

High Harm High Frequency: Managing Serious Domestic Abuse Perpetrators

High Harm High Frequency Offenders (HHHF) who have offended more than once against two or more current or former intimate partners or family members cause considerable problems for their victims and take up a large amount of police time and resource. We matched offending histories against police offender management strategies to see which, if any, worked. Our findings are based on documentary analysis of force policies, interviews with 30 police officers from 6 forces (of mixed ranks up to Chief Constable), analysis of data on HHHF offenders provided by Cheshire Police, and a review of academic literature. Findings focus on patterns of offending, identifying, and channelling HHHF offenders, police and court outcomes, and strategies for managing HHHF offenders.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. STRATEGY MANAGEMENT

Structures for assessing and dealing with HHHF vary across forces. For HHHF who engage, perpetrator programmes are available. For the vast majority of HHHF who do not engage, strategies include positive action, multi-agency management, disruption and incapacitation.

- a. Each HHHF should be placed on a defined plan with a robust individual strategy.
- b. When officers attend incidents, they should be immediately aware of the strategy in place for managing that individual offender, and act accordingly.
- c. Inspectors should have oversight of HHHF management strategies.
- d. Strategies should be clearly indicated in police data for evaluation purposes.

2. 94% OF HHHF OFFENDING IS NON-DA

On average, each HHHF offender will be involved in 30-40 incidents per year, in many cases for decades. 94% of HHHF offending is non-DA, and the majority relates to public disorder, drug-abuse, and mental health issues.

- a. Earlier intervention by mental health services would potentially shorten HHHF criminal careers).
- b. Opportunities for disruption have been ignored when the report is not DA-related; these opportunities should be taken wherever possible no matter what offence is alleged.

3. 'TOP 10' PERPETRATOR LISTS

Top 10 or top 20 DA perpetrator lists often contain hundreds of offenders. Reducing the offending of the top 50 HHHF in each force area would *dramatically* reduce all crime (including DA).

- a. Practices of archiving HHHF offenders should be standardised across all forces to leave a smaller group of active HHHF who are actively managed.
- b. Researchers and police should collaborate to update mechanisms for identifying, recording, and archiving HHHF, in order to increase efficiency.
- c. Greater collaboration between forces would improve data quality and help to track HHHF offenders, especially when they move between different areas.

4. INFORMING MAGISTRATES

Magistrates appear not to give weight or not to receive information on HHHF in some cases, which results in HHHF being bailed rather than remanded, having suspended rather than immediate custodial sentences imposed, and not-activating suspended sentences when re-offending occurred.

- a. Magistrates should always receive sufficient information about HHHF defendants.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Domestic Abuse comprises a significant proportion of police business (more than 20% of crime incidents for each force). There were over 17,000 domestic abuse incidents in Cheshire in 2020. Within that large volume lie a small number of high-harm high-risk serial domestic abuse offenders. This small number - High Harm High Frequency Offenders (HHHF) - are responsible for a significant amount of repeat/serial offending (against the same or different victims), in many cases over a number of years. Police strategies for managing this group include positive action, multi-agency management, perpetrator programmes, disruption and incapacitation. There is little evidence as to what works. Knowing which strategies work more effectively carries important implications for managing offending behaviour, improving victim-survivor engagement, as well as reducing operational policing costs.

FINDINGS

Patterns of offending

- in all incidents attended by police which involve HHHF offenders, they are the suspects in 75% of cases, and complainants/victims in 25% of cases.
- HHHF commit multiple domestic abuse offences (and other acts of violence) over long periods of time, against the same and different victims, however, a much higher proportion of HHHF offending is non-DA (94%).
- the majority of HHHF offending relates to public disorder, drug-abuse, and mental health issues. The proportion of domestic abuse they commit may be small given their overall pattern of offending, but it is serious, sometimes involving rape and serious violence, and can have devastating effects on victims and their families.
- each HHHF offender consumes a large amount of police time and resource; on average each HHHF offender will be involved in 30-40 incidents per year, with their offending career lasting, in many cases, for decades.

Identifying and channelling HHHF DA perpetrators

- the best structures and organisational plan for the management of domestic abuse perpetrators includes the clear identification of HHHF offenders, clear opportunities to engage in behaviour change programmes, and a swift route for non-engaging offenders. Currently, across forces, there are no standard structures (or routes into those structures).
- top 10 or top 20 DA perpetrator lists often contain hundreds of offenders; one database contained details of over 1200 serial DA perpetrators currently in the system.
- practices of archiving HHHF offenders should be standardised across all forces to leave a smaller group of active HHHF who are actively managed.
- researchers and police should together examine how forces can update mechanisms for identifying, recording, and archiving HHHF, in order to increase efficiency.

Police and court outcomes

- few incidents involving HHHF result in a charge.
- magistrates appear not to give weight or not to receive information on HHHF in some cases, which results in HHHF being bailed rather than remanded, having suspended rather than immediate custodial sentences imposed, and not-activating suspended sentences when re-offending occurred. Magistrates should always receive sufficient information

about HHHF defendants, to determine whether bail is appropriate, and to determine whether a custodial sentence should be suspended/activated.

