitation is that the datasets included do not include any direct work with victims, who may provide different insights into this issue. The focus of this project, however, was to work with directly with police to identify problems, given the well documented views of victims over several decades in the existing evidence base (e.g. Hohl et al., 2023; Martin, 2005; Ullman & Filipas, 2001), and the expectation on policing to better and more actively reflect on their own practice to instigate change. Researchers in Pillar 3, however, did sense-check findings with experts-by-experience during their data collection.

Our article contributes to our understanding of the current capacity issues within RASSO policing. The results here highlight that many stages of an investigation and the simultaneous work to protect and support the victim are missed out due to a lack of capacity to meet this demand. This paper has highlighted a series of adjustments to current practice that are needed if the current issues are to be resolved. It flags a required increase in staffing levels, but also transcends the notion of a solution as simple as augmentation in police numbers, demonstrating the importance of addressing organisational setup, introducing team working, and the intersection of promoting specialist knowledge, expertise, and effective supervision. There is a strong message that little improvement is possible or will be sustained unless the effective capacity in the system can meet both the long-run demand, but also the significant peaks and troughs in demand or workload that characterise this situation, as well as the multifaceted and complex nature of RASSO investigations which necessitate a more creative and team based approach to investigating this type of offending.

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Understanding police capacity issues in sex offence investigations, and considering a team approach as a solution to (some of) these challenges

Abstract

Purpose

Only a small proportion of reported incidents of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) are fully investigated and prosecuted in England and Wales. Part of the problem is the lack of effective police capacity for the completion of effective investigations. The purpose of this paper was to identify the challenges of meeting this demand and explore whether a team-based solution can address some of the issues.

Design/methodology/approach

The research used multiple datasets collected during Operation Soteria Bluestone to establish the capacity challenges in RASSO investigations. Case review analysis and interviews with investigators provided further qualitative evidence.

Findings

The findings show that policing's inability to cope with fluctuations in demand contribute to the lack of completion of investigations. Capacity issues result in the lack of completion of basic investigative actions, the lack of appropriate and satisfactory levels of communication with victims, and negative effects on officers including being detrimental to their wellbeing. The article explores how a team approach to investigating RASSO could create resilience and better continuity, especially in relation to victim support. However, there also needs to be sufficient effective capacity in the policing system to meet demand which can be seen to fluctuate widely over the medium term.

Practical Implications

The work identifies two key decisions for police forces. First, it is essential that the resources provided generate the effective capacity that is capable of meeting demand over time. Second, a team-based approach, if adopted, could increase the resilience in the system and improve support for victims.

Originality

This is the first study that demonstrates the psychological and operational challenges related to capacity within RASSO policing, and the potential impact of team working on RASSO investigations.

Keywords: Capacity, Rape and Serious Sex Offending, Demand, RASSO, Policing, Investigation, Victims

Introduction

The poor performance of the police in England and Wales in relation to sex offence investigations has rarely left the news headlines in recent years (Dearden, 2023; Siddique, 2021; Topping & Barr, 2020). Rape convictions fell to an all-time low in 2020 (Topping & Barr, 2020) and charge rates for sex offence suspects remains low (Home Office, 2024). This in tandem with the fact that reporting to the police – despite the poor publicity – has continued to increase (ONS, 2023), driven by recent campaigns increasing awareness of sexual violence and the coverage of several high-profile cases (BBC News, 2022). The poor treatment of victims by the police has been well documented, with the investigative process being described as 'secondary victimisation' of the victim (e.g. Campbell, 2008). Work with victims has suggested that reasons for reporting to the police and understandings of justice are more complex than standard measures around convictions, highlighting components such as prevention of harm to others, dignity, and participation (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Daly, 2017; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Problems in police communication, and conversely the importance of good communication, with victims of sexual violence have repeatedly been highlighted as critical to victims' experiences (e.g. Rudolfsson et al., 2024; Sheeran et al., 2023; Smith et al., forthcoming). Recent reports have suggested that the Criminal Justice System as a whole is not equipped to deal with sex offences (Angiolini, 2024; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2022), with the blame for these failings being highlighted at systemic, legal, and socio-cultural levels.

Undoubtedly, austerity in the English and Welsh public sector has affected police forces as much as any other public service. For a decade from 2010 there was a steady decline in the number of police officers employed in England and Wales, from a peak of 172,000 in 2010 to a low point in 2018 of 150,000 officers (Home Office, 2023), a decrease of nearly 13%. This has resulted in forces struggling to meet demand, with austerity affecting capacity at many levels in policing sex offences (Public Accounts Committee, 2018; Stanko, 2022). This lack of capacity can affect the investigation of sex offences at several stages, which we here divide into three distinct phases of work:

Phase 1: Response

When an incident of rape or sexual assault is reported to police three sets of actions may need to occur simultaneously:

i. The victim needs to be cared for, ensuring both their wellbeing and safety, alongside maintaining any opportunities for collection of forensic evidence.

ii. In ~~about 40% of~~many cases the alleged perpetrator is known by the victim and so action can be taken to locate them and bring them into custody ~~(ONS, 2022a)~~. Alternatively, actions can be taken to identify those involved.

iii. Where relevant, the potential scene of crime needs to be secured so that evidence is not lost or removed. This can include finding other witnesses and sources of evidence.

Note that about half of all cases are reported more than a fortnight, and potentially years, after any incident has occurred (Walley, 2023a). These cases may offer less opportunity for evidence gathering, but pursuing relevant investigative actions alongside ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the victim and others who may also be vulnerable is still critical.

