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To cite this article: Anna Gekoski, Miranda A. H. Horvath & Kari Davies (07 Jan 2026): Police officers' perspectives on the secondary victimisation of rape and serious sexual assault victims, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, DOI: [10.1080/1068316X.2025.2611338](https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2025.2611338)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2025.2611338>



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Published online: 07 Jan 2026.



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Police officers' perspectives on the secondary victimisation of rape and serious sexual assault victims

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ABSTRACT

Secondary victimisation occurs when a victim of crime feels they have been subjected to inadequate, insensitive, or inappropriate treatment, attitudes, behaviour, responses and practices by criminal justice and social agencies, which compound their original trauma. This study explored police officers' perceptions of how victims of rape and serious sex offences may be subjected to secondary victimisation by the police. A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers across four forces in England and Wales. The interview data were qualitatively analysed using reflective thematic analysis. Three main themes were identified relating to how victims may feel re-victimised by their experiences with the police: (1) during the initial reporting phase; (2) if/when they are subjected to distressing evidence gathering; and (3) when investigations are victim, rather than suspect, focused. However, there was awareness among officers of the need for change and of new legislation and guidance aimed at reducing secondary victimisation. The different facets of secondary victimisation are discussed here, and an updated definition is proposed, which more clearly outlines the different ways in which secondary victimisation should or can be mitigated.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 August 2025

Accepted 19 December 2025

KEYWORDS

Secondary victimisation;
rape victims; RASSO; police

Introduction

Victimology literature has historically largely focused on primary victimisation, the direct effect that a crime has on the victim of that crime and the victim's experiences of that crime, including issues such as the extent, impact and fear of crime and repeat victimisation. The impact of primary victimisation has been linked to severe and lasting harm. Survivors may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (Dworkin, 2021; White et al., 2023/2024), experience sleep disturbance (Cox et al., 2023), face physical and reproductive health consequences (Basile et al., 2020; East et al., 2025) and is associated with substance misuse and economic hardship (Moore

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et al., 2023). These combined effects impose substantial personal and societal costs (Peterson et al., 2023/2024).

It is at this point, while contending with these effects in the aftermath of crime, that victims may often become involved with a variety of criminal justice and social agencies, by choice or necessity, such as the police, the medical system, the mental health system, the legal system and support groups and charities (Gekoski et al., 2013). However, while contact with these systems can be beneficial and aid healing, for many, they can compound harms already done, increasing trauma (Campbell et al., 1999). This phenomenon is known as secondary victimisation, which is significantly less researched than primary victimisation and refers to how a victim of crime may be re-victimised by their treatment by criminal justice, or other, agencies (Walklate, 2007), including both insensitive and inappropriate responses to, and treatment of, victims and their needs (Victim Support, 2002).

Evolving definitions of secondary victimisation

The phenomenon of secondary victimisation was first articulated over four decades ago by Symonds (1980), who referred to the 'second injury' that can occur when victims of crime seek recognition and support from authorities but may be left feeling rejected by professional yet distant reactions. This definition was later expanded to explicitly incorporate the element of blame – which is particularly pertinent with victims of rape and serious sex offences (RASSO) – with Williams (1984) defining secondary victimisation as including negative and/or judgemental attitudes towards victims of crime. Later definitions, such as that by Wolhuter et al. (2008), reiterated the idea of blame as central to the definition of secondary victimisation, namely: 'Victim-blaming attitudes, reactions, behaviours and practices by service providers that result in further violation of victim's rights and/or additional trauma' (p. 55).

In recognition of the absence of any objective criteria to measure secondary victimisation, more recent definitions explicitly include a phenomenological, subjective element, emphasising victims' perceptions of harm sustained. For example, the College of Policing (2019, p. 16) states: 'Secondary victimisation is based on perception, and it is immaterial whether it is reasonable or not for the victim or complainant to feel that way'. At their core, the majority of secondary victimisation definitions focus on the recognition of when a victim of crime feels they have been subjected to inadequate, insensitive or inappropriate treatment, attitudes, behaviour, responses and practices by criminal justice and social agencies, which compound their original trauma (Gekoski et al., 2013). At heart, what all definitions of secondary victimisation have in common 'is the idea that victims are injured once by the crime and then a second time by criminal justice authorities' (Wemmers, 2013, p. 222).

The secondary victimisation of rape victims

In the context of sexual violence, secondary victimisation may be seen as the result of a group of attitudes and behaviours that serve to blame or judge victims of sexual violence, subject them to disbelief or scorn or deny them assistance (Gray & Gekoski, 2010). Research has found that such negative experiences with the Criminal Justice System

(CJS) are a reality for up to nearly three-quarters (72%) of rape victims (Ullman & Townsend, 2007), with a recent survey of nearly 500 rape victims finding that ‘not only are they denied justice, but they feel actively re-victimised by the criminal justice system’ (Victim’s Commissioner, 2021). Specifically, recent research by Maier (2025) found that advocates perceive that rape victims face secondary victimisation by the police, legal system and medical professionals, due to: feeling doubted or blamed, being repeatedly questioned, feeling left out of the legal processes, experiencing invasive evidence collection and not receiving the legal outcome they hoped for.

The recognition of how rape victims may be subjected to secondary victimisation by the police is particularly important, given that the police act as gatekeepers of the CJS, with reporting the crime typically being victims’ first interaction with the system. As noted by Rossetti et al. (2017), the police are frequently the only criminal justice agency that victims will have any contact with; therefore, their experience of the police may form their whole experience and opinion of the CJS. However, in the worst instances, victims’ dealings with the police may be so distressing as to replicate ‘the violation felt in the rape itself’ (Jordan, 2001, p. 679), which has been widely referred to as tantamount to a ‘second rape’ (Madigan & Gamble, 1991). More recent research found that for many victims, ‘the police experience harmed them more than the sexual violence that brought them to the police in the first place’ (Hohl et al., 2023, p. 7). Some such revictimising attitudes and behaviours are briefly considered below.

Early academic research in this field found that police regularly voiced concerns about false reporting and rape victims told how officers displayed sceptical, hostile, unsympathetic and disbelieving attitudes (e.g. Campbell et al., 1999; Chambers & Millar, 1983; Temkin, 1999; Victim Support, 1996). More recent work supports such early studies. For example, in an evaluation of the experiences of 26 adult rape survivors who reported rape to the police, victims spoke of being disbelieved and doubted; encountering victim-blaming; officers lacking in empathy and sensitivity and being judgemental and dismissive (HMICFRS, 2020).

Work coming out of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB) also supports such positions. Established in 2021 following the UK Government’s End-to-End Rape Review, OSB is a collaborative programme between the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) and academic researchers aimed at transforming investigative practice (Home Office, 2023; Horvath & Davies, 2025). The initiative sought to replace traditional credibility-led approaches with a new National Operating Model (NOM) that is victim-centred, suspect-focused and context-led, promoting trauma-informed methods, procedural justice and evidence-driven investigations (Home Office, 2023). The model’s six interrelated ‘pillars’ address areas such as investigative practice, repeat suspects, data use, workforce capability and victim engagement and are being implemented across all 43 police forces in England and Wales (Home Office, 2023). In a survey of 1,968 RASSO victims’ experiences with the police, as part of OSB, participants shared experiences of officers dismissing their experiences and feeling police did not think they had behaved ‘correctly’ during the assault for it to be classed as rape, for example, when victims did not present as sufficiently upset after the incident, had removed their own clothing, had not reported sooner or stayed in a relationship with the perpetrator (Hohl et al., 2023). Such common and enduring themes around disbelief, scepticism and blame may stem from police perspectives that have long favoured a ‘real rape’ construct, with

cases that involve (e.g.) strangers as perpetrators, occurring in public spaces, with physical violence, weapons and 'blameless' victims who resist the attack being seen as more credible (Estrich, 1987).

Large-scale rape reviews and surveys have both supported and enhanced findings from qualitative studies. From 2005 to 2012, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Rape Reviews examined all rape allegations made to the MPS during April and May from each year. The London Rape Review (Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime [MOPAC], 2019) examined 501 reported rapes in London. Consistent with the 2012 review, there was evidence of secondary victimisation in the form of rape myths and ideas around what a 'credible' victim looks like. For instance, data from 2012 highlighted rape myths as being significant, with cases being twice as likely to be no further actioned (NFA'd) by police if the victim had voluntarily drunk alcohol. By contrast, if the victim resisted the assault, they were two times less likely to have their case NFA'd. These rape myths conform to ideas of what 'real rape' and a 'credible victim' look like. In 2019, while 'real rape' stereotypes did not have a significant bearing on outcomes, unlike in previous reviews, consistent with the 2012 review, there was evidence that being a 'credible' victim was important for case progression. For example, cases in which there were inconsistencies in victims' accounts were significantly more likely to be NFA'd.

