

OUTCOMES:

Understanding the impact of Outcome 16 on racially minoritised women's participation in Domestic Abuse investigations.

Outcome 16 is used by the police to describe the finalisation of a domestic violence and abuse (DVA) investigation where the suspect was identified, but the victim did not support police action.

This OUTCOMES study aimed to (i) Explore how police respond to and support racially minoritised adult women survivors of DVA in relation to reporting crime and how current professional practice influences Outcome 16 cases, (ii) To understand the individual, organisational, cultural and social factors that influence racially minoritised women's decision to withdraw charges and (iii) To identify recommendations that will increase the likelihood of racially minoritised adult DVA survivors supporting criminal investigations.

This research involved three police forces and three universities, who worked collaboratively to design the research and set objectives. The academic research team consisted of Dr Hayley Alderson, Professor Ruth McGovern, Dr Kausiki Sarma, Dr Claire Smiles (Newcastle University), Dr William McGovern, Dr Nikki D'Souza (Northumbria University) and Professor Geetanjali Gangoli (Durham University).

Key recommendations

1. At a national level, **National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) leads should work collaboratively to ensure higher levels of cultural competency** between and within forces in relation to professional practices when policing minority communities. Specialist compulsory training and refresher training should be introduced for police personnel regarding cultural diversity, how to respond to victims in a trauma-informed way, how to avoid victim blaming language and how best to support racially minoritised survivors.
2. The **ethnicity of all DVA survivors should be routinely collected** to enable forces to monitor the patterns of evidential problems related to Outcome 16 and understand whether individuals or groups of individuals are disproportionately affected due to their protected characteristics.
3. Police to **harness the role of community elders/leaders as gatekeepers** to improve awareness of available support and to promote understanding and trust in the police among **diverse communities**. Given that women from racially minoritised backgrounds often find informal support networks more helpful than formalised services in the context of DVA [1], this approach can also help in improving both police responses and strengthening informal support systems that survivors are more likely to trust and access.
4. The **impact of significant court delays on Outcome 16** to be monitored within forces and on a national basis to ascertain 'the tipping point' i.e. at which point, do the scales tip for a victim where this becomes the primary reason for them not wishing to pursue a prosecutorial pathway? Additionally, a robust process should be established to ensure that at each point in the criminal justice journey (i.e., point of report, criminal investigation process, transfer to court) a reassessment of needs is undertaken to accommodate the changing needs of the survivor.
5. Consideration to be given to whether **Outcome 16 needs to shift focus (as a failed outcome) from a policing perspective**. Currently, it is largely construed as a failure due to the monitoring/accountability of the measure, but this is at odds with survivors' needs at times. Police recognise that they want to keep the 'door open' for repeat victims to reach out for police help when needed rather than to alienate them from further support. It was proposed that victim satisfaction measures should be given greater prominence rather than Outcome 16 (service quality vs outcome of case).
6. Overall, to improve survivors' access and experiences of police support and mitigate the occurrence of Outcome 16 it was recommended to have: equitable multilingual information portals on civil-criminal justice procedures/ provisions, greater awareness of legal rights and service provisions, free legal aid for

low-income immigrant women facing DA, and enhanced police training on dynamics of DVA/ coercive control.

Background

In cases of Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) it is common for survivors to withdraw support for police action; this can be for a complex matrix of reasons, inclusive of re-traumatisation, reprisals from the perpetrator and/or their family, re-victimisation, being disbelieved, stigmatised and lack of confidence in the criminal justice system [2-8]. This is further complicated in the case of racially minoritised women and barriers to disclosure can include problems with language and interpretation, community influences and immigration status [9]. Additionally, it is acknowledged that particular forms of DVA -such as forced marriage, ‘honour’-based violence and female genital mutilation - are more prevalent in minoritised women [10, 11]. Statistics show that in the year ending March 2023, 4.4% of people aged 16 or over in England and Wales reported experiencing DVA in the 12 months before being surveyed. People with a mixed ethnic background experienced the highest rates of DVA at 7.9%, of which mixed white/Black Caribbean individuals accounted for 20.6% and Mixed white/Asian individuals accounted for 5.3% . Other ethnicities with high levels of DVA reporting included Black Caribbean people at 6.2% and White Irish at 5.4% [12].

A recent report that focused on police responses to violence against women and girls, identified that an average of 3 out of 4 DVA cases were closed due to evidential difficulties as Outcome 15 (suspect identified and the victim supports police action, but evidential difficulties prevent further action) or 16 (suspect was identified, but the victim did not support police action) [13]. Table 1 below shows the prevalence in the use of Outcome 16 for Domestic abuse vs All crime [14].