Phase 2: Investigation

The most intense phase ideally starts within the first 24 hours, and involves taking initial details, may involve a handover depending on whether a first responder has been involved, creating an investigative strategy, and collecting time critical material. All relevant material must then be identified, collected, and summarised in an investigator's case file. This process can sometimes be completed quickly, within, say, 48 hours, but this work can take many weeks or months depending on the complexity of the case. This includes interviews with suspects, victims, and witnesses, alongside collection of other forms of material such as phone records, video from security cameras etc. A key aim throughout this process is to establish and maintain a positive working relationship with the victim that considers their agency and ensures they are appropriately safeguarded. Much of this work must be done simultaneously.

Phase 3: Prosecution

Once a case file is prepared there is work to do to bring the case to trial, including file review and liaising with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which should ideally have started during the investigation phase using Early Advice. This can involve some rework and further evidence gathering at the request of the CPS, prior to a charge decision, as well as post-charge work. A task left to investigators is to maintain contact with victims to ensure their ongoing safety and to maximise the chances of cooperation with future court testimony.

Because many of the actions outlined in these three phases may need to occur simultaneously and within a limited timeframe, a lack of capacity at this stage may hinder these actions' completion, at all, effectively, or within the appropriate timeframe. It is estimated there are over one million instances of sexual assault in England and Wales each year (we use figures here for instances of sexual assault as there is no standard definition of what constitutes RASSO in all forces), with around 196,000 of these being reported and recorded as crimes by police (data

to March 2022, ONS, 2022b). This equates to an average of 12 cases per day arriving at a typical force. Random variation, however, can mean that demand can double from one day to the next. There is also some slight seasonal variation based around day-of-week, with some events (e.g. festivals) creating other spikes in demand. Consequently, an individual investigator may have many cases to work on at any one time, across all stages of the process, with little control over when work can be carried out. This involves considerable multitasking.

Because officers are being asked to conduct complex investigations and often to multitask between several different, time critical elements, the issue of capacity is not solely about the number of officers, but how many *appropriate* officers there are to handle cases. This, in practice, involves having enough officers that hold the requisite experience and are suitably trained to undertake the role. Austerity has impacted both these factors, such as the impact of addressing capacity issues through recruitment programmes. While there have been several initiatives to try to resolve some of the recent policing capacity problems including the 'Uplift' programme that recruited 20,000 officers into forces, not only is the total number of extra officers much smaller when capacity reductions caused by those leaving are included, critically, the workforce also becomes younger and less experienced as many new officers are recruited into post at once (Institute for Government, 2023; Police Federation, 2024). Further, during the period of austerity, many of the specialist units that were specifically designed to have ringfenced resources to investigate rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) were disbanded, leaving RASSO investigations to be integrated back into general Criminal Investigation Department (CID) operations (Home Affairs Committee, 2022). In the early 2020's, only a minority of forces in England and Wales had specialist units for sexual offences (George and Ferguson, 2021; Siddique, 2021). These factors related to officer efficacy are likely to have influenced the way RASSO investigations are conducted.

In addition, high levels of burnout have been identified amongst RASSO investigators (Sondhi et al., 2023) which are comparable to that experienced by some healthcare professionals during the Covid pandemic, and manifest as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, or a lack of personal accomplishment. Sondhi et al. (2023) demonstrated that excessive job demands, creating poor work-life balance, were seen as an underlying factor in both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. The consequence of such burnout ~~is~~ can be that investigators may show compassion fatigue, including apathy and a lack of concentration~~lack empathy with victims~~ (Papazoglou et al., 2019) which is likely to affect ~~, leading to a poor response and lack of~~ victim engagement. Sondhi et al. (2023) suggest that the wellbeing of these officers can be enhanced by improved team cohesion, which speaks to the way RASSO investigations are staffed and capacity issues addressed.

All the above circumstances contribute to the way in which officers investigating RASSO cases currently operate. They will, for instance, typically work alone on cases, with one Officer in Charge (OIC) responsible for the course of the investigation. Some forces may employ different officers / staff to undertake different roles, in which case forces may have officers working together with their roles split between either being focused on the investigation or victim care. As noted above, they will likely have many cases to handle at once, and these many involve other RASSO cases, or other types of offences, depending on whether the officer is working in a specialist unit where their time is ringfenced or not (Walley, 2023b).

The changes to policing capacity – the absolute decrease in numbers, as well as the decrease in dedicated time and experienced resources – is likely to have had a profound effect on the efficacy with which RASSO cases are investigated. The aim of the current study, therefore, was to explore:

- What current capacity looks like, how it is managed, and a framing of current challenges related to capacity;
- Whether there any observed impact on the progression, efficiency, or completeness of cases;
- Whether these is any observed impact on victim treatment.

Method

This paper used multiple datasets collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB)[1]. The first stage of OSB was a research programme across five police forces in England and Wales that investigated the current state of how RASSO investigations were conducted (January 2021 – September 2022). This paper draws on datasets from four of the six Pillars of research conducted[2]; Pillars 1 (suspect focused investigations), 2 (disrupting repeat suspects), 3 (procedural justice approach to victim engagement), and 4 (learning, development, and officer wellbeing). Due to space constraints here and the number of datasets drawn on in this article, the datasets are discussed in turn rather than following a traditional Methodology format. Ethical approval was granted by the respective Pillar's institutions; Pillars 1 and 2 – Bournemouth University (39633) and the University of Suffolk (RETH21/006); Pillar 3 – Durham University (SOC-2021-08-02T16_39_29-szxm15); and Pillar 4 – The Open University (HREC_4450). All ethical approvals considered the main

[1] This research was conducted as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone, funded by the UK Home Office. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.
[2] Please see Stanko (2022) for a full outline of the OSB Pillars.

ethical issues related to all Pillars; ensuring the confidentiality and wellbeing of all participants, and the secure transfer, storage, and security of the data used. Further details of each dataset can be found in related published works, referenced by each dataset title. Except for the demand and process dataset, all other data collected included material relating to demand and capacity, but also included data collection relating to broader topics around RASSO investigations.

