



# A matter of trust: Improving police responses to violence against women and girls in racially minoritised communities

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## About the research

Several high-profile cases in 2021—the murders of Sarah Everard, Bibaa Henry, Nicole Smallman and Sabina Nessa—damaged community trust in the UK police and sparked urgent national conversations about police handling of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Such violence has been characterised by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS 2021: 6) as an ‘epidemic’, and two 2021 police inspectorate reports revealed systemic policing failures in safeguarding women and girls from violence and called for radical overhaul of police responses to this form of violence. Yet there is scant research on how the police work with victims/survivors of VAWG from minoritised communities—that is, how policing operates at the intersection of race and gender. This project seeks to address that gap as a first step towards proposing evidence-based solutions.

Despite high levels of distrust of the police among racially minoritised communities, research also indicates that the latter want more communication with the police on a range of crime prevention, awareness and community needs. However, police responses must take into account how intersections of age, social class and/or gender with ethnicity create varied needs and experiences on the part of those who interact with the police (Barrett et al 2014). Following the Macpherson Report, police cultural diversity training has been seen as a route to effective policing, though some researchers regard this approach as ‘window dressing’ that gives ‘the appearance of progress, while actually achieving little’ (Cashmore 2002: 327). Other research indicates the effectiveness of rigorous and well-designed training on VAWG, which has led to increasing victim-centred interactions by police (Franklin et al. 2020; Oehme et al. 2016).

This project aims to improve outcomes for racially minoritised (potential) victims/survivors of VAWG in England by collaborating with policing partners to understand current police responses to VAWG, with a particular focus on racially minoritised women and girls. It also aims to identify areas of good practice, challenges and knowledge gaps to support more effective policing for racially minoritised victims of VAWG.

A mixed methods approach was adopted, comprising a combination of focus groups with police officers from two police forces, police case files pertaining to cases of VAWG (including rape and sexual assault), and bodycam footage of police responses to calls relating to VAWG.

In total, the data comprises:

1. eight focus groups involving 54 police officers
2. ten sets of bodycam footage related to police response to a VAWG call out
3. fifty-five police case files on VAWG from two police forces dating between 2022 and 2023.

The limitations of this dataset relate to the nature of focus groups in an organisational setting: some participants are limited in what they can disclose because of police confidentiality requirements.

The other main limitation involves the non-representative nature of the charging rates in the 55 police case files on domestic violence (n=26) and rape and serious sexual assault cases (n=29). These had an overall charging rate of 24%; within this, reports of rape and serious sexual offences had a 40% charging rate. However, these are highly disproportionate compared with the charging rates

across the police forces in England and Wales as a whole. For example, Home Office–held data on crime outcomes in England and Wales for the year to September 2021 show that just 1.3% of the recorded rape offences that were assigned an outcome resulted in a charge or summons (Home Office 2022<sup>1</sup>). Police Area A also provided specific cases for us to review that they deemed examples of good record-keeping (e.g., in almost all cases, victim and perpetrator ethnicity is recorded, whereas victim ethnicity is only recorded in 58% of all cases for this police area). While these cases allowed us to assess positive outcomes in terms of progress expectations on the part of victims from report to court and offered useful information regarding victims, perpetrators, and police processes, they also represent a highly selective sample.

The key issues that emerge from these three data sources span several themes that relate to the issue of trust: barriers to reporting; difficulties with the criminal justice system; victim engagement and safeguarding; and multi-agency working.

## Research findings

### Community trust in the police: Causes and effects

Trust emerged as a key issue in the policing of VAWG. It was most evident during the interviews with the police officers but was also apparent in the case files. The majority of the police officers noted falling levels of trust among the population more broadly, particularly among racially minoritised people and women. Barriers associated with racially minoritised communities (including barriers to reporting) were noted by the majority of respondents but were less evident in the case files and bodycam data: these data sources record police The project has been funded by the ESRC, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the funder [grant number ES/X003078/1]. interactions with members of the public and the case trajectory and thus may not capture the officers' own reflections on the underlying processes involved.

