

Police Control Room, Dispatch and Frontline Officers' Responses to Domestic Violence Incidents

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Policing domestic violence

In the period April 2015 to September 2015, the police forces of England and Wales and British Transport Police recorded 206,815 offences that were domestic abuse related. Overall, 11% of all offences recorded by the police were flagged as domestic abuse related. The proportion of violent offences that were domestic abuse related was highest for women aged 20 to 34 (60%) (ONS, 2016). An HMIC inspection of the police response to DV in 2014 found that 'the overall police response to victims of domestic abuse is not good enough' (HMIC, 2014: 6). Factors that contributed to this in relation to this study included (HMIC, 2014: 7):

- Failure to prioritise action that will tackle domestic violence when setting the priorities for the day-to-day activity of frontline officers and assigning their work;
- Officers lacking the skills and knowledge necessary to engage confidently and competently with victims of domestic violence;
- Extremely limited systematic feedback from victims about their experience of the police response.

Our project focused on the police response to calls and reports of domestic violence, the implementation of DASH, and the support received by victims. It focused specifically on the role of call handlers and dispatchers in a police force control room, the response of frontline officers, and the relationship between these groups of workers in the police organisation. The study was conducted in collaboration with a police force in England in order to provide recommendations and to contribute to the evidence base concerning the police response to domestic violence calls, the support provided to victims, and to further inform training for control room staff, dispatchers, and frontline police officers.

Ethnographic research was conducted in a police force control room which encompassed observations and unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline response officers. The aims of the study were:

- To explore how frontline officers intervene in domestic violence (DV) incidents and how response and support mechanisms can be improved to further support victims.
- To explore frontline officers' views and experiences of the training provided in relation to victim support and domestic violence.
- To explore frontline officers' views and experiences of DASH and its implementation in practice.
- To explore the handling of domestic violence related calls in a police force control room.
- To explore the mechanisms and processes related to the dispatch role and the relaying of domestic violence incidents to frontline officers.
- To explore the relationship(s) between call handlers, dispatch, and the frontline response in relation to domestic violence calls and support for victims.
- To explore how police forces can improve the support provided to victims of domestic violence and contribute to the evidence-base to inform future policies and practices.

Organisational factors

Response officers and force control room staff perceived the majority of their workload to be domestic-related. It was suggested that the number of domestic incidents being dealt with by the force with had increased, as had the time it took to respond to these incidents due to the necessary risk assessment and safeguarding referrals forms. In addition to the increase in demand, frontline staff reported that there had been a noticeable reduction in the number of staff available to respond. There had also been a notable loss of specialist resources to deal with domestic incidents such as the DART officer. Officers also reported a rise in social media related domestic incidents which caused particular challenges for evidence gathering and safeguarding.

Current training for response officers and supervisors was identified as being poor. NCALT in particular was identified as not sufficient, given the number of domestic incidents dealt

with. Supervisors responsible for reviewing domestic incidents were concerned over the lack of consistency between them given their lack of specialised training. Most officers reported that their skills for dealing with domestic incidents were developed 'on the job' rather than in dedicated training. This has implications for the quality and consistency of risk assessments and victim engagement.

The Role of External Agencies

A reduction in the availability of other agencies and external partners was felt at the frontline and in the control room. There was a strong perception that social services were demanding more assistance from police officers or were passing over visits that they themselves did not have the capacity to do. Officers stated feeling alienated from the process when external partners were involved as they were unable to see the outcome of the referrals they have made. Officers thought that it would be beneficial to be able to input into and see the outcome of cases they were involved in. This speaks to the understanding of officers as being ends-orientated and outcome driven (Scheible and Six, 2015). Officers were aware of a reduction in the availability of refuges for victims of domestic abuse. They stated there was a lack of knowledge over places that may be available. A knowledge bank of up-to-date information that officers could refer to would be useful.

Supporting Victims, Risk Assessment and DASH

Officers felt that the role of response officer did not allow for sufficient time to build relationships with victims of domestic abuse. This was seen as a barrier to supporting victims and encouraging disclosure of offences. Response officers also felt that the high visibility police uniform and car was a barrier to building trust with a victim. They felt that a plain clothes officer was more suited to attending domestic incidents, especially conducting follow up and scheduled appointments. They reported that victims were often conscious of neighbours, family members or even the suspect seeing them. The DART officer was seen as the best resource for making these follow up visits.