1) Demand and process dataset (from Pillar 4; Walley, 2023a)

Work was conducted to understand the investigation process and the demand entering the system. Data for this were collected from the Incident Reporting system in one OSB force for all RASSO incidents that were reported between January 2018 to December 2021, provided in anonymised format to the researchers. This included any reports that came into the system via 999, 101, were passed from other forces, or were from other public services. In the dataset, 6,947 separate incidents were included, but these incidents may have included more than one offence and other non-RASSO offences. Over 40 separate variables were collected in the sample, in the following categories:

- The crime number, Home Office offence codes and sub codes, and qualitative descriptive details of each offence;
- The timeline of the offence, including when the incident was reported, how it was reported, when the incident occurred, when the investigation started, and when the case concluded;
- Details of the police process, such as whether an offender was identified, whether suspects were interviewed, charging decisions, and disposal outcomes etc.;
- Limited details about suspects and victims, e.g. ages at the time of the offence. No data that might be used to identify a victim or suspect were included in this dataset.

Three sample incidents were then taken and interviews conducted with investigators from the force to identify the necessary steps that had been completed to progress the investigation as far as it could have been taken. These cases were used to produce a generic map of the investigation process to understand the workload (amount and timing) involved in protecting and engaging with the victim, the identification and full investigation of the offender, and the workload involved in case preparation and bringing a case to trial.

2) Case review dataset (Pillars 1 and 2; Norman et al., 2022)

A case review dataset was generated by creating a template for officers to complete in the five OSB forces. Using non-probability quota sampling, 72 closed cases dated between 2019 and 2022 were requested from each force. Identified by officers, the included cases aimed to

comprise of an equal number of classification types based on victim-suspect relationship (stranger, acquaintance, and domestic) and a range of outcomes in line with current Home Office outcome codes (victim declines to prosecute, no further action [police or CPS decision], charged). A total of 253 case reviews were completed across the forces, ranging from 33 to 59 per force, and comprised of two levels of review. All officers received training on using the case review tool from the research team and were split into two groups depending on rank:

- First reviewers ranged from Detective Constables to Detective Inspectors. In phase one, first reviewers provided a summary of the case, including a log of investigative actions taken, as well as critically reflecting on several areas of the investigation: initial investigative focus, direction, decision-making, and completion; risk assessment and management; victim engagement; supervisory oversight; considerations around the suspect including any repeat perpetration; liaison with the CPS and other services; and time management;
- Second reviewers held the rank of Detective Inspector and above. In phase two, second reviewers critically reflected on the same areas of the investigation as in phase one, but also reviewed the initial review conducted by first reviewers.

Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative section of the reviews. Descriptive statistics were calculated from the quantitative data on timeliness of investigative milestones.

3) Interviews with officers dataset (from Pillars 1 and 2; Barbin et al., 2024)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 officers from the five OSB forces ranging from 10 to 17 per force. Officers ranged from Police Constable to Senior Policing Staff, including victim focused officers. The interview schedule covered key areas, such as: officer experience and training; investigative challenges; intelligence used in RASSO investigations; named suspects; repeat suspects; how the police work with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) on RASSO investigations; and the process of conducting suspect-focused investigations. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020).

4) Ethnographic observations dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)

Ethnographic observations were conducted over 40 shifts (324 hours) across 14 investigation teams in four forces. Purposive and opportunistic sampling was used to ensure force structure and shift patterns were reflected. Observers made field notes using an ethnographic reflexive approach (e.g. Eriksson et al., 2012).

5) ***Review of BWV footage and Achieving Best Evidence interviews dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)***

Body Worn Video (BWV) footage captured by police in first response to RASSO cases was reviewed, covering 16 cases across three forces totalling 14 hours. Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews with the victim were also reviewed, covering 31 interviews across three forces totalling 34 hours. Pro forma prompts to capture basic contextual details (e.g. who was present) and key aspects of the qualities of the victim-police interaction were completed by researchers while reviewing the footage.

6) ***Interview and focus group dataset (from Pillar 3; Smith et al., forthcoming)***

Focus groups were conducted with Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) and support practitioners (six online focus groups, 27 participants, across four forces) and police officers (16 online focus groups, 69 participants, across three forces). Eight interviews were also conducted with support service strategic leads or managers across three forces, and eight interviews with senior RASSO leads across four forces. For service focus groups and interviews, purposive and self-selecting sampling was used to reflect main support services in force regions, and the researchers asked to include specialist practitioners for minoritised and marginalised victims where possible. Purposive and self-selecting sampling was also used to identify officers for focus groups and interviews, with the use of a force liaison to assist in the identification and invitation of relevant participants, which depended on local structures (e.g. included investigators, first responders, call handlers etc.). For all focus groups and interviews, semi-structured topic guides were used and drawn up on the basis of literature then developed iteratively through the project.

Data were analysed thematically (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), with weekly research meetings to identify and test emerging themes before the collaborative development of a codebook. Findings were sense-checked with victims through expert by experience panels. For broader discussion of the systemic injustices experienced by rape victims in police investigations see Smith et al. (forthcoming) and Smith et al. (2022).