Research outside of England and Wales has also found similar concerns. For example, White and McMillan (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with investigators of sexual assault, including 11 Canadian officers and ten Scottish officers. They used thematic analysis to identify key themes about how officers perceive victims, evidence and the interplay between them. While the paper is not framed through the lens of secondary victimisation – and the authors do not use the term – the findings clearly demonstrate it. For example, the authors discuss how police perceptions, disbelief and evidential priorities can reproduce harm for survivors; that is, victims may feel disbelieved, marginalised or blamed during investigations. This may arise in, for instance, police officers' credibility assessments, such as scrutinising gaps in victims' memories, substance use or perceived inconsistencies. This may re-traumatise victims by implying doubt or blame. Additionally, the authors note that when investigations are driven by 'evidential logic' rather than 'victim-centred practice', victims can become 'distanced from the process' and thus feel sidelined or invalidated. The paper describes this as a process of 'de-centring the victim'. This experience mirrors secondary victimisation as we use the term here. The authors recommend trauma-informed, victim-centred approaches to mitigate this; that is, to prevent secondary victimisation by design.

Sleath and Bull (2017) reviewed the literature on how police officers perceive rape victims and whether those perceptions influence investigative decision-making in rape cases. The review included 24 articles – from the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, the UK and other European countries – published between 2000 and 2016, which primarily used vignettes or hypothetical scenarios of police officer perceptions (rather than interviews or case reviews), which is named as a limitation. The authors found that police perceptions of rape victims – particularly blame attribution, rape myth acceptance, differential treatment of victims, institutional blame and credibility assessments – can create conditions in which victims may experience secondary victimisation (although they do not use this term) through investigative responses. For example, when victims do not meet stereotypical

expectations, they risk being disbelieved, blamed or deprioritised. An illustration of this is how victim characteristics outside of the 'ideal rape victim' stereotype (e.g. non-stranger rape, intoxicated victims) create increased risk of being disbelieved or blamed. Although the review is not framed through a secondary victimisation lens, the authors acknowledge the emotional and psychological implications of such negative attitudes for victims.

Finally, procedural, as opposed to attitudinal, elements of RASSO investigations may also compound feelings of re-traumatisation (Dodge et al., 2019; HMICFRS, 2021). These include invasive evidence gathering, such as forensic medical examinations (FMEs) (Chambers & Millar, 1983; Kelly et al., 2005; Temkin, 1996) and investigation into victims' backgrounds, including third party material (TPM) – e.g. school, counselling and medical records (Information Commissioner, 2022) – and 'digital strip searches' of mobile phones and social media (Powell, 2015). The Information Commissioner (2022) observes that 'rape victims are facing gross invasions of privacy when they report to the police' and that information found in TPM is used to form judgements about victims and their credibility and truthfulness. This may lead to cases being prematurely closed/NFA'd by the police, or not charged by the CPS, and also contribute to victim attrition, when a victim withdraws from the case due to e.g. the re-traumatisation of such intrusive evidence gathering.

Impacts of secondary victimisation on rape victims

Secondary victimisation can have a significant impact on the victim's subsequent recovery, magnifying feelings of shame, disempowerment and guilt, and leading to an increase in PTSD symptoms (Orth & Maercker, 2004; Sleath & Bull, 2017). Early research by Campbell et al. (1999) found that in a sample of 102 rape victims, contact with the legal, medical and mental health systems could exacerbate trauma, with victims of non-stranger rape who encountered victim-blaming behaviours from professionals having significantly elevated levels of PTSD. Looking at the police specifically, typical observations from victims included 'Treating me like I was the one who raped, the offender, not the victim' (p. 847) and 'It's just more rape. The rape just keeps on and on, like you just can't escape it' (p. 855). More recently, Hohl et al. (2023) found that 75% of survivors said that their mental health had worsened as a direct result of police (in)actions and 55% reported a negative impact on their physical health. Overall, half of the participants reported that they had lost trust in the police due to their (in)action, and 56% said they were unlikely to report a rape to the police in the future. In the words of one victim: 'I would rather be assaulted 1,000 times over than go through the police process again' (p. 46).

The present study

There is a growing body of literature that documents rape victims' experiences of secondary victimisation by the CJS, including the police, where 'more than with any other crime the victim can experience reporting rape as a form of revictimization' (Kelly et al., 2005, p.ix). Such research usually takes a phenomenological perspective, in which victims' subjective experiences and lifeworlds are given precedence. What is under-explored in the literature is scrutiny of police attitudes and actions in rape investigations, to investigate to what extent victim accounts are congruent with the source of this apparent

revictimisation. The aim of this study is to consider such actions and attitudes amongst 50 RASSO investigators across four police forces in England and Wales.

Method

Design

This study followed a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews. These were analysed using reflective thematic analysis, in order to explore a subset of a larger dataset of interviews with officers conducted during OSB research.

Participants

Participants included 50 police officers working across the four forces included in the OSB Year 1 deep-dive.¹ There were 17, 10, 11 and 12 officers, respectively, from each force. Force and participant identifiers have not been included in the Findings section to preserve the anonymity of both the forces and participants involved in the research. Ranks included Police Constable (PC), Detective Constable (DC), Detective Sergeant (DS), Detective Inspector (DI), Detective Superintendent (Det Supt) and Senior Management (SM).

Materials

A one-page information sheet and consent form were developed for potential interview participants. These documents contained details about the project, including: the aim; background and purpose of the research; and confidentiality/anonymity. A semi-structured interview schedule was devised to capture the challenges associated with investigating RASSO.

Although secondary victimisation was not a topic on the interview schedule, questions surrounding, for instance, the collection of digital and TPM, as well as victim-focused investigations, naturally elicited responses on the subject. Additionally, semi-structured interview guides are designed to allow for themes to come up inductively and spontaneously, which is what occurred in this case. When the idea of secondary victimisation arose inductively in interviews, the interviewer and first author used their expert knowledge of the subject to ask pertinent follow-up questions.

Procedure

This research was approved by the ethics committees at the University of Suffolk and Bournemouth University. The academic leads worked alongside OSB police-appointed leads to facilitate data collection and recruit participants. In one force, in accordance with their DPIA requirements and to protect participants' anonymity, interviews were arranged directly by police leads, who selected participants for interview. In the remaining three forces, police led confidentially compiled lists of officers who investigated RASSO, who were then invited for an interview by the academic lead. No incentives for participation were offered, and officers were told they were under no obligation to take part.

Interviews with officers from one force were conducted via telephone, with the officer calling on a withheld number. In the other three forces, interviews took place over

Microsoft Teams. Two researchers took part in each interview; one interviewing and note-taking. A total of 50 interviews (with an average duration of one hour each) were conducted between October 2021 and June 2022. All interviews were audio recorded. After the interviews, the recordings were uploaded to the secure online data sharing platform, SharePoint. After the interviews were transcribed, the recordings were permanently deleted.

Analysis

Interview data were analysed using the qualitative method of reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021). Reflective thematic analysis was used to organise data into thematic sets as determined by the researcher. This method embraces subjectivity, flexibility and creativity, takes an organic and reflexive approach and encourages the researcher's role in active knowledge production. The process of conducting a thematic analysis that was followed in this study follows the six phases articulated by Braun and Clarke. In phase 1, the researcher immersed themselves in the data, reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, recording initial ideas and possible patterns within the data. In phase 2, the researcher generated initial codes, identifying aspects within the data of interest and organising the data into meaningful sets. In phase 3, these codes were sorted into themes, both broader 'master' themes and narrower 'sub-themes'. In phase 4, the themes were refined; some were discarded, some merged and some broken down further. In phase 5, the themes were given names to identify them and set out in a table. Finally, in phase 6, the themes were written into a coherent narrative, using participant quotes embedded within it, supported by literature in the area.

All three authors conducted the analysis manually and independently, with the first author analysing data from two forces and the second and third authors analysing one force each. A subsequent conversation between the three researchers explored where there were common themes and any divergences. Although a formal audit trail was not maintained, the analytic process followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021), emphasising transparency, reflexivity and thoughtful engagement with data, as opposed to procedural replication. Rigour was achieved through an iterative and collaborative process, in which the three researchers independently engaged with the data, generated initial codes and subsequently met to discuss and refine potential themes. These discussions allowed for the comparison of interpretations, critical questioning of assumptions and the progressive development of shared, nuanced understandings of meaning within the dataset. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's view that quality in reflexive thematic analysis derives from depth of engagement, reflexive awareness and the coherence of the analytic narrative, rather than from mechanical audit procedures or consensus coding.