The police officers in the focus groups identified several reasons for the lack of trust in the police and the barriers to reporting VAWG among particular communities. While recent disclosures on misogyny within the police force were a factor, the officers identified other issues that might deter migrant populations from reporting. Cultural factors were mentioned frequently in relation to barriers to reporting and lack of trust in the police regarding VAWG. While the majority of respondents identified cultural differences in South Asian populations, a few also pointed to the issues they faced with other diverse communities. Others pointed to dominant discourses about justice and crime in migrants' home countries as a factor in the lack of trust. In addition to the constructions of cultural differences, the participants also mentioned language barriers, limited knowledge of the UK's criminal justice services and processes, and the perpetrators' actions to control their victims, who might be migrant women. A few of the officers noted that some of these barriers were being overcome for some forms of VAWG but not others. Several noted that cultural barriers can be overcome through knowledge and awareness among the police but that this was not always the case. A few of the officers noted the need for the police force to reflect the local population that they served, both to increase community confidence in them and to improve police understanding of those communities.

However, a couple of the officers felt that seeking a more representative police force was tokenistic and that it might be risky to assume that trust and reporting levels would increase if the ethnicity of a crime victim and the police officers involved in reporting it were to match. Common among the police officer responses was recognition of the lower levels of trust in the police among the racially minoritised, though their understanding of the causes and contexts of this, as well as the possible solutions to it, varied. A few of the officers noted how decline in trust was not only observable among the members of the public but was also affecting their relationship and joint working with other statutory services.

1 Home Office (2022) Crime outcomes in England and Wales, year to September 2021: data tables, Table 2.2. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/crime-outcomes-in-england-and-wales-year-to-september-2021-data-tables>



Photo by Ethan Wilkinson on Unsplash

### Trust and the broader criminal justice system

The respondents highlighted how the erosion of trust in the police was often the outcome of the workings of the criminal justice system more broadly – the public viewed the police as the face of that system and hence blamed them for broader systemic failures. In many cases, the police officers pointed to the evidential difficulties that impacted trust – that is, the evidential threshold required by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the particular evidential issues associated with VAWG, a crime often committed in private spaces. Several police officers felt that the CPS prosecution decisions tended to further erode public trust in the police. Low prosecution and conviction rates in VAWG cases were identified as central to this issue. The majority of the police officers reiterated the inherent difficulties of evidencing VAWG due to its ‘private’ nature and attributed the attrition in the criminal justice system at this stage of the process to the CPS. Another key issue identified by several officers was the ways in which delays to the administration of justice can lead to a breakdown of the relationship between the police and the victim. While this was often attributed to the CPS or other downstream processes within the CJS, the lack of staffing, noted by the officers within the police force also contributed to these delays.

The link between the police and the CPS was identified as a crucial aspect of the justice process by the focus groups that was prone to suffer due to miscommunication, delays and lack of co-ordination. Across the different police forces, this issue was raised repeatedly, and a call was made for

closer working relations, for physical proximity and for restoring the ties between the CPS and the police force as a whole to speed up the justice process and improve outcomes for victims.

Although a minority of the respondents dismissed any concerns about the erosion of trust in policing or cast the responsibility for this as beyond the control of police (for example, by blaming the media), the majority identified this as a serious issue that needs to be addressed. They identified various contexts and causes for the falling levels of trust, particularly in racially minoritised communities and among women. These included a lack of knowledge and understanding among the police and delays in the criminal justice process.

There was a wider understanding, however, that victims of crime may have different needs and that addressing these differences would help the police build trust and respond to victims more appropriately. One of the many ways in which the police officers were reaching out to their local communities was through awareness-raising and proactive interventions to inform members of the public about what they could expect from their police force. Other neighbourhood policing and community engagement strategies were also mentioned, and the police officers reiterated the key role of proactive policing within communities. They identified community engagement as a key plank in rebuilding trust, and some of the officers expressed a commitment to the principles of community policing – although the priority given to such engagement and proactive policing appeared to vary in practice.

## Victim engagement: Challenges and changes

There was a consensus that VAWG policing practices and policies had evolved significantly over the last two decades, and largely for the better, as had police knowledge and understanding of this type of violence. However, there were a few indicators that victim-blaming attitudes may still prevail, and, in one case, that this was being challenged at an institutional level. For example, in a case for which we had access to the police case file, the initial advice and assessment given to the police opposed any further investigation and prosecution, as the person reporting was a vulnerable woman who had made previous allegations of rape that had not resulted in a prosecution.

Survivors' reluctance to support a prosecution was evident across all data sources. In the bodycam footage, for example, there was clear reluctance on the part of some victims to give a statement. On the whole, the decision to prosecute was often shaped by the victims' wishes as well as the police's assessment of the re-victimisation risk and concerns around safeguarding the victim and any children.

Another key concern raised by respondents – and one that was also evident from the police case files we examined – was diminishing victim engagement following the initial report to the police, and victim retraction, which led to the discontinuation of the investigation and the victim's decision to take no further action. This was the case in the majority of the police case files that we examined.