Results

The ~~combined~~ analyses of the different datasets, brought together and synthesised for the purposes of this article, showed that issues relating to capacity and demand impacted on the investigation of RASSO at several levels, including issues completing necessary investigative actions, poor frequency and quality of victim contact, and negative effects on officers themselves.

Investigative actions

Data in Table 1 shows the number of times investigative actions should have occurred in cases reviewed, alongside the number of times these actions took place. These data~~from the case reviews (Table 1)~~ suggest that some fundamental functions of RASSO investigations were not undertaken in reviewed investigations. When considering this alongside the demand analysis, this could be explained due to the demand varying partly randomly on a day-to-day basis, meaning that some days are quieter than average and some considerably busier. Even if a system has the capacity to cope with average demand, there will be periods where there is insufficient capacity, which results in required actions not being taken.

Table I: Investigative milestones of cases with named suspects by and across four forces

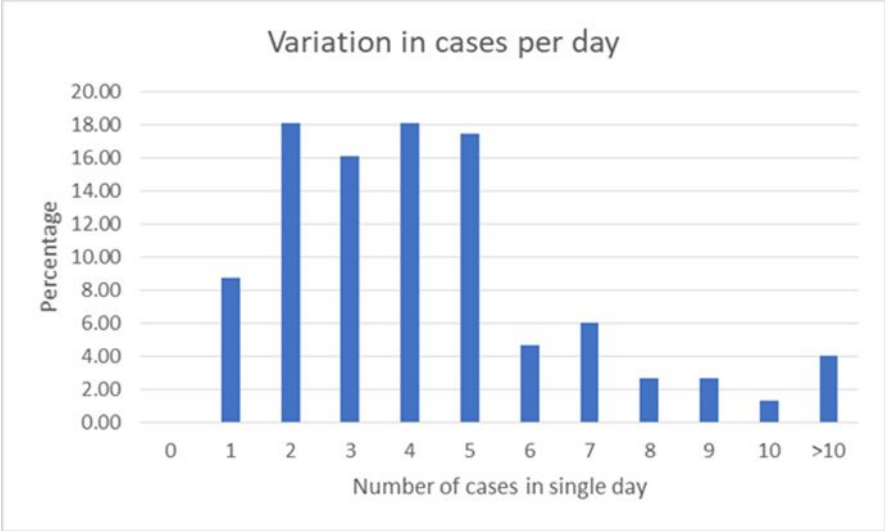
Investigative milestones	Viability of action	Total across all forces	Range
Safeguarding	Should occur in all cases.	95 (65.1%)	17 – 29 (50- 72.2%)
Suspect interview	Should occur in all cases except where victim said they do not want to proceed before the suspect is interviewed.	88 (60.3%)	17-28 (47.2-76.5%)
Forensics	Should occur in all cases where forensics are available.	80 (54.8%)	17-26 (47.2-59.4%)
Suspect intelligence	Should occur in all cases.	67 (45.9%)	14-22 (38.6-68.8%)
Victim interview	Should occur in all cases where victim is willing to engage with the police process.	66 (45.2%)	8-23 (22.2-52.3%)
Offender risk management	Should occur in all cases.	50 (34.2%)	5-22 14.7-50%)
Victim intelligence	Should occur in all cases.	45 (30.8%)	5-15 (13.9-46.9%)
CPS engagement	Some type should occur in all cases at a minimum early advice.	45 (30.8%)	7-19

			(21.9-43.2%)
Total cases		**146**	**32-44**

Figure 1 shows how the number of cases arriving each day varies considerably (and analysis shows this is not likely to be a seasonal pattern of variation). Figure 1 shows that, in a system that is expecting 4-5 cases per typical day, the system may receive nine or more cases on some days in the year, hence the demand on some days is double what investigators would routinely expect. The high caseloads and the subsequent time they could dedicate to each case were noted by officers and supervisors themselves:

> *"I'm carrying 21 cases at the moment … so you've got 40 hours in a week, and we deal with prisoners as well so that might be two days gone. So that leaves me 3 days to work on my caseload. So that's 24 hours to deal with 20 cases. So that's about an hour and 10 minutes for each case a week." (Force B, Officer 2)*

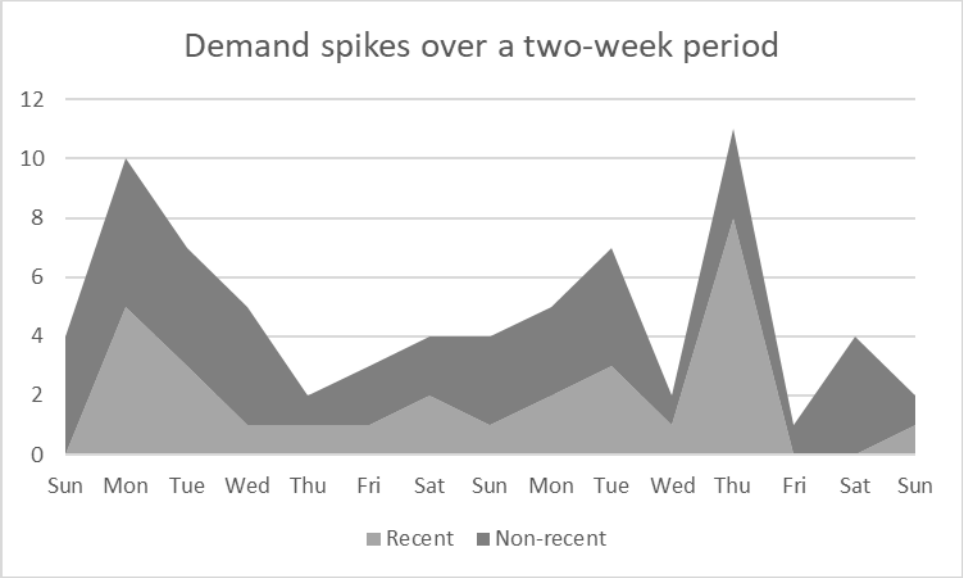
Figure 1. The variation in the number of RASSO cases arriving per day for one force