In the findings section, numbers/percentages of officers are not reported for each theme. Presenting numerical data in qualitative research is controversial. The authors argue that using numbers in qualitative work carries risks, including leading to the inference of generalisability of conclusions; reducing evidence to the *amount* of evidence and making a report seem more 'scientific', without meaningfully contributing to its logic (Maxwell, 2010). The authors did not, therefore, use frequency of mention – how often a particular word/topic came up – as this is a quantitative means of identifying

importance. As Braun and Clarke argue, frequency alone does not determine the significance of a theme. Rather, patterned meaning – that is, a shared meaning across the dataset that is a recurrent idea/belief/concept – was used to identify themes. Thus, the themes relating to secondary victimisation were defined by a conceptual pattern, rather than repetition of words/topics. In this sense, patterned meaning is about identifying a coherent story or underlying idea that meaningfully organises the data.

As the themes were constructed inductively through iterative discussion among the three researchers, the analytic process emphasised depth and reflexivity rather than numerical saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). The researchers judged that themes had reached saturation not because no new codes appeared, but because further data no longer changed interpretive understanding. The goal was analytic sufficiency and depth, achieved through iterative, reflexive engagement, as opposed to quantity or mechanical completeness.

Reflexivity

The area of RASSO is a difficult subject for researchers to study, particularly over a prolonged period. Thus, in OSB, researchers had regular mandatory one-to-one and group clinical supervision. In addition, as qualitative lead, the first author scheduled weekly team meetings where team members talked not only about the progress of their work but were also invited to talk about any aspects that they might be finding emotionally challenging or triggering. One-to-one meetings were also arranged as and when need and this researcher was able to talk to the pillar leads about any personal matters that arose.

Although the authors were independent researchers, it should be acknowledged that the project was funded by the Home Office as part of the wider Operation Soteria research programme, which was designed in response to the End-to-End Rape Review (2021). Therefore, the researchers did have to sit with the tension of being in a structured government-funded project while maintaining independence.

Findings

Table 1 shows the three themes and eight subthemes identified in the data.

The authors would like to acknowledge at the outset that many of the views presented in the findings are victim perspectives represented through the eyes of officers. While this is not a limitation, but rather the purpose of this research, it is important to acknowledge that this is the lens that is being depicted here.

Table 1. A summary of the themes and subthemes identified.

Main theme	Sub-theme
1. Initial reporting	1.1 Unwillingness to report due to anticipatory secondary victimisation 1.2 Inadequate initial police response
2. Distressing evidence gathering	2.1 Forensic medical examinations 2.2 Interviews 2.3 Digital material 2.4 Third-party material
3. Victim-focused investigations	3.1 Imbalance in distressing evidence gathering 3.2 Undermining the victim

1. Initial reporting

This theme explores the idea of secondary victimisation around initial reporting. This includes both pre-reporting – when a victim is deciding whether or not to report the crime – and, if they do go ahead and make a report, the possibility of secondary victimisation from the initial police response.

1.1. Unwillingness to report due to anticipatory secondary victimisation

‘Anticipatory secondary victimisation’ refers to how victims may anticipate being revictimised by the CJS before reporting. Participants reflected on why victims may fear such treatment, noting that the media, press and received and conventional wisdom all contribute to victims being afraid of the ‘system’, concurring with literature suggesting that victims anticipate the CJS process will be too distressing and compound their original trauma (Fohring, 2020):

Starting with the criminal justice side, there is acknowledgment that this is not a user-friendly system, particularly from a victim perspective ... you’ve suffered some horrendous harm, whether you are of that perception that the actually the criminal justice process would add to that suffering or harm ... I think that’s quite well documented in evidence and we talk about a lot of that in the media.

Victims may also fear specific criminal justice agencies, starting with the police as gatekeepers to the CJS, because it can shape their experiences of the whole CJS (Rossetti et al., 2017) and lead to sustained engagement in the process. Participants here reflected on how real events, reported by the media, may taint victims’ perspectives of the police, who may be pre-perceived as ‘difficult and derogatory’, leading to victims anticipating ‘appalling’ treatment, which may deter them from reporting at all:

I think it’s difficult to investigate [rape] because most people don’t come to us ... and that’s partly our fault ... going back to ... was it Reading in the 80s? World in Action thing that was very famous at the time, I’ve got a vague memory of watching it at the time, of the police treating a rape victim appallingly. And people know that.

These findings relating to victims’ fears around police judgement, scepticism and lack of belief, empathy and sympathy are again borne out by academic research (e.g. HMICFRS, 2020; 2022), with a recent systematic review highlighting that ‘fear of not being believed’ was a common barrier to reporting (Wieberneit et al., 2024).

Victims may also fear other aspects of the police process, after the initial reporting, such as evidence gathering, which may be felt as a further violation, intrusion into victims’ private lives and a source of embarrassment or humiliation. This may make victims understandably reluctant to embark upon a process which will expose them to this level of invasion:

The victim also knows, probably from the press and media et cetera, that we’re going to delve into their phones, their personal life. We’re going to speak to their friends. And sometimes ... there might be shame that something happened to them, or there’s embarrassment.

Victims may also fear that this highly intrusive process of evidence gathering will ultimately transpire to be futile, given the unique characteristics of rape as an offence

(Webster & Oxburgh, 2022); for example, evidence from FMEs may be useless if the suspect alleges that consensual sexual activity took place. For all these reasons, and more, victims may fear reporting a rape, and may even be advised not to by family, friends and/or support agencies (Fohring, 2020):

I totally understand that there are people, services for women in particular perhaps, who advised women not to report rape because the experience is appalling for women.

Finally, there was acknowledgement from some officers that more needed to be done to address this issue, to encourage victims to report rape and reassure them that they will be believed and supported through the process:

Absolutely needs to be more done to support people coming forward who have been abused ... There's absolutely no way the police should be judgemental ... [police] need to take all the extra steps they can to show that we will be empathetic. You know ... you're going to be supported. You're going to be believed. You know, you're going to you're not going to be turned away.

If, despite the anticipatory anxieties described above, victims do make the brave decision to report, their fear of secondary victimisation may be borne out in the initial police response, as explored in the second sub-theme.

1.2. Inadequate initial police response

If a victim does report a rape, their fears of revictimisation may be confirmed by their subsequent contact with the police; indeed, it may be even worse than anticipated. As found by Hohl et al. (2024), when asked how their experiences of the police aligned with their expectations, almost three in five (59%) victims said that their experience was worse than they expected.

Police in this study told how victims may be subjected to secondary victimisation by their contact with police initial responders and subsequently, when their case is handed over to detectives. This may have implications for how victims see the whole criminal justice process and may lead to early withdrawal from the case. This supports research findings that most victim attrition occurs early in the process, which may be 'influenced by careless and insensitive treatment by police officers' (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 82).

Participants here spoke of initial responders being inadequately trained, young and inexperienced, with not much service or life experience:

The uniform officers who are first on the scene, they don't receive any specialised training either. Which obviously creates its own challenges in terms of the necessary support that the victims will receive upon arrival.

The reality is that the uniform officer, generally speaking, is really, really young in service and probably so uncomfortable in the presence of a rape victim, all they want to do is hand them over ... I think our uniform colleagues are inexperienced, unsure what to say.

This combination of factors may lead to them feeling ill at ease in the presence of vulnerable and traumatised rape victims, thus giving inappropriate or insensitive responses, which may feel revictimising. In recognition of such issues, training has been developed for first responders, in which 'officers and staff will learn about sex offenders, victims'

responses to these traumatic events, myths and misconceptions about rape, communication skills, victim support, and effective response' (College of Policing, 2023).

However, when the initial report is assigned to a detective, the service victims receive may not improve. Wider OSB research found that detectives were frequently young, inexperienced, lacked any introductory training on RASSO and/or may be too overwhelmed with day-to-day police work to undertake training, expected to be 'investigative generalists' rather than specialists (Barbin et al., 2025; Stanko, 2022). Such findings are replicated here, where it was found that detectives are not only largely untrained in sex offences and trauma, but are often not even accredited detectives, lacking in experience, with a 'minimal' understanding of RASSO. Participants spoke of officers joining rape teams straight from response and uniform, frequently without having completed their detective training:

I'm being allocated another four officers, all of whom are coming straight from uniform to RASSO, which is a massive jump for them.

