

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

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 (1-7). The police use outcome 16 to describe the finalisation of an investigation where the suspect was identified, but the victim did not support police action (8). On average 51.4% of domestic abuse cases were discontinued in England and Wales year ending 2022 (8). This research was developed to support police forces to improve their understanding of why over half of cases are finalised in Outcome 16 and inform a better response to survivors and support prosecution. Currently there is a dearth of research which explores victim engagement and racial disparity, and this was identified as a priority area to be examined.

The research was co-produced by three police forces and three universities, who collaboratively designed 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 FINDINGS

- 1. Co-location of police and VCS organisations** including specialist police personnel co-located at VCS sites to increase empathy and understanding between professionals in relation to acknowledging each sector's perspective and organisational processes to better address survivors needs. Participants illustrated contacting the police to obtain an immediate response to stop the abuse/violence they were subjected to within a particular incident.
- 2. At a national level, NPCC leads to works together to address the clear post code lottery** between and within forces in relation to professional practices when policing minority communities. Specialist compulsory training and refresher training should be introduced for police staff regarding cultural diversity, how to respond to victims in a trauma-informed way, how to avoid victim blaming language and increased knowledge regarding honour-based abuse and how best to support survivors.
- 3. Police to harness the role of community elders/leaders as gatekeepers to diverse communities** due to the belief that diverse communities lack trust in the police and withhold a deep-seated culture which secures keeping issues of a criminal nature within the family to address.
- 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 need is undertaken to accommodate the changing needs of the survivor.
- 5. Consideration to be given to whether Outcomes 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).

Project Aims

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

Methodology

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 within three police force areas in England. Police and VCS participants were recruited through a gatekeeper in each police force area. Survivors were recruited through community organisations specialising in supporting racially minoritized populations. The study collected routine police data and was due to complete a quantitative survey.

Qualitative Findings (n= 59 participants)

Survivors (n=17): Specialist VCS organisations were provided with inclusion criteria (racially minoritised women, 18 years+, to have contacted the police regarding a DVA incident and withdrawn support) and acted as gatekeepers to the study. Each participant was a racially minoritised survivor of DVA whom had had experience of communicating with police regarding a DVA criminal investigation. During focus group discussions, it became apparent that not all participants had withdrawn support from DVA criminal investigations, however each participant offered detailed lived experiences on their perceptions and views of interacting with police during the criminal justice process. Due to not specifically collecting this information it cannot be accurately recorded here how many participants had withdrawn support and data should be interpreted as contributing factors to engaging in police investigations rather than specifically outcome 16.

Key findings from survivors included: mistrust towards the police, perceptions and experiences of racism, experiencing a backlash/ influence of the community, fear of escalated risk, the length of the criminal justice process and the impact of positive experiences with the police/third sector. Race and gender are intersections that are prominent in the quotes. The data is consistent with previous findings (9).

Participants reported that they contacted the police to obtain an immediate response to stop the abuse/violence they were subjected to within a particular incident. However, mistrust of the police was of great concern to victims- survivors, alongside the fear of police brutality and perceived systemic racism which was expressed strongly within the Black African Caribbean community.

"I feel like it's been a challenge for people of colour to engage with the police in things like that because of just the way we're treated in general, the way that we see them treat our partners. You know, they're so rough with our partners. If we called them for a violent incident, they might die in custody. You know, so there are a lot of things that prevent us from going to the police in the first place, because of a lot of past trauma, a lot of past experiences that we don't want to put our partners through that bad experience."
(Survivor participant 2)

Racially minoritised women described a fear of escalation in abuse alongside actual escalation of abuse being experienced following contact with the police. Participants repeatedly described being persuaded to not contact the police and when they did, they often experienced isolation from the community.