Detailed analysis of these spikes in demand showed that some of the spikes had a high proportion of cases reported immediately after the incident, therefore needing immediate response both to safeguard the victim and preserve the evidence. The variation in demand from one day to the next could be highly significant. As Figure 2 shows, the second Wednesday had just two reported incidents, one of which required an immediate response. The following day there were 11 incidents, eight of which were reported very soon after the incidents had occurred. These data show how RASSO teams have to cope with sudden

increases in urgent demand, with the current system not having the capacity to do this effectively during these spikes in demand.

Figure 2. Data showing the number of RASSO incidents for a two-week period in one force



Data from interviews with officers demonstrated a clear link between issues with capacity and how much of the fundamental investigative process they can work through:

> *"The biggest challenge for me is resource … And then maybe we're losing investigative opportunities because things are being missed." (Force B, Officer 1)*

It was noted that capacity issues means that officers are 'firefighting', meaning that investigations were not given the attention they deserved, and take longer to investigate than they otherwise would:

> *"We want to help victims the best we can and there are difficulties with giving our best because of the time constraints we have because of lack of officers … you're firefighting every day and when there are new cases reported it becomes difficult to give that case the focus is deserves. And victims are becoming unhappy because of the amount of time it takes for an investigation to take place, which can be months or years." (Force D, Officer 2)*

Officers noted that staffing issues also affected the availability of officers *with relevant expertise* to conduct RASSO investigations:

> *"I don't think the makeup of our teams is effective. As an organisation, we have lost an awful lot of experienced staff, and the force is made up of very young staff now. I personally don't think it is appropriate that we have staff put onto complex teams with very little experience of any other investigation type and then expect them to be able to deal effectively with rape and sexual offences with minimal supervision." (Force C, Officer 3)*

This lack of thoroughness was also deemed to be exacerbated when there are time sensitive aspects of the case which mean multiple actions must be completed at the same time:

> *"A lot of the investigation can actually be completed very early on if you have the resources. Say if a job came in and you had your DS and you had four DCs available, you had a couple of [victim focused officers], you could go out, and maybe a couple of civilian investigators, and you go out and get everything done really quickly. But when it's maybe, you know, you've got a DC, maybe another one can help you out a little bit, and a [victim focused] officer, then you're kind of limited. Then you're always playing catch up with that investigation." (Force A, Officer 9)*

While there may be other reasons as to why basic investigative actions are not undertaken, such as a lack of perceived importance placed on their completion, the data outlined here demonstrates the impact capacity issues have on officers' ability to adequately complete required basic investigative actions.

Frequency of contact with victims

At a basic level, capacity issues may mean victims are not communicated with enough. Issues around failures to provide updates came up through different data, with ~~O~~one ISVA service ~~estimated~~ providing a specific estimate that in their caseload less than 30% of officers were providing updates every 28 days (P3: ISVA, F~~f~~orce B ~~FG~~)~~, which is supported by case review data (see Table 2) which shows that victim contact was only apparent in just under 75% of the cases sampled~~. One officer suggested to an observer however that lack of capacity might affect their ability to record on their systems when contact with victims was happening, but that contact might still be going ahead:

> *"[the officer] tells me they don't always update the notes, so [the officer] spoke to the victim that morning and that was contact but [the officer] didn't record it" (P3: Observations, F~~f~~orce D)*

Explicit links were made between lack of capacity and lack of communication with victims:

> *"It is notable how often I [the observer] hear officers having to apologise to victims for how long it has been since they last spoke to an officer. I hear [the officer] saying 'due to the volume of our work we can't always update you … I appreciate its quite a while.'" (P3: Observations, Fforce C)*

Capacity issues around victim communication could be compound, where officers became hesitant to communicate with victims when they had been unable to make progress on cases in other ways. One manager reported:

> *"I hear from my officers all the time 'I'm scared of ringing my victims and telling them I haven't got an update for them, you know, it's soul destroying' and that, that basically boils down to because they haven't done anything on the case because they've been too busy dealing with other stuff. And, you know, that's a bugbear with officers." (P3: Police, Fforce D)*

One police officer discussed how the police are focused on certain types of outcomes (e.g. convictions), but the victims' needs may be more around safeguarding and ongoing support, however, *"that type of work and those types of outcomes ('soft stuff') are not measured or recognised." (P3: Observations, Fforce C)*. This lack of recognition and measurement of victim contact as an important policing activity may be a reason why officers struggle to prioritise or feel embarrassed about making victim contact when they do not have investigative progress to convey, alongside a lack of capacity to do so.

Officers' ability to contact victims might also be affected by wider resourcing issues. One particular example noted was ~~observer noted lots of issues~~ with access to cars, or to car keys, which *"seems to be very time-wasting"* and how this might affect victim contact as an officer was unable to leave to visit a victim until a different officer had come back with a car (P3: Observations, Force C).