Out of those 55 case files (29 on rape and serious sexual offences and 26 on domestic violence), 39 resulted in no further action towards prosecution because of evidential difficulties or victim retraction. Evidential difficulties is also known as Outcome 15, a "Home Office classification used by the police to describe the finalisation of an investigation where the suspect was identified and the victim supported police action, but evidential difficulties prevented further

action" (HMICFRS, 2023); victim retraction is also known as Outcome 16, "a Home Office classification used by the police to describe the finalisation of an investigation where the suspect was identified, but the victim doesn't support (or has withdrawn support for) police action" (HMICFRS, 2023). Outcome 16 was most common in cases on domestic violence and was identified in 21 out of 26 case files, while Outcome 15 was identified in 16 out of 29 cases of sexual violence. A case outcome of a charge was identified in 13 cases. These are not representative figures – as stated previously, the sample was very unrepresentative – but they nonetheless offer insight into the information available in a sample with disproportionately high charging outcomes.

In 2024, the HMICFRS categorised the high use of Outcome 16 in VAWG cases as a "matter of grave concern" (HMICFRS 2024: p.12) in an inspection report on the policing of VAWG (the Home Office commissioned this report after the 2021 murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer). However, this situation seemed unchanged from the HMICFRS (2021) review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic, which reported that on average, three out of every four recorded domestic abuse cases are closed with outcomes 15 (evidential difficulties) or 16 (victim does not support further action). This review also noted a huge variation between forces in use of Outcome 16, with between 36 percent and 71 percent of cases having this outcome (HMICFRS 2021).

The HMICFRS (2024: 12) also noted that the number of rape cases ending in Outcome 16 for women victims increased from 5,773 in 2014/15 to a record high of 18,584 in 2018/19. The report noted "serious concerns that there are significant variations between forces in the use of these outcomes [15 and 16], with limited explanation as to why this is the case". They reiterated how this concern echoed

2 HMICFRS(2023) Outcome 16. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary/outcome-16/>

HMIFRS (2023) Outcome 15. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary/outcome-15/>

HMICFRS (2024). Police response to violence against women and girls. Final inspection report. Available at: <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/police-response-to-violence-against-women-and-girls-final-inspection-report.pdf>

HMICFRS (2021) Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic - 2021. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-ht-ml/review-of-policing-domestic-abuse-during-pandemic/>

HMICFRS and CPS (2021) A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape- Phase one: From report to police or CPS decision to take no further action. Available at: <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/joint-thematic-inspection-of-police-and-cps-response-to-rape-phase-one.pdf>

the HMICFRS and CPS (2021) joint inspection of the police and CPS responses to rape, which highlighted the lack of information and recording in the case files about these cases.

In some cases, retraction occurred because the act of reporting itself seemed to fulfil the victim's immediate needs, and they did not wish to pursue a complaint. For example, this was evident in one particular police case file, where the victim reported suffering domestic violence at the hands of his ex-partner, who 'threw a drink over him and has then grabbed his clothing to pull him back and slapped and punched his face several times leaving reddening' (one of the rare cases found in the case files of female-on-male domestic violence).

The nature and causes of victim retraction require urgent research, particularly in terms of different forms of VAWG within different populations, to inform the policing practices and facilitate more effective responses to those reporting domestic and sexual violence. On the issue of victim retraction, officers repeatedly raised the question of what victims of crime want when they make a report to the police. A better understanding of the reasons for differential rates of victim retraction and lack of support for prosecution is vital – rather than reflecting any inherent orientation among particular communities, retraction might instead reflect victims' broader lack of confidence in the ability of the police and the wider criminal justice system to deliver just outcomes. The competing challenges posed by the need to safeguard versus the imperative to charge (especially in relation to victim retraction), and the need to maintain victim engagement in the face of diminishing trust and victim retraction, thus needs further research.

## Multi-agency working to improve trust

Several of the police officers pointed out that improvements had been made in multi-agency working to support the victims of VAWG over the years. The police case files routinely indicated that safeguarding concerns and risk assessments were logged, and that there were consistent attempts to engage with other agencies about managing risks and offering referrals to victims of VAWG who report to the police. Other agencies the police mentioned as important partners included both statutory bodies and charities, which were highly valued, particularly for safeguarding victims. However, in the context of the annual funding cuts due to the austerity policies that have been implemented since 2020, several officers mentioned a lack of adequate service provision due to the shrinking capacity of existing services and the lack of accessible services in some parts of the country. Unlike domestic violence services, which have evolved in the UK to include 'by and for' specialist services for particular populations, the absence of a similar provision within the sexual violence services is indeed conspicuous by its absence.