Table 1: Outcome 16 for Domestic Abuse and All crime

Home Office outcome code	Domestic Abuse	All Crime
OC16	55%	20%

These statistics highlight the significant 35% increase in outcome 16 in relation to DVA v All crime and show why it is an important area requiring further investigation. Additionally, statistics show that the total offences categorised as Outcome 16 have increased from 6.9% in Year 2015 to 21% in Year 2024, showing an approximate 14% rise in this period [15]. Furthermore, when considering DVA among different ethnic groups, a pattern that has been identified is that cases involving Asian/Asian British suspects are solved at between 0.79 and 0.86 times the rate of White British cases [16].

However, many forces cannot explain what the evidential problems are and whether individuals or groups of individuals are disproportionately affected due to their protected characteristics [10]. While there is much research on racially minoritised women, DVA and other related forms of violence and abuse, and negative experiences with policing; there is a dearth of research that explores Outcome 16 in this context. Therefore, this research was developed to support police forces to improve their understanding of why cases are finalised as Outcome 16 for racially minoritised survivors to inform a better response to support prosecution.

Methods

Our project took a mixed methods approach and used semi-structured focus groups and interviews with police officers and staff, voluntary community sector (VCS) organisations and racially minoritised survivors of DVA. A gatekeeper in each individual police force area supported recruitment of police participants; the

gatekeeper also provided details of the VCS organisations available in each locality. Survivors were recruited through community organisations specialising in supporting racially minoritised populations.

The study aimed to collect routine police data regarding: satisfaction data for DVA, Positive Outcome data for DVA and Outcome 16 data for DVA. Whilst some data was collected from all three forces, the data sets were not comparable across sites, the sample sizes were small, and ethnicity was not consistently recorded. Therefore, data disaggregation by ethnicity was insufficient for robust analysis to take place. This replicates a challenge reported by Bland et al (2022) who identified that ethnicity data is often unrecorded for a multitude of reasons including, the suspect being unidentified, individuals refusing to answer the question regarding ethnicity or the police failing to record the answer [16].

A survey was due to be circulated via each police force area to racially minoritised women who had commenced a criminal investigation that had been closed as an outcome 16 within the previous 6 months. However, upon commencing the project and in discussion with the three police force areas, it was unanimously agreed that this could exacerbate risk or harm to survivors and incite associated safeguarding implications. For this reason, we did not undertake a survey. This is important learning regarding the ethical and practical challenges of conducting survey research with racially minoritised DVA survivors.

The remainder of the report focuses on the findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups and the development of a piece of live artwork.

Qualitative Findings (n= 44 participants)

Police (n=26)

Police spoke positively about their perceptions of enablers to good practice, which were identified as: working collaboratively with specialist third sector organisations, having co-located IDVA's, having access to a DVA Intranet tile, having access to The Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence (DASH) or the Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA) questions in pocket notebooks, establishing relationships with Imams to act as gatekeepers, evidence-led victimless prosecutions and early intervention with families for wrap-around care. In addition, police identified the implementation of an Honour Based Abuse (HBA) single point of contact in one site as important due to the prevalence of this type of abuse for racially minoritised women.

However, systemic factors such as rotation of police personnel within specialist violence against women and girl roles were raised as an issue disrupting the continuity of support available throughout investigations which had a negative impact for survivors. Additionally, it also limited skill development in the police force and reduced the potential for police officers to become specialists in the subject of DVA through accumulative experiences and critical reflections on practice. A lack of workforce representation that reflected the local demography was acknowledged as a challenge alongside preparing inexperienced new recruits (who due to their age, lacked life experience) to respond to the "*most complex, embedded, ingrained, intergenerational trauma*" (Police force 1). Furthermore, police articulated a recognition that frontline responding officers visiting families for repeat callouts and safeguarding teams routinely dealing with DVA cases could experience compassion fatigue, which had potential to influence levels of empathy shown to the survivor and/or desensitisation to DVA situations.

Consistent themes identified barriers to engagement and retention within criminal investigations surrounding language barriers, the timeliness of access to interpreters and complexities of trying to enforce the criminalisation of abusive behaviours using words that are not readily translatable into an English word

(one locality provided an example of policing diverse communities where 100 different languages are spoken within one mile square).

