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Policing domestic abuse: the onus on first responders

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ABSTRACT

The police first responder has a central role in the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in most jurisdictions and is uniquely placed to solicit information from the victim-survivor about the experiences and behaviours they have witnessed first-hand. The College of Policing advises that first response officers have a dual role when attending domestic callouts: to recognise signs of abuse and prevent offences from occurring, and identify criminal offences so that offenders can be brought to justice. The frontline encounter by police is a pivotal moment for myriad reasons. Sharing results and reflections from our experiences of evaluating a number of innovative approaches to the policing of domestic abuse in the UK context, we illustrate the onus placed on the police first responder. In the effort to improve the overall criminal justice response to domestic abuse, we argue that a greater appreciation of this onus is needed amongst all criminal justice and multi-agency practitioners. Furthermore, we argue that greater support for police first responders is needed to improve outcomes for all following this encounter.

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Introduction

Both crime and survey-based evidence in England and Wales and indeed across the globe show high levels and asymmetrical – or gendered – patterns of domestic abuse. This is in spite of considerable legal and legislative developments, strategic and policy prioritisation and innovative approaches and practices stretching from the global to the local levels. These stubborn patterns persist and, in England and Wales recent figures published by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) show conviction rates, already poor for various categories of violence against women and girls (VAWG), reduce further for domestic abuse and rape (CPS 2023). Research provides increasingly detailed insights into the specificities of where and how inroads may be made in various localities to prevent such violence and abuse, respond more effectively to it, punctuate perpetrator behaviour and protect and safeguard women and children via multi-agency means. However, amassing this wealth of evidence, Walklate (2018) prophesised that the criminal justice system will continue in its inability to process and secure convictions. More recently, Newburn has drawn attention to the limited impact of policing initiatives generally (Newburn 2022). It is often cited, and there is common agreement, that responding to domestic abuse is especially challenging for the police who are at the front end of the criminal justice system (McPhee 2022).

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Pertinent to England and Wales, the main inspectorate body stated the need for immediate cross-system action to respond with greater pace and urgency to the epidemic of offending against women and girls (HMICFRS 2021). In early 2023, the Home Office published the Strategic Policing Requirements (SPRs) which outlines the direction of policing by the Home Secretary. Recent requirements thus provide strategic direction and objectives for police forces to tackle national and local priorities. VAWG has been added to the previous list of six national threats (terrorism, serious and organised crime, national cyber incidents, child sexual abuse and public order and civil emergencies), to improve trust and confidence in policing by relentlessly pursing perpetrators and creating safer spaces.

Whilst the policing of domestic abuse (DA) is complex, since the 1980s, in most jurisdictions multi agency working gradually became the dominant approach to tackling it (Sampson 1988), though this was not fully embraced until well into the twenty-first century (Davies 2018, 2022, Cleaver *et al.* 2019). However, despite the introduction of legally enforceable protection measures (Duggan 2019), and an array of different multi-agency innovations, the gateway to change is highly dependent on the first police responder. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the first responder opportunities and challenges when attending DA incidents, focussing in particular on how they impact the victim's journey through the criminal justice process.

The College of Policing (CoP) advise that first response officers have a dual role to play when attending domestic callouts, namely to recognise signs of abuse and prevent offences occurring in the long-term; and identify criminal offences so that offenders can be brought to justice. New student officers recruited within the professionalised police education qualification framework, are advised 'You *can* make a difference'. The first police responder is uniquely placed to solicit vital information from the victim-survivor about their experience and the behaviours they have witnessed first-hand. In sum, this frontline encounter is a pivotal moment in the policing of DA. In such cases, it is likely that this is not the first time a victim has reported their abuse to the police. Repeat victimisation is common in relationships characterised by such abuse (Phoenix 2023). On each occasion, the victim will likely meet a different police officer and each time a responding officer faces this dual role which requires them to ensure immediate safety, build rapport, carry out an initial investigation, identify risk and initiate support and protection (initial safety planning). At the point of call-out, police officer/s need to swiftly establish and record the nature of any relationship or personal connection between the victim and the offender. The nature of the abuse needs to be understood whether it be intentional physical harm or behaviour underpinned by the threat of violence. Abuse may be psychological and manipulative, sexual, financial, emotional and verbal, online and/or digital. There are further complexities with regards to identifying crime categories, with seriousness hierarchies, copious and often confusing guidance about behaviours and charge decisions. There are overlaps between crime types, for example, financial abuse and coercive and controlling behaviours, coerced sexual activity and obsessive, unwanted and repeated behaviours that constitute stalking and harassment (Barlow and Walklate 2022). Information available to first responders about a call-out is scant and tends to be limited to a highly generalised DA flag to the call.