Longer-serving officers in this study expressed concerns – even incredulity – over young, untrained, inexperienced officers handling RASSO cases and victims, which is supported by research by O'Neill (2011), where police officers viewed older and more experienced colleagues as the most successful investigators. Talking of the potential effect on both victims and investigations of inexperienced investigating officers, one participant noted:

The [FORCE] is fast-tracking detectives at the moment, and it unsettles me greatly ... The thought of something happening to me or someone close to me, and then they're being investigated by somebody with six months' service ... that's incredible.

Finally, and conversely, it was noted in another force that experienced officers may also not give victims the best service, as they may be jaded and desensitised to the effects of RASSO, suffering empathy fatigue:

What we would probably think is just normal, to everybody else it really isn't. And to everybody else it's really quite it's horrible. And we get exposed to that so often that it desensitises ourselves ... sometimes our desensitised state to some of these quite traumatic offences to the victim might lead to a less empathetic response to them.

Such inadequate first responses from uniformed officers and subsequently detectives, both new and experienced, may reinforce victims' initial fears about their treatment by the police, provide a sub-optimal start to their criminal justice journey, taint the way in which they see the rest of the CJS and ultimately serve to revictimise them.

1. Distressing evidence gathering

If a victim does decide to report a rape to the police, then – unless the case is NFA'd at a very early stage – an investigation will follow. This theme explores the ways in which some types of investigative evidence gathering may subject victims to secondary victimisation, including FMEs, interviews, digital evidence and TPM.

2.1. Forensic medical examinations

In many cases, FMEs are a crucial first step in evidence collection. Officers reported several traumatising issues relating to FMEs, including: long waiting times and delays;

having to relive the details of the assault; and the invasive nature of the examination itself. As found in previous research (Kelly et al., 2005), officers flagged how there could be delays in getting appointments, as well as the length of time victims might expect to be at a SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre), at a time when they are acutely traumatised:

The process when we're at the [SARC] can take anything from four to six hours, with the victim. Which is just ridiculous, because this is somebody that like, that day has been through an ordeal or even the day before. They're shattered, they're tired, you know, and we've now put them through quite a lengthy time in the [SARC] ... you know, it is stressful for them.

As far as can be ascertained, a fairly novel finding in this research was the observation that victims may feel re-traumatised by having to repeat the details of the offence, despite having just recounted these to the police and having yet to complete their video-recorded interview (VRI). Reliving their experience to multiple personnel and agencies may be re-traumatising and serve to exacerbate feelings of anger and distress:

Unfortunately, the [SARC] ... go through the incident again ... we give them an account, we talk to the [SARC] doctor and we tell them what happened. But the [SARC] still, you know, not through fine detail as I say, but just go through what happened. And I don't think it needs to be that case ... And then they have to recount it again for the video interview. So they are telling it quite a few times. And even when they phone up, they'll phone 999, sometimes they'll say it then ... So, that victim's recounted it a lot.

Lovett and Kelly (2004) noted that while all SARCs function as inter-agency projects, primarily between the police and health service, 'apart from involvement in management committees, inter-agency links on sexual assault are minimal' and that 'direct contact between workers from different agencies – can enhance not just referral processes but also 'joined up' responses' (p. 70/1). Participants in this study seemed to confirm this lack of joined-up responses.

A critical finding here is that, even if examinations take place in a timely fashion, in optimal conditions, they are still – by their very nature – invasive and may be felt as re-victimising, as found in previous research. For example, Kelly et al. (2005) found that 'the forensic examination itself was experienced, almost universally, as a difficult and intrusive process' for victims. This is supported by participants in this study:

So in terms of, I mean, almost harvesting evidence from the victim ... they have to go through a traumatic experience ... having just been raped, they then have to go and have a full medical, whether internally examined and everything, which must be horrendous.

It was also observed here that victims' distress may be compounded due to the timely nature in which FMEs must take place, given the short forensic window:

When it's a live incident that is moving within the time constraints of a forensic window for both the victim and the suspect, there is that time pressure element. And then asking a victim to take part in the forensic procedure, which is obviously upsetting ... intrusive due to the nature of it.

Participants spoke of how they saw this as a fundamental clash between the needs of the police investigation and the emotional needs of the victim, which could be difficult to navigate:

Victims have different needs, and their needs can be quite diverse at times and their needs sometimes are not consistent with what the investigative needs of the case may be. So for example, when a victim, maybe, doesn't want to go to the [SARC] straight away and ... what we're seeking to achieve is, we're trying to identify the perpetrator and bring them to justice, but we don't have the upheaval and the emotional impact to contend with ... our role has a significant impact on their life.

Interviews with SARC staff by Widanaralalage et al. (2024) also emphasised the conflict between victim and police needs, noting officers' 'focus on evidence collection/retrieval over survivors' psychological wellbeing' (p. 4).

2.2. Interviews

As referenced in the above section, victims are required to give their account, often at multiple stages of the investigative process. As well as sharing details of the offence with, for example, emergency call handlers, first responders and SARC employees, victims are required to give a formal statement, which is captured via an Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interview, which is typically a VRI. ABE interview guidelines stipulate that interviews with vulnerable victims – the definition of which automatically includes sex offence victims – be trauma-informed, victim-centred, encourage a free narrative account and are flexible (UK Ministry of Justice & National Police Chiefs' Council, 2022).

Previous research has found that officers do not always adhere to ABE guidelines and may lack effective training (Webster & Oxburgh, 2022) when interviewing RASSO victims. The findings here echo these concerns, with participants noting non-existent, deficient and inadequate interview training, inexperienced officers leading interviews, unfocused and overly long interviews and 'pushing' victims during interviews. Officers in one force talked of untrained detectives conducting interviews with rape victims:

The other day, I was interviewing with someone who hasn't even done this basic interviewing course or the detectives course, he's not passed the exam and you're supposed to do that ... before you're considered to be a trainee detective. So he was kind of a pre-training detective, and he's supposedly the lead interview[er] ... which is appalling.

In one force, participants flagged how, even when officers do receive interview training, there is inadequate emphasis placed on the interviewing of victims (as opposed to suspects and witnesses):

I think it's our training around video interviews of our victims ... We have a two week course. One week of that is with the victims and witnesses. You don't do a mock victim one. You do one where ... somebody witnesses an incident and you've you then interview that person. And ... literally there you go. You're kind of qualified.

These deficits in training go against current research findings and recommendations. For example, research with victims and practitioners alike has found that interviewing RASSO victims requires ongoing specialist knowledge and training in order to minimise secondary victimisation (e.g. Geoghegan-Fittall et al., 2023; Tidmarsh et al., 2023; Webster & Oxburgh, 2022). Yet, in this study, not only did officers lack specialist knowledge of interviewing RASSO victims, but some lacked even basic interview training with victims.

Inadequate training and inexperience may lead to victim interviews that are too long and unfocused, at a time when victims are tired and traumatised. One officer noted how it

could be counterproductive to interview in such circumstances, it being better to leave a space of time between the assault and the interview:

They're traumatised or they're tired or, you know, for different reasons that they don't want to come and do a video interview straight away. And actually, it's better practice if they don't, because the memory recovers slightly, so it's better you leave it for, you know, 48 h then they come in, but maybe a day or so at least.

Finally, the tension between taking a trauma-focused approach and being an impartial and unbiased investigator was highlighted. ABE guidelines stipulate that interviewers should 'communicate empathy' and convey 'respect and sympathy' (Ministry of Justice, 2011). Research with victims supports the importance of this approach, with victims needing to feel 'safe, comfortable and protected' (Webster & Oxburgh, 2022, p. 688). However, ABE guidelines also state that if there are 'significant inconsistencies' in victim accounts, 'interviewers should explore them', in the context of 'puzzlement by the interviewer ... On no account should the interviewer voice their suspicions to the witness or label a witness as a liar' (ABE, section 3.68). Officers here told how they might have to 'explore' a victim's account and 'push' them, particularly if they suspect a false allegation:

Rape comes down to one word against another. And in the interest of fairness, I think we have to, as we would a suspect to a certain degree, we have to explore a victim's account. And I think ultimately, if a victim is not telling us the truth and it's quite evident from a video interview ... I think it's only right that we push ... You've got one chance at that video recorded interview and it's about getting everything out to that.

However, there is a fine line here, in officers 'exploring' a victim's account, without 'cross-examining' them or insinuating that they are lying. Previous research has found this balance to be precarious, with Stokoe et al. (2018) finding that officers would sometimes 'step over the bounds of neutral interviewing and questions which implied some degree of fault, imprudence or even complicity on the part of the interviewee' (p. 39). Thus, if officers are to avoid re-traumatising victims, they must be mindful at all times of not exhibiting victim-blaming attitudes and behaviour.