“It’s hard as well, because if you’re looking at so-called honour-based abuse, there are risks with interpreters in that area as well. I’ve experienced it myself in investigations, where the victim has literally run out of a room, because the interpreter is associated to the perpetrator in some way. And that’s why, having members of staff, it’s so important to have a diverse workforce. It’s just worth so much in gold.” (Police force 1)

The role of perceived public stigma, shame and influential community and cultural beliefs regarding how survivors ‘should’ manage domestic abuse incidents was a challenge that police officers regularly experienced within racially minoritised populations.

“Something I’ve found in my professional experience and is another reason why women are so reluctant to come forward, is the shame it brings on the family and the shame of the wider community. And again, someone said before earlier about the reputation, it’s not just their reputation, which is then, essentially, soiled. It’s also the reputation of the family and how it can affect them. And, obviously, if that gets communicated back to family back home, there are potential ramifications for the family back home.” (Police force 3)

Communication with victims once a criminal investigation is underway was recognised as being inconsistent. Significant barriers regarding the length of time to progress through the criminal justice system was known by the workforce to negatively influence a victim's decision to remain involved and support criminal investigations to completion.

“A lot of the time we’re waiting a year, a year and a half, for cases from charge to the case going to trial...It’s just giving them that doubt in their mind, of thinking, “Do I really want to wait all this time to go to trial, to maybe not get the result that I want?” They’ve got all this thinking time in between, so I don’t think the delay in things getting to court is helping our victims, either, in their headspace.” (Police force 2)

Across the three forces, there were consistent challenges when responding to racially minoritised populations, which included the differing recognition of what constituted DVA within communities and survivors’ lack of awareness regarding their legal rights, the UK’s criminal justice processes and potential support available. Additionally, it was perceived that racially minoritised women’s experiences of police conduct within their country of origin influenced their expectations, trust, and confidence regarding policing in the UK.

Voluntary Community Sector (n=16)

Specialist VCS organisations across the three force areas reported the unfairness present for survivors and the risk of re-traumatisation due to the extensive length of time the criminal justice process takes, all of which has a detrimental impact on survivors and places them at risk. Survivors were suggested to be often ‘stuck’ in the system whilst simultaneously trying to move forward with their lives and competing responsibilities. VCS participants demonstrated concern that they perceived police were sometimes limited (due to sporadic contact, lack of knowledge about certain patterns of abuse and language barriers etc) to safeguard victims of abuse. They also echoed concerns reported by survivors regarding mistrust of the police due to previous interactions with them, or perceived negative ramifications of contacting them.

“I would say most of them don’t trust the police because of their experiences, there’s a lot of calls which are, “I don’t trust them. They’ve not helped me before. They’ve not believed me before. They’ve

not supported me in the way that I thought they would,” that then means that they’re not going to do it again. So, yeah, definitely, I think with honour-based abuse, there is a definite lack of trust in the police in being able to safeguard, yeah. It could just be that, you know, it might not even be their experience. It could be their friends or other family members haven’t been trusted” (VCS Organisation)

A lack of sufficient funding for organisations to provide ongoing consistent support to survivors throughout the criminal justice process alongside the issue of immigration status and victims having no recourse to public funds, were reported to influence decisions for victims to retract support due to having limited ‘options’ available to them.

“Some refuges in the UK won’t accept people who have no recourse” (VCS organisation)

The complexity that exists specifically for racially minoritised survivors of ‘honour’-based abuse was discussed at length. The additional challenges of experiencing pressure from multiple family/community members contributed to survivors deciding to delay or completely avoid contact with the police or dissuaded them to remain in contact with the police throughout the criminal investigation.

“So, I think that’s a difference for honour-based abuse when you compare it to domestic abuse and also, a main point is with honour-based abuse, you often have multiple perpetrators.... So that makes leaving the situation a lot more difficult for victims of honour-based abuse because it’s not just one person that they need to escape from and leave. It’s a whole community. It could be the entire family. It could be extended family. It can be an entire community” (VCS organisation)

Survivors (n= 2)

Two specialist VCS organisations acted as gatekeepers and supported recruitment into the study. They were provided with inclusion criteria (racially minoritised women, 18 years+, to have contacted the police regarding a DVA incident and to have withdrawn support from a DVA investigation). Focus groups were initially conducted with nineteen women. However, during the focus groups, whilst all women were racially minoritised survivors of DVA, who had contacted the police regarding DVA, it became apparent that not all participants had withdrawn support from a DVA criminal investigation. Despite following up with the VCS organisations, it could not be confirmed which participants had experienced outcome 16, therefore the data has been excluded from this report (findings will be written into an academic paper). A further two interviews were held with participants that met all the eligibility criteria, and therefore the findings below are from two interview participants only.