"(The influence of the community and wider familial network is) too much, and in a negative way, I'd say, not in a positive way, not in these situations.... I wouldn't admit, to my extended family, that I had the police involved. They were like, "Get a beating and just take it. You'll be fine." It's what you said, about being ashamed and embarrassed, like they're doing the beating and they're doing the abuse but you're the one feeling embarrassed. And you have a lot of them literally telling you not to do anything. It could be your own aunts, your mother's sisters and your own very close family saying, "Just put up with it. He'll change. You've got the kids." (Survivor participant 13)

Once police contact had been initiated, the length of the criminal justice process was described as a significant barrier, impacting on an individual's ability to recover from the trauma they had/were experiencing as they could not 'move on' until the case had been finalised.

"I thought, okay, I wanted to do an assessment because my husband wants to go to court. I needed this assessment. I waited for five months to do it. Five months. They said, "Okay, we are coming to see you from Oxford to Middlesbrough." But they didn't come. I'm waiting for one month, two months, three months, for five months... After my assessment, the police didn't inform me, didn't give me any information, didn't contact me, they just disappeared. And until today I am waiting for my case... They didn't contact me. They didn't send me any emails, any information about it." (Survivor participant 9)

Systemic factors such as language barriers, immigration status and fear of deportation were all described as contributing factors to support being withdrawn. 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 all played into individuals either making a choice not to contact/delay contact with the police in the first instance or deciding to withdraw support from an investigation. The most prominent facilitator to supporting a criminal investigation was having access to individuals (police and/or specialist organisations) that understood the nuances of minoritised survivors' lived experience and could respond in a culturally sensitive way.

"When I ring Organisation x, I don't need to explain in detail what it's like in my community. They already know...So they already know what it is, I don't need to explain in more detail. I don't need to, you know. It's like you can't explain to somebody who doesn't live in it how it is. It's so hard to describe it into words. A common understanding, but honestly, without all the services [...] I don't think I would have been able to cope or get through it at all...it has to be specialist places. Who understand and when they use the language, they use the correct language, and they allow you to be heard and they just listened. Yeah." (Survivor Participant 17)

Police (n=26)

Police spoke positively about their perceptions of enablers to good practice, which were identified as: the implementation of an HBA SPOC, working collaboratively with specialist third sector organisations, having co-located IDVA's, having access to a DVA Intranet tile, having access to DASH/DARA questions in pocket notebook, establishing relationships with Imams to act as gatekeepers, evidence-led victimless prosecutions and early intervention with families for wrap-around care.

Systemic factors such as rotation of police staff were raised as issues disrupting the continuity of support for survivors and reduced the potential for police officers to become specialists in the subject of DVA, they were seen as a barrier to improving good 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) affected a consistent police response being implemented. Furthermore, police articulated a recognition that responding officers regularly visiting the same 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 were also discussed across all three police force sites regarding the 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 within which 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)

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)

The role of stigma, shame and influential community and cultural beliefs regarding how individuals '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)

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, survivors lack of awareness regarding their legal rights and potential support available was raised as challenging when responding to racially minoritised populations. 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 that the extensive length of time the criminal justice process takes has a detrimental impact on survivors, whereby they were often 'stuck' in the system whilst simultaneously trying to move forward with their lives and competing

responsibilities. VCS demonstrated concern that they perceived police were 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 the 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)

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, all influenced 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 for victims of honour-based abuse was discussed at length. The additional challenges of experiencing pressure from multiple family/community members contributed to victims 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)

Limitations Routine data was collected from all three forces. However, ethnicity was not consistently recorded, and sample sizes were small resulting in minimal analysis being undertaken.

A survey was due to be circulated via each police force area to racially minoritized 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 practicalities and feasibility of conducting a survey of this nature in future work.

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, a further layer of complexity was perceived as being present for racially minoritised populations, inclusive but not limited to challenges of language barriers, accessing translations services in a timely manner and the complexity of supporting survivors with no recourse to public funds or an insecure immigration status. The recognition of the importance of community expectations for victims within some minoritised populations and the understanding of how stigma, shame, and the potential for victims to be isolated from families and whole communities because of contacting the police, resonated

across all participant groups. This also prompted an understanding of the necessity for specialist training to ensure competency on behalf of all frontline professionals, inclusive of police and specialist domestic violence agencies to respond to nuances within minoritised populations in a culturally sensitive way.

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