That being said, even when interviews are performed by properly trained officers, strictly according to ABE guidelines, taking a trauma-informed approach, the very nature of this type of evidence gathering may feel revictimising, given that victims are required to relive every detail of the assault:

We're asking victims to talk about really personal, private things that they might feel ashamed about and they might, for some reason not want to share with all sorts of people or for their families or friends to know. So that does make it difficult.

This echoes findings by HMICFRS (2022), who found that 'making a statement was an exhausting and retraumatising experience, according to most participants'.

2.3. Digital material

In comparison to more 'traditional' sources, the collection of digital material – e.g. text messages, emails, social media posts and digital images – is a relatively new source of evidence that is now used in many, or most, rape investigations, and 'may provide vital

evidence to support an investigation and prosecution’ (HM Government, 2021). As one participant in this study said:

Phones tell you just so much about that person’s life and so much evidence can be obtained ... they could have told all sorts about what happened. So just about every investigation you want to look at a phone, if it’s reasonable, if it’s legal and justifiable.

However, while such evidence may be helpful to an investigation, it may also be a ‘double-edged sword’, as victims may find the seizing and scrutiny of their digital devices revictimising (Dodge et al., 2019). In this study, participants highlighted various ways in which digital evidence collection may be experienced as distressing or traumatic. This could take the form of practical/procedural issues, such as victims being without their phones for extended periods, with participants speaking of long waiting times for phone downloads, and mobiles being ‘seized’ for weeks or months. These delays, in accord with issues noted in previous research (HM Government, 2021) were often attributed to inadequate resources, both in terms of staffing and equipment and/or lack of training in downloading machines/systems, with some forces relying on digital investigation teams or specially trained officers:

We can’t always download them in a day because of the fact that we haven’t got many people trained [on the download equipment]. So if they have to be sent away or we have to wait for somebody to be free to do it, then we’re keeping those for longer ... I wouldn’t want my phone being taken for days and days on end.

While victims have myriad legitimate reasons for not wanting to be without their phone, one point of concern is that this may raise doubts in police officers, as described in this case:

The victim saying, no, I don’t want you to take my mobile phone ... because I’ve got a two year old daughter and I need my phone, ... And I quite agree, you know? In the back of my mind, being a police officer, being cynical, it does ring alarm bells because you still kind of think, wow. If you want this case to go somewhere and you’ve got nothing to hide, then why aren’t you? But then on the other hand, I can completely agree.

While this victimisation can be somewhat mitigated by the provision of a replacement phone (which does not always happen; Victim’s Commissioner, 2021), one participant noted that the lack of parity in any replacement given might feel like ‘further revictimisation’:

If we do take a victim’s phone then, depending on the case, we would replace the phone. When I say replace, I don’t mean like for like ... not replace their iPhone 11, I’m afraid ... they’re getting a bog standard ... smartphone that they can just make calls on ... which when you were a victim of that serious sexual assault, you know, feels a bit of further victimisation, I’d imagine.

As well as the logistical issues associated with the collection of digital material, previous research has found that only a minority of victims are told why digital information is relevant and required (Victim’s Commissioner, 2021) and in some cases, police may be dishonest about what is to be collected (HMICFRS, 2022). Similarly, in this study, participants noted that victims are not always fully informed about what material will be downloaded from their phone, or that more/different material might be downloaded than they consented to. This was often attributed to system issues:

They [victims] can make it specific [on what is downloaded]. But part of the problem that we have ... I think quite often when they do the download, they might download most of it anyway because our software ... can be very problematic dealing with different things. If you try and download part of a phone, then it might not get it.

The same officer noted that in such circumstances, only material that has been consented to be looked at should be. However, they also foresaw issues with this:

We should respect and shouldn't look beyond that if that's technically what they're allowing ... But I suppose the problem would be is that if we're looking at that and we saw something else which then undermined what they were saying, there would be conflict of interest there.

Lastly, as there is now so much personal information on mobile phones, participants observed that victims may feel that their privacy is being invaded when police trawl through their messages, social media posts and photographs. As found by the Victim's Commissioner (Molina & Poppleton, 2020), some victims compared this 'to the violation inflicted by the rape'. One participant in this study said:

We were going through victim's phones seeing every single thing about their private and personal lives ... You know, if someone took my phone, you'd know exactly what I'd been up to, who I'd talked to. And that shouldn't be the case.

The Government End-to-End Rape Review (HM Government, 2021) found that the handing over of personal and sensitive digital material to police causes 'deep concern' for many victims and is a major factor in victim attrition. Thus, as found by Dodge et al. (2019), 'digital evidence was seen by officers as a double-edged sword: it provides more convincing evidence in some sexual assault cases but also makes cases much more lengthy and invasive for victims' (p. 10/11).

Finally, there was an acknowledgement from officers of new guidance around, for example, how long victims' mobile phones could be kept and what is considered relevant and proportionate to look at. For example, a new code of practice for powers included in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act, which came into force in November 2022, stated that victims' mobile phone data would only be requested where it is 'strictly necessary'. In one force, officers reported that strict parameters around digital data are starting to be set:

We've done a lot of work trying to make sure that we're in line with the legislation, that what we're asking for is relevant to the case. We're not going on fishing expeditions, we're not ... going into every mobile phone that we seize.

While even in forces where this was not happening yet, officers welcomed these changes in legislation.

2.4. Third-party material

Many of the participants' concerns around the collection of victims' digital material were echoed in the use of TPM. While there may be legitimate investigative uses for such material, research has found that requests may often amount to 'a wholesale demand for lifelong medical records, including any mental health notes, social services material, school reports and educational material and records of any therapy' (Victim's Commissioner, 2021), with HMICFRS (2021) finding that around half of victims had their medical and other records accessed.

As found by the Information Commissioner (2022), the ‘significant trauma’ of RASSO can be ‘further amplified’ by such requests, particularly when the interrogation of TPM is unnecessary, irrelevant, excessive and intrusive. Some participants noted examples where they felt TPM requests were necessary, in particular to support the victim’s account:

So if the victim is saying I was raped five years ago and I went to the GP and told them about that, it’s relevant. We need to get that because that supports our victim.

However, other participants voiced concerns that relevance was often not demonstrable in their searches:

I think would we often dig in a people’s past and when just because I don’t know, maybe they were a little bugger as a child? And I don’t see how that impacts on whether they could or couldn’t be raped on that day that we’re dealing with or sexually assaulted in any way.

By interrogating victims’ personal lives and histories, in some cases police ‘are making judgements about the case based on information that is often unconnected with the assault in question’ (Information Commissioner, 2022). Participants here voiced how deep dives into victims’ pasts are frequently felt as intrusive, amounting to another source of victimisation, supporting findings by the Victim’s Commissioner (Molina & Poppleton, 2020) who found that ‘some survivors compared the request [for digital and TPM] to the violation inflicted by the rape’:

Having reported a great deal to me already, that person is ridiculously brave in terms of the climate, just knowing that we [will be] going to be going to through someone’s invasive personal information ... I’m reviewing medical notes ... I’ll pick up on what their history and their ailments have been. It’s like, I don’t need to know this.

The level of intrusion with digital and TPM may be considered akin to what has become known as a ‘digital strip search’ and accounts, in part, for victim withdrawal from the process (Victim’s Commissioner, 2021). A participant in this study said: *With third party searches ... I’ve heard it referred to like a digital strip search. Yeah, so we definitely need to move away from that.* As the Information Commissioner (2022), concluded: ‘Victims should not have to subject themselves to intrusive investigations and information collection ... as a result of reporting a crime which has been perpetrated upon them’.

As with digital material, participants noted that it may not always be properly explained to victims exactly what TPM will be looked at, which raises the question of whether they are able to give fully informed consent:

You’re going through medical records, counselling records ... a lot of the time, I don’t think all the complainants fully understand exactly what we’re requesting and what we look at.

This supports research from HMICFRS (2022), which found that victims were often ‘shocked and unprepared’ when TPM that they saw as ‘irrelevant and intrusive’ was used in court.

While participants largely agreed that TPM requests were too broad and unspecific, they cited the CPS as requiring, and asking for, such material:

I don’t agree with the third party protocol. That’s obviously something that we have to do from CPS ... I’m not a big fan of all third party, but it is a process we have to go through.

This tension between the police and CPS is supported by the Victim’s Commissioner (2021) and is explored in more detail in Gekoski et al. (2024).

In sum, as shown throughout this and previous sub-themes, officers were dubious about the relevance and necessity of collecting and analysing excessive digital and TPM data, although it was clear that this data collection was still taking place. However, participants were also optimistic about seeing change in this area, with more awareness around what is a reasonable line of inquiry, what is relevant and proportionate and being more 'robust' in 'kicking back' CPS requests for such information:

People will go in and get everything about that person under the direction of CPS. But I think now we're being a bit more robust and we're kicking stuff back and say, Look, no, it's not relevant ... why would it be relevant that somebody had told a lie in school.