Participants identified barriers such as nonrecognition of DVA/coercive control and the inability to articulate their experiences in the English language. Not being provided with an interpreter by the police influenced the survivor’s ability to have a voice within the criminal justice investigation. The quote below shows a lack of support and provision by the police:

“The first barrier is language. Because now I speak a little bit better English, but at that time, even the police in their reports said that I spoke poor language. I wasn’t able to express myself, I wasn’t able to explain properly what was happening, because my vocabulary simply wasn’t good enough. They didn’t provide an interpreter. They saw me speaking like this, they never provided an interpreter” (survivor 1)

Survivors discussed how systemic factors such as precarious immigration status influenced their decision making. Survivors felt trapped in DVA relationships due to the perceived power that perpetrators held. Perpetrators were described as weaponizing their knowledge of the policy landscape, convincing the survivor they would receive a hostile response due to them being a migrant. Due to lack of knowledge survivors with

precarious immigration status had about their rights, they described being fearful of being deported; this impacted on them either not reporting to the police and/or withdrawing support. Perpetrators recognised these vulnerabilities and exerted control over survivors.

“I think initially what my husband was doing was he held my documents, passport, everything. At the same time, he was kicking me out of the house and he said that’s so I can leave without my stuff, or just to kick me out really.... So, because of my visa – I was only on spouse’s because I missed the date for the indefinite leave to remain – he was basically threatening that I can go back to Russia without my son and never see him again” (Survivor 2)

Another factor reported was the lack of awareness of the rights/civil-criminal justice provisions that survivors were entitled to owing to their immigration status, particularly in the context of DVA. Survivor 1 reported that the police failed to recognise the dynamics of coercion/control she was subjected to, there was a lack of acknowledgement of the potential retribution that the survivor may experience alongside an associated fear of escalated risk which subsequently led her to not support police action.

“The police asked me if I want to arrest him and charge him, and I said no, because I was so fearful of the, kind of what would happen. Yeah. What he would do, if I kind of agreed to that. He would kill me. He is in that category of people that he would punish, for anything, and if I had done that, he would 100% do that, and I was so scared about that. But the police just said, “Oh well, if you don’t want it, that’s fine.” If they clearly saw somebody’s harmful behaviour towards a child and their mother, why would they even ask me about that? Clearly, I was scared of him, they clearly saw that”.

Additionally, participants described feeling as though police were at times unable to understand the full spectrum or dynamics of DVA (including the stigma and shame of reporting) and often felt that their experiences were minimised. The factors outlined above played into individuals delaying contact with the police or deciding to withdraw support from an investigation. This signifies that structural and procedural issues within the criminal justice system are of substantial importance to survivors when deciding what actions to take. Our data is consistent with previous findings (8).

Live Artwork

Five members of the research team discussed the themes from the qualitative data with a live artist, who worked collaboratively to develop a visual depiction of the findings. The live artwork (fig.1) was circulated to the three police forces and the VCS participants who had been interviewed to sense check the image. Two police forces and two VCS organisations provided feedback, and minor changes to language used were made to the final image. The final live artwork has been circulated to all police forces and VCS participants to disseminate within and across their specialist DVA organisations and networks with the aim of generating reflections amongst professionals. The live artwork provided a mechanism to display and disseminate findings in an alternative format to the written word and make findings accessible to a wider number of professionals and members of the public who will not have had sight of the final report. This contributes to the wider movement of making academic research more inclusive by using methods that foreground marginalised voices.

Conclusion and implications

Many of the challenges described are relevant to ALL victims of DVA such as the length of time the criminal justice process takes and the detrimental impact this has for victims attempting to recover. However, further layers of complexity were perceived as being present for racially minoritised populations. Race, class and gender were intersections that were prominent in the qualitative data. Community expectations, stigma,

shame, the fear of ostracism from family members of entire communities were identified as significant deterrents to seeking police or statutory help. It would be important for future research to consider the impact of third party reporting on the use of outcome 16 and to consider whether there is differentiation between intimate partner abuse and abuse occurring within the wider family and/or community setting.

Implication: Specialist domestic abuse services and frontline practitioners must be trained in culturally sensitive practice. Community engagement strategies should be co-designed with trusted community organisations to build trust and reduce stigma around help-seeking, as lack of awareness can put victims at increased risk.

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Figure 1

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