DASH was viewed by officers as a useful tool for engaging with victims and for generating disclosure of offences. DASH was also reported as a good tool for encouraging the victims to recognise that particular forms of behaviour were abusive. However, DASH was often seen as too intrusive for certain incidents and not useful or relevant, for example very low level

arguments or incidents involving family members or siblings. Officers reported being uncomfortable asking particular questions in these settings. Officers expressed frustration at being unable to use their discretion in these situations and felt a ‘blanket approach’ to domestic incidents signified a lack of trust in their policing abilities. This blanket approach created a process driven attitude in which DASH was seen as a ‘box-ticking’ exercise for a ‘risk-averse’ force. It is crucial that officers fully understand the risks identified as coercive and controlling behaviour. This may alleviate some of the frustrations around the use of DASH in all situations and may refocus officers on the victims rather than the potential ‘worst case scenario’ outcome.

Officer Wellbeing and Emotional Stressors

The factors outlined above are having a detrimental impact on police officers and force control room staff. All of our respondents reported increased levels of stress, and dissatisfaction with their roles and the changing nature of policing in general. Many felt that the force was dealing with more social welfare issues at the expense of criminal issues which went against their understanding of what policing entailed. The force needs to ensure that there is a clear definition of what the role of a contemporary police officer involves. This definition needs to shift the cultural understanding of policing from one of crime fighting to a more socially oriented role which is victim-centred.

Recommendations

Organisational factors

- Map the demand of domestic incidents to understand not only how many there are but how much of an officer’s time is required to deal with the incident and support the victim. Map the demand in dispatch to understand how long ‘grade 2’ incidents are sitting with dispatch before they are being resourced. Understand how this relates to officer and staff perceptions regarding demand and resources.
- All officers and staff need to be trained in dealing with reports of online crime, online abuse, and digital evidence, and how this can be involved and utilised by offenders in domestic violence incidents, especially with regards to coercion and control.
- Force control room staff and frontline officers need to ensure that they support victims of social media harassment. The focus needs to remain fully on victim support, prevention,

and sanction of the offender (Lewis et al., 2016) rather than on the victim's ability to self-exclude, for example by expecting a victim to delete their Facebook profile.

- Improve the training given to response officers and also their supervisors who are reviewing domestic incidents to ensure there is consistency of approach.
- Expand the number of DART officers or make them available for officers to contact when they require additional advice.

The Role of External Agencies

- There needs to be more out of hours assistance from social services for officers dealing with vulnerable people and victims of domestic abuse.
- More efficient information sharing between partner agencies and frontline staff and an ability to see and feed into the progression of cases, particularly for repeat victims.
- Officers need an accessible resource that can inform them of available refuge spaces for victims of domestic abuse.

Supporting Victims, Risk Assessment and DASH

- Allow time for officers to build relationships with those victims at risk, particularly through scheduled appointments and build in time for officers to conduct follow-up visits to maintain relationships.
- Study and monitor the use of text messaging as a replacement for face-to-face follow ups and further study the impact this has on support for victims.
- Ensure that all frontline officers are trained to understand coercion and control and how it may be operating in non-violent incidents. This may help officers buy-in to the safeguarding requirements at all domestic incidents they attend. Inputs from Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors may also help.

Officer Wellbeing and Emotional Stressors

- There needs to be a greater understanding and clearer definition of what the role of a contemporary police officer involves. This definition needs to shift the cultural understanding of policing as one of 'crime fighting' to a more socially oriented welfare role. There is still a clear value dissonance between the expectations of the officers and the reality of the role.
- The force needs to communicate with officers the reasons behind the force policy on domestic abuse in a way that does not erode trust but builds it.

- The process-driven approach to domestic incidents may be encouraging a risk-averse culture which undermines the value of risk management tools like DASH. Officers need to feel confident in their assessments through proper training and supported in their decisions by the force so as to avoid a disproportionate response or the use of the ‘precautionary principle’.
- More accessible supports need to be put in place for staff and officers who feel that they are emotionally or physically stressed by the types of incidents they are attending or calls they are handling.

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Biographies

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