Such views were reflected in a Home Office consultation in 2022, which showed that almost nine in 10 respondents were in favour of introducing a statutory duty on police forces to only make 'necessary and proportionate' requests for TPM. This was subsequently enshrined in law, in an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill in May 2023. To ensure compliance, forces that fail to abide by the new rules face consequences, including possible legal action (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

1. Victim-focused investigations

Building on the above theme, officers spoke of how investigations were too victim-focused; it being overwhelmingly the case that the victim's behaviour and actions before, during and after the assault are focused on, as opposed to that of the suspect. Officers observed that this could result in victims feeling as if they were the ones under suspicion rather than the suspect, which may be a significant source of secondary victimisation.

3.1. Imbalance in distressing evidence gathering

Officers in this research told how investigations are more victim-focused, as opposed to suspect-focused (as explored in Pillar 1 of OSB). The definition of suspect-focused investigations adopted here is that of Hohl and Stanko (2022), who said that 'the investigation must begin by examining the suspect's offending behaviour early in the investigation, rather than focusing on the victim as the first and primary site of the investigation'. The key elements of this approach include foregrounding: (1) the actions of the suspect before, during and after the offence and their explanations for those actions; (2) the circumstances and context of the offence; (3) the relationship between the suspect and victim and (4) awareness that the suspect may use or attempt to use grooming techniques such as manipulation, coercion and control on officers (Stanko, 2022).

However, as detailed here, the victim is very much the 'primary site' of investigations. Speaking broadly about how RASSO investigations focus on scrutinising victims – unlike in any other crime – officers expressed puzzlement:

I do feel that sometimes when I speak to people ... they do investigate the victims. And I say, why have you done that, that's not relevant. If I was reporting an incident, I wouldn't want to be investigated like that. We don't do it for assaults. We don't do it for burglaries. So why do we for ... sexual offences? I don't understand.

This victim focus manifests in the disproportionate gathering of evidence about the victim, which is not routinely collected on the suspect. This echoes findings in research

by the Victims' Commissioner (Molina & Poppleton, 2020), where victims felt investigations were 'unbalanced'. While this is unavoidable in certain types of evidence gathering – for example, it is only necessary to take swabs from the suspect, while the victim has to endure a full FME – in other types, it is not. This is particularly the case with digital and TPM, in which 'digital strip searches' are routinely performed on victims and not suspects, an imbalance that officers across forces referred to as unfair:

Suspects ... we don't dig into their past, like what they did at school and what they've done, like, what counselling they've had or what is done with the probation services and things like that, which would probably be just as relevant to your argument character wise ... [it's] very intrusive for victims. And I do think that's very unfair.

This aligns with findings from The Information Commissioner (2022), who found that in RASSO cases, 'it appears victims are subjected to a far greater level of scrutiny of their personal information than the suspects'. Participants here observed that this may make victims feel as if it is they, rather than the suspects, who are the focus of the investigation, which may be experienced as intrusive and revictimising:

When the demand is sort of made for information about the victim ... it feels like they are the ones that are under investigation rather than the suspects, I've seen that firsthand ... and I understand why they feel that way, it isn't fair.

This supports previous research with victims, which has found that such a partial approach may make the victim feel as if the police are biased in favour of the suspect (HMICFRS, 2021), as if they themselves are the ones under suspicion (Information Commissioner, 2022) and that they are 'the criminal' (Victim's Commissioner, 2021).

Some officers did note practical considerations in obtaining suspect information, such as suspects refusing to give pin codes/passwords to their digital devices, deleting data and/or refusing consent for the police to access TPM. While the victim, as the complainant, is usually willing to consent to police accessing any evidence that might help support their case:

Ultimately, I think kind of the emphasis is more on the victim, looking at their phone for example because, well the suspect might have deleted that, okay. And to send that off to the lab, that's going to take nine months and get any deleted data, whereas I could look through her phone now ... because she's come forward to us. She hasn't deleted those messages ... It's all about what is the best way that's going to help the investigation.

However, while these practical considerations certainly exist and have an impact, officers were also of the opinion that such 'digital strip searches' were frequently conducted on victims and not suspects, to go on 'fishing expeditions' for something that might 'discredit' or 'undermine' their case, which is the focus of the next sub-theme.

3.2. Undermining the victim

Linked to the notion of suspect versus victim-focused investigations is the focus on victim credibility and how the police appear to seek to undermine the victim and her case from the start. In terms of specific factors that the police may perceive to be undermining or discrediting, participants' comments centred chiefly around the perceived truthfulness of the victim and their account, which was discussed under the theme of

‘victim fabrication’ in Gekoski et al. (2024). These ideas and beliefs may be grounded in the stereotypical gendered idea of women being liars generally (Wieberneit et al., 2024) and liars about rape specifically, which is an example of a commonly held rape myth (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

This takes us back to Theme 1.1 around anticipatory secondary victimisation, where it was found that victims may not report their assault due to fear of disbelief. In this current theme, the evidence suggests that this fear may be borne out for some victims, as officers appear primed to uncover evidence of dishonesty from the start of the investigation, such as ‘lies’ (about anything) in their past and/or any evidence of previous (apparent) false allegations. If any ostensible untruths are uncovered, these may be used to suggest that the assault itself is fabricated: the implication being that if the victim has lied once, then she is *de facto* a liar:

There is a lot of pressure placed on the victim because we’re asking to look into the past to see if they lied ... I think that’s very harsh. Even if you’ve lied in the past, doesn’t mean you’re lying about this incident ... There is a lot of focus based on the victim’s character, and basically trying to find out whether they’ve lied in the past, just sort of the defence to say, oh well you lied in the past so you must be lying now ... I think it’s very difficult for the victim.

However, the idea that women frequently fabricate rape has been widely discredited as a rape myth, with research finding that police officers overestimate the occurrence of false allegations (McMillan, 2018) and that genuinely false allegations of rape are made in a very small minority of cases. As reported by Kelly et al. (2005), ‘at maximum they constitute nine per cent and probably closer to three per cent of all reported cases’.

There is also a vital distinction to be made between ‘false’ allegations and inconsistent, mistaken or unproven accounts (Hohl & Stanko, 2015), an issue which is discussed in detail in Gekoski et al. (2024). An example from one force illustrates how a minor inconsistency in a victim’s account can be used as evidence that the entire account is false:

Some of the things I’ve seen around some of the decision-making is our, yeah, literally just beyond disbelief ... One was NFA’d saying it was a provable lie. The victim said she was picked up by an Uber at X spot, she actually got in the car 50 yards down the way, so the officers right now offers a provable lie that she’s got in the car a different place. I mean, some of these things are so shocking.

Thus, inconsistencies, omissions or mistakes in the account – however minor or inconsequential – may be looked for and over/mis-interpreted, and taken to mean that the whole account is fabricated. These findings are supported by Wieberneit et al. (2024) who found that among the most frequent barriers to investigating RASSO complaints were ‘inconsistencies in the complaint’. Given that ‘pre-existing bias that victims fabricate their experiences of sexual victimization’ (p. 3,747) was also cited as an equally important barrier, taken together the two factors make for a potent combination of scepticism and disbelief.

Building on results from this force officers in Gekoski et al. (2024), officers in other forces also spoke of the importance of victims not just telling the truth, but telling the *whole* truth, as any omissions in their account could be used to discredit them and, again, suggest that the substance of the account is untrue, as opposed to simply a detail:

Sometimes there’s a there’s a reluctance by victims to come up with to tell the whole story ... there’s sometimes a hesitation in not wanting to admit that certain things have happened, which might be damaging to the case ... They could then have an inroad if you like to, to

challenge them, to say, well, they're obviously lying about that, so they must be lying about other things.

Previous research has found that withholding, or not remembering, information is frequently due to fear of not being believed, which may be interpreted by police officers as 'lying'. For example, Jordan (2001) found that victims may try to 'embellish' their accounts, or 'conceal wrong-doing', to make themselves seem more 'believable' to the police. The irony being, as observed by Chambers and Millar (1983), that: 'Police scepticism promoted the narration of the very inaccuracies which, in turn, consolidated the police view that women fabricate complaints and make false allegations'.

In considering why fishing expeditions for discrediting factors, such as (un)truthfulness, appear to be unique to victims of rape and not other victims of crime, officers believed that this was partly due to the nature of consent:

Often there is one person's word against the other. And the key is who's telling the truth? So the credibility of both your victim and your suspect is pretty key.