Strategies for managing HHHF

- police forces manage HHHF using 4 main strategies – positive action; perpetrator or behavioural change programmes; multi-agency risk-management partnerships; disrupt and incapacitate - which strategy, if any, is working, is currently hard to determine; perpetrator programmes are known to be effective for the 1% of domestic abuse perpetrators who complete them; custodial sentences stop offending for the period they last, but there is little evidence that they are effective post-release, with time between release from prison and reoffending often being short.
- HHHF databases should be dynamic and robust enough to archive or remove large numbers who are currently on lists but who do not offer the most severe threat, or whose offending has ceased/largely stopped: the remaining top 50 should be actively managed to properly enable a rigorous and relentless pursuit of the most harmful DA offenders using the four strategies.
- disruption and incapacitation of the top 50 HHHF in each force area would dramatically reduce all crime including DA in each area.
- each HHHF should be placed on a defined plan, and with a robust strategy in place for each individual; when officers attend an incident, they should be immediately aware of the strategy in place for managing that offender, and act accordingly.
- Inspectors should have oversight of HHHF management strategies.
- the mixed profile of offending by HHHF should be recognised as an opportunity for disruption, linked to either increased incapacitation or to longer-term strategies to change behaviour.
- disruption is likely to increase numbers of arrests in the short-term; in the long term, disruption and increased surveillance following release from custody should significantly reduce offending. This approach is likely to put pressure on police (and CPS/HMCTS) resources, requiring effective partnership working, and close management of internal budgets.
- far greater co-ordination between mental health services and HHHF management is needed - earlier intervention by mental health services would potentially shorten HHHF criminal careers.
- greater collaboration between forces would improve data quality and help to track HHHF offenders, especially when they move between different areas.

CONCLUSIONS

The data provided shows that the police are right to focus strongly on HHHF offenders. Amongst all of the low level and nuisance offending committed by SDAP Top 10 offenders, they had also committed extreme acts of violence (rape, strangulation, serious sexual and violent assaults) and would be considered by the public to be extremely dangerous people. The repeat and serial nature of their offending profiles, and the length of time over which they have developed their criminal careers, means that they cause and continue to cause considerable problems for the public, and take up a large amount of police time and resource. Curbing their offending reduces the number of victims, reduces costs of policing, and removes a significant danger to public safety.

METHODOLOGY

- We carried out an evaluation of the policies and procedures relating to domestic abuse and HHHF offenders through an analysis of documentation issued in South Yorkshire, Cumbria, Sussex, and Suffolk.
- We interviewed officers, including Heads of Public Protection, IOM Leads, Harm Reduction Unit Leads; DA leads, Head of Safeguarding, Chief Constables and ACCs, Force Improvement and innovation co-ordinators, Wanted Persons Operational Lead, Manager of Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Unit, Head of Crime, Safeguarding and Incident Management, Head of Custody and Joint Justice Service, Head of Complex Domestic Abuse and Stalking Unit, and a focus group formed from Complex Domestic Abuse and Stalking Unit Team. Interviews were conducted face to face or remotely using Microsoft Teams and auto transcribed using Otter AI. The interviews were used, together with the documentary analysis, to understand current policies and practices in each force, and to produce charts of the processes for managing high harm DA offenders in each force.
- We analysed Cheshire SDAP data for 2000 to 2019 for a sample of 112 offenders, with numbers of offences committed each month. This was used to assess scale and rate of offending for SDAP offenders. The data for one cohort, those offenders on the SDAP register in 2019, included details of the offences/ incidents in which an individual was a perpetrator and/ or a victim (date, home office offence code, CJS outcome codes).
- We analysed data from Cheshire police for the top ten offenders currently being managed on SDAP (SDAP Top 10). For each incident reported to police the data records the complainant (anonymised for the purposes of the research), where the incident took place, what police action was taken, and the criminal justice outcome. Using the information, we produced an aggregate picture of this group of HHHF perpetrators and their offending profile and also a timeline for each individual, showing their offending behaviour/victimisation over time, who they offend with, and against. Where possible this offending timeline was matched against the strategies being used to manage that individual.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Data which shows the trajectory of HHHF is not readily to hand; without the dedicated time given by Cheshire police, it would have been impossible to collect data relevant for this investigation. Strategies for the management of SDAP are hard to identify in the Top 10 SDAP data as they are not routinely marked in the data. As strategies can be overlapping, evaluation of which strategy, if any, is actually working, is currently hard to determine. In the future, academic researchers and police should together examine how forces can update mechanisms for identifying, recording, and also, where appropriate, archiving HHHF, in order to increase efficiency. As part of that process, they should involve police data and Intelligence units to future-proof the development of data-analytical processes for the identification of criminal careers/offending trajectories, particularly in relation to HHHF domestic abuse offenders.

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