Beyond improving the safety of public spaces, partnership working with the police and the night-time economy in relation to sexual violence and safe housing was also mentioned by a few officers as a crucial component of their domestic violence responses. Respondents named a shortage of suitable housing as a key barrier to victim engagement, investigation, police progression of cases, and victim recovery. While respondents repeatedly reiterated the centrality of multi-agency working to the policing of VAWG, they also raised concerns about the strains associated with joint working that posed a serious risk to outcomes for those reporting VAWG and to the policing of VAWG more broadly.





## Conclusion

On the whole, the police officers in the focus groups reflected on the challenges arising from lack of trust in the force and from particular trust issues in relation to women more broadly and racially minoritised communities more specifically. They discussed causes behind lack of victim engagement, as evidenced by the high rates of victim attrition evident in the case files and the outcomes regarding evidential issues and potential solutions. Internal processes and delays within the criminal justice system were identified as a key factor that exacerbated the challenges of policing VAWG. Solutions focused on victim engagement, effective safeguarding, and building positive relationships and trust with local communities.

However, the police officers in this study located the causes of the trust problem as arising from the cultural values of particular communities and media reporting and/or exaggeration of failures associated with other police forces in the UK or internationally – they did not attribute these causes to the nature of policing itself. Notably, the officers did not mention institutional racism or racism more broadly. The wide gap between these police perceptions of lack of trust among racially minoritised populations and the findings of independent reports (such as the Casey Report and various HMICFRS reports) that identify institutional racism within police forces and racial disparity in police criminal justice data (HMICFRS 2023) represents a significant area of concern.

A significant minority of police officers revealed an equally problematic perception that trust was not a significant issue because reporting rates for VAWG were increasing, hence indicating growing trust in the police. While they did engage with discussion of measures that might help build trust, this was based on a limited construction of the problem. Similarly, while lack of trust was recognised as an issue, the officers identified the practices and processes of the wider criminal justice system as the cause and felt that, rather unjustifiably, the lack of trust arose because they were the face of the system.

Several challenges to victim engagement were identified in the case files, body cam footage and by the police. Some of these related to the particular dynamics of VAWG and diverse ways in which victims utilised the police – for example, they sometimes sought to report an incident and seek immediate support rather than a prosecution. However, lack of trust in the police caused by long delays in criminal justice processes, lack of investigation progress, evidential difficulties, the ineffectiveness of protective measures such as injunctions, and the lack of provision for some categories of victims (such as those with NRPF) were also noted.

Multi-agency working was widely recognised as an effective tool to build trust with local communities, create effective safeguarding frameworks and prioritise victim safety in the face of victim retraction of support for prosecution. Indeed, the majority of case files in the sample record victims being informed of sources of support by the police, though direct referral seems less common. Safeguarding – often through working closely with community organisations – was identified as a key factor in retaining victim engagement, and the police recognised the role played by these community organisations in restoring and building trust within the community. However, the broader issues around lack of trust were also felt to affect police relations with such organisations, as were competing organisational priorities, service thresholds and gatekeeping in response to funding pressures, which prevented effective multi-agency safeguarding responses in the face of what was deemed identifiable risk by one organisation.

Reflecting on the past two decades of policing VAWG, several officers pointed out the prioritisation of VAWG within policing and the focus on safeguarding as key improvements. Nonetheless, there was a strong perception that years of austerity policies had resulted in staffing cuts, increased workloads, lack of resources and inadequate (time for) training. The impact on morale, performance and capacity to respond to public demand was severe. In this context, recent target-driven approaches to policing were leading to unintended consequences, such as pressure to enact 'performative' policing to meet targets rather than respond to need.

This research has identified a range of issues relating to the policing of VAWG among racially minoritised women and girls. While we were able to identify some good practice for safeguarding referrals and signposting and there seems to be police recognition of VAWG as a priority area, there remain a number of issues that must be explored further. In particular, there needs to be greater scrutiny of the outcomes of VAWG reports, which can be achieved by drawing upon a randomised sample of police case files. In addition, while it is important to understand police perspectives on the challenges and initiatives within their particular forces regarding addressing VAWG, future research must capture a range of serving police officer voices – including those that can offer more critical perspectives.



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## About the authors

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