However, participants' comments about the credibility of *both* parties seems to contradict findings about suspects not having the same level of scrutiny applied to their lives as victims – *We seem to do more work looking to see if the victim is lying than the actual suspect* – as seen throughout the findings of this study. Additionally, as the Information Commissioner (2022) found: 'Speculative requests like this appear to be conducted as a credibility check on the complainant. This happens only in rape and sexual assault and in no other kind of case'. The disbelief surrounding victims of sexual assault (who are usually female) and not suspects (who are usually male), harks back to the aforementioned idea of women being liars and serves as a powerful form of secondary victimisation.

However, there was acknowledgement from officers that this culture of disbelief and focus on victim credibility was wrong and how – while culture, behaviour and actions are slow to change – things are slowly moving in the right direction. As this senior officer said:

We don't believe victims. We prejudge them for credibility. We are using rape myths and stereotypes, and we don't understand trauma ... I don't think we can teach culture in a week on a course, but we can highlight to people they need to think differently. And so my request was they needed to focus on rape myths and stereotypes, impacts of trauma and victim credibility.

Thus, there appears to be positive movement in terms of refocusing investigations to make them more suspect-focused in respect of victim credibility, which is in line with new legislation regarding digital and TPM as outlined in previous themes.

In Gekoski et al. (2024), it was found that judgements about victims' credibility may also be grounded in other rape myths, such as how a so-called 'real' rape victim should look, present and behave. For example, in one force, victim precipitation myths were found, such as ideas around victims' sexual history, substance (mis)use, memory issues and mental health. However, these themes either did not seem present in other forces or were only lightly touched upon by some officers; thus, to draw on such comments would be misrepresentative. In summary, while findings from Gekoski et al. (2024) relating to victim credibility in the form of 'victim fabrication' were clearly evident across other forces, other rape myths were notably absent.

Discussion

This study explored police officers' views of how secondary victimisation of RASSO victims manifests. It provided a lesser-heard perspective by focusing on officers' views that, while not the primary focus of the original interviews conducted, were notable in the frequency with which secondary victimisation was discussed. This suggests that officers have a keen awareness of the notion of secondary victimisation and the myriad ways victims can be adversely affected by it. In this respect, it was particularly sobering to hear the breadth of secondary victimisation-related issues being highlighted, not by victims, but by the people victims may hold responsible for the secondary victimisation they face. This study identified three core themes relating to secondary victimisation that demonstrated its potential to harm victims right the way through the investigation process: at (and even before) the reporting stage; during the evidence gathering related to the investigation and through the poor and uninformed attitudes victims faced, which contributed to their secondary victimisation.

The fact that core facets of the investigative process are not being completed effectively is well documented, and our findings accord with the literature that outlines the impact this has on victims (HMICFRS, 2020, 2022; Hohl et al., 2024). There are well cited issues such as the training of RASSO officers and their lack of specialist knowledge, for instance, which impacts on the investigative processes and victim care (Barbin et al., 2025; Darwinkel et al., 2013; O'Neill, 2011; Stanko, 2022). Our findings demonstrate that, even where such training does exist, the victim is often overlooked within this training, such as the lack of training on victim ABE interviews, which as noted above contradicts current research findings and recommendations in this space (Webster & Oxburgh, 2022) and is perhaps an indication of the lack of emphasis placed on victim welfare compared to investigative efficacy. The fact that victims are often not fully informed of the process of the investigation, which in the case of digital material downloads sometimes extends to victims being misled about the process, is of significant concern and relates to the integrity with which RASSO investigations are conducted.

Issues around officer attitudes were also a prevailing factor in creating a climate of secondary victimisation for victims. Empathy fatigue has been well documented in the literature as something which officers are liable to suffer from after long periods of time spent working in stressful situations, and may affect the way victims are treated (Maguire & Sondhi, 2024). Perhaps more concerning is the attitude of suspicion that is generated from the continued over-focus on the victim. This manifested in unnecessary and intrusive evidence gathering about the victim and, perhaps even more concerningly, through misconceptions about victim credibility related to, for instance, a lack of understanding around memory and recall, and scrutiny placed on victims which did not apply to the suspect. This is, again, a well-worn finding in previous literature, and suggests that despite guidance to the contrary, RASSO victims are placed under an unfair scrutiny that is singular to RASSO investigations and perpetuates myths and stereotypes singular to sex offending (HMICFRS, 2020, 2022; Information Commissioner, 2022; Wieberneit et al., 2024).

Both individual and institutional issues lead to secondary victimisation

Our findings accord with previous literature, demonstrating issues relating to secondary victimisation at both an individual level relating to officer attitude and competence, as

well as the institutional challenges that hamper both an effective investigation and appropriate victim care. As noted above, participants recognised that some of the personal attitudes held by officers were inappropriate and ran the risk of causing secondary victimisation. They also spoke, however, to a wider 'cultural' attitudinal issue, when talking about 'we' (i.e. the force) needing an attitudinal shift. This is, perhaps, indicative of officers' expectations that their treatment of the victim and the way they focus on either the victim or the suspect is led and steered by their institution. If this is the case, then forces must be mindful of this and the importance of both the individual and the institution in preventing secondary victimisation. For example, when it comes to the collection of digital data, there is an institutional expectation that officers will navigate the limitations of the digital tools that they are required to use by not being transparent with victims about the extent of data that will be collected. While officers have an individual duty to victims, the forces – as institutions – equally have duties to their officers to provide an environment that instils and maintains appropriate standards.

The findings also highlighted institutional challenges which serve to perpetuate secondary victimisation, and which officers also have to contend with. These are covered in more detail in a separate publication (Gekoski et al., [under review](#)), but outline that challenges start right at the reporting stage, with RASSO victims often reporting to inadequately trained, inexperienced officers. This lack of training and experience extends to victims' contact with detectives, who are neither appropriately resourced (Walley et al., 2025) nor have the specialist knowledge to conduct this aspect of the role appropriately. The fact that officers are suffering from empathy fatigue reflects the wider literature demonstrating poor well-being support for officers, leading to a myriad of mental health issues (Maguire & Sondhi, 2024), and which have been linked to officers' difficulties in coping with the institutional inequities of their role (Purba & Demou, 2019). These findings echo the more general findings in the Year 1 OSB report (Stanko, 2022) and were all shown here to impact victims and cause them further harm. The officers here acknowledged and were quite open about the poor practice that victims may face and suggested an awareness of and frustration around the systemic issues they see as detrimental to both victims and the investigative process.

Defining secondary victimisation as both 'unavoidable' and 'avoidable'

The findings also demonstrated that secondary victimisation is multifaceted and can be caused by several different types of issues. Two avenues for secondary victimisation to occur were discussed: the potential for either 'unavoidable' or 'avoidable' secondary victimisation, depending on the context. One of the examples of how these two types of secondary victimisation may manifest (and manifest simultaneously) is the process of FMEs. Early research in this area highlighted problems in forensic practice, including: long waits; no choice about the sex of the examiner; examinations taking place in police stations; the examiner displaying disbelief, hostility, and a lack of sympathy and a lack of understanding of rape and trauma (e.g. Chambers & Millar, 1983; Corbett, 1987; Lees & Gregory, 1993; Temkin, 1996, 1997, 1999; Victim Support, 1996). These issues are 'avoidable' through attitudinal changes, better training and more appropriate resourcing. Since the establishment of SARCs – described by Horvath et al. (2020, p. 1) as 'highly skilled, one-stop medical units staffed by multidisciplinary teams' – improvements have been reported

in service provision (e.g. Kelly et al., 2005), which have mitigated some of these issues (although as noted above, in practice it is clear some of these issues remain). Despite this, FMEs remain an inherently difficult and traumatic process to go through, one which, if the victim wishes for such forensic material to be gathered, is unavoidable. In other words, secondary victimisation may still occur when there has been no objective system failure. In this way, FMEs at their core may be an unavoidable source of secondary victimisation, but the way they are completed may be a source of avoidable secondary victimisation.