Police failures to contact victims regularly may be particularly acute where police find victims harder to reach and officers need more time, knowledge, or skills to maintain effective contact (examples given included victims who: are sex workers; have mental health needs; from minoritised communities). It was also noted that victim contact could 'tail off', leading to poorer victim contact as the investigation progressed:

> *"[Officer] and [officer] talked about Soteria. They said [...] Officers complain that they can't give victims the time needed. [...] Initial contact with victims is usually good but it then tails off because they don't have enough time to dedicate to contacting victims." (P3: Observations, Fforce D)*

Aspects of how police work was being organised in the face of capacity challenges could have particularly detrimental impacts on contact with victims. One example was where police structures and capacity pressures meant that live cases were prioritised over ongoing cases:

> *"If a 'live' job comes in everything else gets put on hold and the team have to prioritise that. He tells me that there are times when they have an ABE booked but a call comes in and it's an 'acute' and so they have to cancel the victim." (P3: Observations, Fforce C)*

Another example was high turnover of staff, with concerns around victims not being kept informed of changes:

> *"There's been five different officers, and each time she's not been informed that the officer in charge has changed, up until I've made contact and tried to find out what's going on with the case." (P3: ISVA, Fforce C)*

Examples were given where staff turnover or prioritisation of 'live' cases meant other cases were not touched for long periods (e.g. 12 months, 18 months), suggesting victim contact during these periods may be lacking. The consequences of infrequent contact with victims, taken together with the length of cases, may impact on the likelihood of cases progressing. When asked why they thought victims cease to engage with investigations, one ISVA responded immediately that *"90% of them are dropped because it's taking too long and they haven't been given any updates." (P3: ISVA, Fforce C)*. While ISVAs also noted that reasons why victims cease to engage vary for different people, This is a stark finding which suggests that capacity issues ~~are~~ may be at least in part responsible for victims feeling unable or unwilling to progress through the investigative process.

Quality of victim contact

There were examples where failures to fit police processes with victims' needs were explicitly linked to capacity, such as where a victim expressed the need for an officer of a particular gender. ~~As~~ For instance, in one example~~,~~ from a ~~In one~~ case where BWV was reviewed (P3,

BWV, Fforce B), the victim repeatedly requested a female officer. The police force was unable to provide this and, rather than giving the victim options around what was possible, proceeded against the victim's repeated objections, which appeared to have detrimental impacts to the relationship between police and victim and limitations on the quality of information the victim was able to provide. The researcher reviewing the footage described the overall interaction as *"chaotic and unproductive"*.

Unfortunately, even where victims' needs were known, they were not always followed, for example communications being made directly with victims who had asked for communication to go through their ISVA, calls being made and voicemails being left late at night or just before an officer went on leave, causing victims anxiety and preventing them from being able to ask questions to fully understand the information. This included communication about critical decisions, such as to take 'No Further Action' on cases. While inferred, it is possible that capacity issues, such as officers having to 'finish up' tasks before shift end or leave, causes a decrease in the quality and thought behind victim contact.

An overarching theme around the impact of capacity on the quality of communication with victims is that building up rapport with victims takes time. There were examples of good practice, such as where a victim came in to complete a process but was rethinking her decision and was offered space to "*just have a chat" (P3: Observations, Fforce A)*. There were also examples of good practice in ABE interviews, where victims were encouraged, for instance, to take their time and take breaks. Other times, however, communication was observed to be focused on police processes and lack space for building rapport (or ensuring victim safety):

> *"I hear as he makes a call to a victim. It is very transactional and he does not ask how the victim is and if they are ok to talk. He says things like 'You rang in yesterday for a call back', 'Nothing from forensics back', […] 'I'll try and give them a call and see if there's an update' […] 'If you don't hear from me just assume there's no updates'." (P3: Observation, Fforce C)*

One officer described challenges where only one response officer was available to attend a report of RASSO, meaning they were unable to be focused on the relationship with the victim *"which again isn't ideal because you'll need someone to be liaising […], somebody solely there to speak to the victim and again I think that can damage rapport if you're constantly going off on your radio." (P3: Police, Fforce C).* Another example was lack of preparation time for victims' recorded ABE interview. One observation followed a scheduled interview with a victim,

which had to be cancelled when an intermediary and an interviewer who had not previously met the victim were not able to engage effectively, resulting in the victim becoming distressed:

> *"The officer says that 'if they had the resources, it would have been nice to be able to just meet [the victim] and have a chat with the [vulnerable adult] interviewer and intermediary ahead of the assessment'."* ([P3: Observation, Force D)]

As well as issues around time with victims, a range of problems were identified around having appropriately trained officers (e.g. vulnerable adult interviewers) as well as gaps in related services (e.g. ineffective interpreting or translation services, long waiting lists for ISVAs).

There may be situations where lack of capacity creates more work for police, as well as poor experiences for victims. As noted above, agreements with victims around how to communicate were not always adhered to, including where the victim had expressed a preference for the police to communicate with her ISVA rather than directly. This might be expected to save police time as more of the work building rapport with the victim would rest with the ISVA. Part of the reason this may be happening is that officers lack capacity to build relationships with ISVAs, with ISVAs citing issues around high turnover of staff meaning they no longer have relationships with officers, while both ISVAs and officers pointed to a lack of specialism in the police meaning that officers do not have relationships with ISVAs.

> *"I wouldn't even know where to find an ISVA's phone number." (P3: Police, Force B)*

As with the issues relating to investigative actions, specialist expertise was relevant here too, with problems highlighted around the appropriateness of generalised response officers attending first contact with a victim who has reported a RASSO, rather than specialist officers being responsible for first and ongoing contact. Investigative officers noted issues where the first contact carried out by response officers (untrained in responding to RASSO) was done poorly, e.g. basic contact details not collected, resulting in investigators having to go back out and repeat work, while response officers commented on pressure from their supervisors to get a crime number on and pass it on 'as fast as you can', suggesting that victims would experience this time pressure.