This idea is not new; in the literature, studies recognise the notion of ‘unavoidable’ secondary victimisation, such as having to go through invasive evidence collection. However, definitionally this is often missing, with existing definitions focusing solely (and undeniably, importantly) on the avoidable secondary victimisation, caused by agencies’ negligence, ignorance, disorganisation or poor attitude. We would argue here that both types of secondary victimisation are important because they speak to the complexity of officers’ roles when working in RASSO and with RASSO victims and the different mechanisms by which we can work to remove or mitigate the potential for secondary victimisation. We therefore here (re)define and expand on the original definition of secondary victimisation by Gekoski et al. (2013), as: *Secondary victimisation can occur when a victim of crime feels they have been subjected to avoidable inadequate, insensitive, or inappropriate treatment, attitudes, behaviour, responses and practice by criminal justice and social agencies and/or due to unavoidable actions required by criminal justice or social agencies.*

Implications for law enforcement practice

All secondary victimisation caused by poor officer practice or by an ineffective system is, in effect, avoidable and therefore should be eliminated from the process. The fact that logistical and institutional issues, such as delays, are compounding what may be ‘necessary’ evidence gathering is clearly an unacceptable burden to place on victims. There is work to be done to ensure that these processes, recognising their propensity for causing secondary victimisation by their very nature, are handled as well as possible to minimise further harm to victims. Clarifying protocols around when and what a victim needs to disclose and to whom, for example, should ensure that the victim does not need to unnecessarily repeat themselves. The importance of inter-agency cooperation is stressed here as a core facet of providing good care and service to victims, alongside its ability to promote better investigations.

There have been manifold reviews conducted and improvements suggested over the years, which speaks to making the service and system better, with very little change to show for it (End-to-End Rape Review, 2021). The data collected for this study were obtained during the first year of OSB, a programme designed to precipitate transformational change into the way RASSO investigations are conducted (Stanko, 2022). Since the collection of these data, subsequent evaluations have indicated some signs of progress. For example, early evaluation of Operation Soteria adopter forces has found that new training is encouraging a more victim-centred approach, aiming to dispel rape myths, increase understanding around trauma and make police reflect on their beliefs, behaviours and the language they use with victims (HMICFRS, 2024). Furthermore, it

was found that more forces are investing in digital download vans or kiosks and are mostly returning victims' mobile phones within 24 hours (an ambition outlined in the End-to-End Rape Review, 2021) and in rare cases where this is impossible, victims are given replacement phones (End-to-End Rape Review, 2021).

Thus, these types of changes are possible. Nevertheless, such changes will take time to embed and capacity issues and institutional challenges remain. In particular, while police forces remain woefully understaffed and under-resourced, officers are inadequately trained and carrying unacceptably heavy caseloads and are often under chronic stress (Stanko, 2022), it is hard to see how real transformation is possible. Addressing these issues will require real, systemic change, the responsibility for which lies not just with individual police forces but with those that are responsible for the running of our CJS as a whole. Time will tell whether projects like Operation Soteria afford this type of change, and whether other elements of the CJS are able to follow suit.

It is also important to note that for many issues documented here, there is already a significant amount of guidance in place for officers. The Victim's Code, for instance, was implemented in 2004, yet research finds it is not followed (Victim Support, 2017), and that few victims know their rights under the Code, with a recent report putting this number at less than one in five (Victim's Commissioner, 2021). It has been argued that because the provisions under The Code are not enforceable in the courts, 'no rights in any real sense are provided by the Code' (Sanders & Jones, 2007, p. 285) or, as Wolhuter et al. (2008) put it: 'victims are mere consumers of services, rather than holders of rights' (p. 141). Understanding the barriers between providing guidance and its routine implementation, in addition to enshrining victims' rights in law, is crucial in understanding and improving victim care. Questions are also therefore raised here as to why the guidance that is currently available is not more properly integrated within policing.

In separating the concepts of both avoidable and unavoidable secondary victimisation, it is hoped that more can be done to minimise the risk of secondary victimisation. For instance, in the case of collecting evidence, it is not enough to assume that because this is done sensitively and in a timeframe and manner which respects the victim's rights and wishes, that this is enough to safeguard against secondary victimisation, given that the process itself has the potential to cause harm. Participants noted in their responses that victims' needs may fundamentally clash with the needs of the investigation, which may be a cause of secondary victimisation. As such, there needs to be a considered response by law enforcement as to what the response to a victim should be in this instance, in line with the principles of procedural justice (Johnson et al., 2025). This kind of complex decision-making is likely to be facilitated by officers with specialist training and understanding of the nature of secondary victimisation and how to mitigate this type of harm.

Conducting an ABE interview, for instance, may be a balancing act. From a victim's perspective, research has emphasised the importance of not rushing victims into ABE interviews, as they may find it hard to provide a coherent account within the first 24 hours of an offence, or immediately after an FME and should be well rested (Geoghegan-Fittall et al., 2023). However, conversely, officers should also be mindful that waiting too long to conduct an interview (e.g. weeks) may cause anxiety, worry and doubt (HMICFRS, 2022). From an investigative perspective, conducting the interview early on may lead

to the generation of crucial investigative leads, which leads to the swifter apprehension of the suspect, but must be balanced against the concerns about obtaining the best account possible and whether waiting may precipitate better information gathering (Geoghegan-Fittall et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of secondary victimisation here could also be considered in the context of conflict, which may lie partly between victims' expectations of how the system works and how the system actually works. As argued by Svensson (2007), secondary victimisation can arise as the result of a disconnect between victims' prior, and largely uninformed, beliefs in a strong welfare state and the way the 'real world' works, which may ultimately leave victims revictimised by their experiences. For example, as found in this and previous research, 'the nature of policework, and particularly the ways in which the police interpret their jobs and the aspects of their work that they value, may mean that victim-orientated work is accorded less priority than crime-fighting' (Mawby, 2007, p. 215). Therefore, if victims are labouring under the (mis)apprehension that the primary role of the police is to support and help them in the aftermath of crime, then they may feel re-victimised by their experiences when this support is not forthcoming. If this is the case, then we suggest that the police taking responsibility for the better management of victims' initial expectations may reduce secondary victimisation by heading off feelings of disappointment, frustration and anger. For instance, setting out to victims that the primary role of the police is as investigators rather than support figures and explaining to them and signposting them to ISVAs (independent sexual violence advisors) and other sources of support might help to set more reasonable parameters for victims.

Limitations and future research

This study explored secondary victimisation from the perspective of police officers; therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, some important aspects of secondary victimisation identified in research with victims were not picked up. For example, strong themes in victim research revolve around treatment by the police and whether this is perceived to be fair, kind and empathetic – principles that align with procedural justice (Johnson et al., 2025). These were not identified here.

We also used interviews that were not originally collected for the purposes of understanding officers' views of secondary victimisation, which may have limited the information we obtained. However, the fact that so much relevant data relating to officers' views of secondary victimisation was apparent in these interviews that were designed to understand the general challenges relating to RASSO investigations suggests it is a prominent and constant issue for officers that requires urgent attention. In addition, considering police officers' perspectives strengthens and supports research in this area, which is often conducted with victims, often taking a phenomenological perspective.

A further limitation should be noted in terms of recruitment. As officers in one force were selected by police leads and in the other three forces, police leads compiled lists of potential interviewees, there was a risk of selection bias. It may be, for example, that police leads chose (potential) interviewees who they believed would give the 'best' or most 'favourable' account of policing RASSO. However, it is important to note that, particularly in the smaller forces, RASSO teams were often small and there was therefore

limited opportunity for such ‘selection’, given the number of interviewees needed by researchers.

Finally, these interviews were conducted in the early stages of OSB, taking place between 2021 and 2022. This may mean that there have been changes implemented since that go some way towards addressing some of the issues identified here. For example, as highlighted in the Discussion, there have been changes to training and to the way in which police deal with mobile phones and TPM. However, it should also be noted that there has only been very limited evaluation of any such changes (HMICFRS, 2024), thereby flagging the need for more evaluations in this area.

Finally, it is beyond the scope of this paper and these authors, who sit outside of policing, to suggest how some of these recommendations – for example, those relating to inter-agency collaboration and disclosure protocol clarity – could be operationalised in concrete terms. However, it is suggested that policing needs to think about how they turn these recommendations into tangible, auditable standards that they can measure demonstrable progress against.

Conclusion

Preventing secondary victimisation is undeniably a crucial victim welfare issue. However, it would be remiss not to appreciate the interlinking nature of preventing secondary victimisation and the knock-on effect of better victim engagement, less victim withdrawal, better opportunities for best evidence gathering and more appropriate investigative outcomes. It also has the potential wider benefit of better instilling trust in policing, which then encourages reporting in the first place, at a time when confidence in policing is at an all-time low.

Note

1. The data for this study were collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB), funded by the UK Home Office. OSB was 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. OSB aimed to improve the investigation of RASSO in England and Wales. See Stanko (2022) for further details.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Katherine Allen, Thistle Dalton, Joana Ferreira and Kristina Massey for data collection.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The primary data used in this paper were collected as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone, funded by the UK Home Office. The secondary analysis of the data and writing of this paper were provided

by the Economic and Social Research Council funding responsive mode (OPP147): secondary data analysis round one, grant number APP10145.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

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