The effects on officers

Challenges relating to capacity affected officers on several levels. Officers felt they were spread too thinly, particularly in relation to having to routinely prioritise resources elsewhere, meaning not enough resources being dedicated to RASSO:

> *"I might have a rape, and I think to myself, 'I'm going to go in tomorrow, I'm going to concentrate on that rape.' And I walk through the door and there could be a robbery, and there could be three people in the cells, and that rape's gone for the day, and maybe the next two or three days because that takes precedence at that moment in time … perhaps it needs a specialist unit to give rapes the attention that they need, because they are long, protracted inquiries." (Force B, Officer 3)*

Officers noted that these capacity issues were having a direct impact on their wellbeing, with officers noting the amount of additional work they felt they had to do just to stay on top of their caseload and the burn-out they face:

> *"I probably do 10 to 20 hours on top of my 40 hours a week to manage what's going on. And that's not unique to me; that's the same with my staff. Even with their additional hours, they put in a lot of hours in their own time. They take their laptops to work from home. They'll come in on their rest days." (Force C, Officer 4)*

Officers also made the link between their own wellbeing, and that when this suffers it has a knock-on impact on their ability to effectively engage victims:

> *"[the officers] talk about having 'victim fatigue' which is a term I [the observer] hear several times throughout the day, where they feel desensitised to cases come in. [...] you don't feel as much for victims anymore, not like when you used to hear about it at the beginning" (P3: Observations, Fforce A)*

This link between burnout and compassion fatigue as described here by a participant is echoed in previous literature (Papazoglou et al., 2019). These effects on officers are compounded by a lack of supervisory capacity:

> *"I think we have a supervisory issue again because of the volumes of workload. Our central team has, on paper, 34 staff and it is carrying 600 plus crimes. Now it is impossible, especially when we haven't got a full complement of sergeants, for folks to effectively supervise those." (Force C, Officer 3)*

This means that officers who are uncertain on the course of action to take – likely compounded by high levels of inexperience – are unlikely to be appropriately supported. Consequently,

mistakes or omissions are less likely to be identified and rectified, or poor victim care addressed.

Discussion

The data provide clear evidence that the investigation system capacity in the policing of RASSO is insufficient to either meet long-run demand or cope with short-run demand spikes causes by demand fluctuations. The consequences of this include the failure to address the most basic investigative actions or provide proper victim care. Considering these basic failings, it is also fair to assume that any more strategic, long-term, or proactive ways of disrupting sex offending, and particularly repeat and pervasive sex offence suspects, are very unlikely to occur. Challenges around capacity relating to the inexperience of officers and the lack of time for them to develop appropriate expertise compounds these issues, as do associated issues with a lack of supervisory capacity which means that investigative and victim care errors and omissions are less likely to be rectified.

The management literature on demand and capacity management can be used to help develop practices that meet demand economically (Klassen & Rohleder, 2002). Capacity strategies usually anticipate predictable seasonal peaks and troughs in demand, a practice known as a 'chase' capacity strategy (Sasser, 1976). This practice has been seen in some aspects of police work (Ritchie & Walley, 2015). Most demand, however, also exhibits natural random variation which means that processes need to be flexible enough to cope with unpredictable, short-run changes. The presence of this demand variation creates conditions for queues to build up. Queue theory literature shows these situations need capacity provision to be greater than average demand if long queues and work backlogs are to be avoided (Shortle et al., 2018). The greater the demand variation, the more 'spare' capacity is needed to absorb the variation. The variation can be inadvertently increased by management interventions such as work prioritisation systems that reserve capacity for urgent cases. Specialist skill sets also create the conditions for higher levels of variation which means that work backlogs more readily form. Walley and Adams (2019) have highlighted that police forces' understanding of demand and the impact of practices such as prioritisation is patchy, at best. This means that many forces have limited understanding of what demand there is and how it might be dealt with.

RASSO work is often split between 'recent' demand, where a case comes in that has recently occurred (although how recent is defined varies from force to force), and 'non-recent' demand where significant time has elapsed before reporting, preventing most forensic investigation. This is too limited in its perspective because it does not address all the nuances of types of

demand and how to respond; for example, much demand comes in a domestic abuse or familial context, where events occur repeatedly over time (ONS, 2022a). Even some rapes involving perpetrators unknown to the victim are part of a pattern of repeat offending that can remain undetected unless the demand is studied carefully. This needs time and resource.

If management theory is applied, the following types of intervention are required in addition to further training in RASSO investigation:

1. Capacity needs to be increased through additional recruitment so more officers are available meaning workloads decrease sufficiently to the point where they can spend significantly longer on any one case. Currently, effective capacity is usually insufficient to meet average demand levels consequently with many cases being abandoned quickly. This will improve the levels of activity in the investigation stages shown in Table 1;
2. The capacity also needs to cope with the variability of demand, whereby spikes in demand can be absorbed more readily without compromising the effectiveness of the investigations;
3. Scheduling of staff based around demand levels, so that capacity is available when demand enters the system, is an essential component of the solution. In particular, the research noted that some investigation departments operate five days per week, Monday to Friday. The immediate implication is that the demand that occurs from Friday afternoon through to early Monday morning is not addressed until the start of the Monday shift. The investigators are then confronted with an urgent, two-day work backlog, with more demand coming in.

The data presented in this paper suggests that understanding capacity must be informed by a balance of the needs of victims as well as the requirements of investigative tasks. One of the issues with considering capacity purely from the perspective of absolute numbers is that it does not address the fact that often actions need to be taken quickly and simultaneously, something which was highlighted as a challenge in our data. The inference here is that one officer working on a RASSO investigation may be simply insufficient to get through the appropriate actions within the timeframes required. The solution to this issue was mentioned by officers themselves; that a wider group of officers and staff working simultaneously on one investigation are needed to better cope with the demands of RASSO cases, particularly when multiple actions are required that are time sensitive, or when cases are complex and may make demands on officers time to think more strategically about disrupting repeat offending, as well as conducting the immediate investigation. Working in a team should create a resilience in the system because it is less likely that an entire team are simultaneously

unavailable to meet urgent requests or be responsive to a victim, mitigating some of the issues as outlined above. A team approach would help simultaneously provide victim support and focus on suspect investigation and disruption; in essence, having a team to work on RASSO cases may provide a solution to some of the specific capacity challenges identified here.

There is some evidence that a team approach to investigations is used in some forces, such as the allocation of both an investigator and a victim liaison officer to one case. There is debate, however, as to whether a targeted approach to multiskilling should take place within RASSO teams. Prior research makes strong recommendations for fully trained and highly focused investigators that have specialist skills in RASSO (Williams et al., 2022). It may be useful to have specific focus on roles within RASSO investigation, for instance, to provide a clear point of contact with victims, or to have one officer whose role it is to liaise with the CPS. There are also, however, advantages to officers having the ability to switch from one role to the next in different investigations, as opposed to specialising in one type of role consistently (as is the norm in major crime investigations, National Police Chiefs' Council Homicide Working Group, 2021). Capacity is one such advantage, allowing for more flexibility for officers to take on roles according to demand. There are also advantages in terms of officers' understanding of the importance of all roles within the RASSO investigation; specialising in one specific area of the investigation runs the risk that officers become deskilled or unmotivated to work in other areas (such as not wanting to work with victims), or the establishment of a hierarchy or dissonance between different roles in the team (Stanko, 2022).

Team working can also play a significant part in developing the right capacity strategy. The ability to critically reflect on decisions taken using peer support is increased if a team is working on one investigation, something which may mitigate a lack of supervisory oversight due to supervisory capacity challenges identified. A team approach may also facilitate the sharing of expert knowledge, which is particularly relevant in the face of an inexperienced workforce or staff that do not have capacity for appropriate training (although this is clearly not a long-term solution to this problem).

There are also possible wellbeing benefits of a shared workload. Wellbeing of officers should be a priority and alleviated in general terms through the better provision of manageable caseloads, in line with the findings supporting increased reporting in general (Harding et al., 2024). Working as a team may provide added benefits in terms of alleviating the stress associated with making complex and high-stakes decisions alone, which could be mitigated through their decision and joint decision making in a team. As noted above, poor officer wellbeing can be mitigated by increased team cohesion (Sondhi et al., 2023) and working in

a team provides more opportunities for officers to debrief with each other, which is particularly salient when working on RASSO investigations which have the potential to be highly distressing in nature (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022).

Our findings suggest that not only does demand need to be better met and capacity more carefully considered within RASSO policing, but that the organisation and setup itself needs to be considered, particularly how working as a team on RASSO investigations – with officers maintaining the flexibility to fill different roles as required – could mitigate many of the capacity and associated challenges outlined. While this may seem more organisationally complicated or resource intensive, this idea does not equate to, say, the doubling of staff if two officers work on a case simultaneously. This is because efficiency in such a case increases with more actions being able to be taken simultaneously, shared and flexible workloads allowing for the investigation to be progressed more effectively, and the potential for more strategic disruption of repeat offending increased. In theory this should decrease the demands made on policing as prolific offenders might be more effectively prevented from re-offending. These findings have implications for how forces organise their RASSO resources, considering not just the amount of resources dedicated to investigating this type of offence, but how those resources are deployed.

The datasets included in this paper were drawn from some of the same and some different police forces in England and Wales who were part of OSB; some datasets were based on one force, others three to five. This could be seen as a limitation of the data due to the variability introduced, however, we argue this is a strength and that the themes identified were found in each dataset, despite their differences. Another limitation is that the datasets included do not include any direct work with victims, who may provide different insights into this issue. The focus of this project, however, was to work with directly with police to identify problems, given the well documented views of victims over several decades in the existing evidence base (e.g. Hohl et al., 2023; Martin, 2005; Ullman & Filipas, 2001), and the expectation on policing to better and more actively reflect on their own practice to instigate change. Researchers in Pillar 3, however, did sense-check findings with experts-by-experience during their data collection.

Conclusion

Our article contributes to our understanding of the current capacity issues within RASSO policing. The results here highlight that many stages of an investigation and the simultaneous work to protect and support the victim are missed out due to a lack of capacity to meet this demand. This paper has highlighted a series of adjustments to current practice that are needed if the current issues are to be resolved. It flags a required increase in staffing levels,

but also transcends the notion of a solution as simple as augmentation in police numbers, demonstrating the importance of addressing organisational setup, introducing team working, and the intersection of promoting specialist knowledge, expertise, and effective supervision. There is a strong message that little improvement is possible or will be sustained unless the effective capacity in the system can meet both the long-run demand, but also the significant peaks and troughs in demand or workload that characterise this situation, as well as the multifaceted and complex nature of RASSO investigations which necessitate a more creative and team based approach to investigating this type of offending.

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