In this paper, we examine recent developments in the response to DA, with a specific focus on the first/ frontline response by police officers. We report on results and reflections from our experiences of evaluating a number of approaches to the policing of DA in the UK context. Our research has involved mixed methods, including analysing police data, semi-structured interviews, observations of meetings and online surveys with stakeholders involved in the multi-agency policing of DA. Our further analysis of the combined findings from these research projects outlines features of the police response which has the potential to enhance or inhibit victim-survivors journeys through the criminal justice system. We reflect on these themed findings from the first responder perspective. The remainder of the article is organised as follows. First, we contextualise the frontline response to DA and consider some key terms. Second, we provide a brief outline of the research projects we draw on for supporting evidence, including a short description of the methodologies employed. Third, we consider the unique opportunities for police as first responders to DA. We then critically

discuss the significant challenge for these front-line professionals. Focussing on a complex range of issues that arise from a number of drivers – often but not always – present in an emergency situation, we unpick the onus placed on the frontline police officer. We discuss the precarity of their predicament as a prelude to our call for a review of the support apparatus for police first responders.

The frontline response to domestic abuse

The phrase 'frontline response' is often used in literature on the subject of improving the police response to DA. This includes work that explores the response to reports of abuse (Loftus 2009, Robinson *et al.* 2018, Friskney *et al.* 2021), assessment of risk (Black and Lumsden 2020, Barlow and Walklate 2021, Myhill *et al.* 2023; Robinson *et al.* 2016) obtaining quality evidence (Westera and Powell 2017), understandings of coercive control (Robinson *et al.* 2016, Barlow *et al.* 2020, Barlow 2022, Barlow and Walklate 2022, Myhill 2022) and issues with trust and confidence in the police (Loftus 2009). Literature emanating from the field of health and psychology/psychiatry focuses on first responders – including police – well-being and coping strategies (Anderson *et al.* 2015, Arable *et al.* 2018). Though the public health approach is seeping into criminological and policing research, in part due to the often more lucrative research funding in that field, crime and policing literatures bring forth surprisingly few specific references to police first responders. The actual interactive moment of the frontline response tends to be glossed over. Here we prioritise this alongside analysis which attends to policing's structural context and the wider multi-agency policing framework.

Arable and colleagues (2018: 612) identify first responders *as professionals who respond to emergency situations in order to provide safety and protection to citizens, property and communities*. Their examples of specific professional first responders include police or law enforcement officers, fire fighters, ambulance, military and search and rescue personnel. They note the first three professions listed have similar job characteristics. In addition, criminal justice first responder practitioners might include probation officers, others have listed social service and health professionals, including clinicians. One dimension of the term first responder is the emergency situation element. The implication is very clear, the first responder is present at the scene of the emergency incident (Messing 2017). However, depending on the nature and context of the DA call, the first response may not always equate to the 'blue flashing light' emergency. DA calls can lead to what is termed a 'scheduled response', where a uniformed officer may not carry out the first response until a number of days after the initial call. We return to this issue later.

The police procedure for responding to DA will vary in the specifics of the procedures from country to country, within and between police jurisdictions and at local levels (Davies and Biddle 2017, Davies 2018). However, there are commonalities, one of which is that uniformed general duty officers who are responsible for responding to emergency calls for service typically respond to DA call-outs. Moreover, such call-outs dominate the day to the activity of frontline policework. Though the existence, availability and deployment of Independent Domestic Abuse or Violence Advisors (IDAAs/IDVAs), or Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) vary across police forces in the UK, they too might be classed as part of the frontline co-ordinated multi-agency response where they attend alongside the police. In effect, there is often varied appropriateness in the use of the term first responder. First responders are usually part of a response team and *first* response conjures the impression of a *second* response. The proximity of those sometimes referred to as first responders to the emergency is sometimes over-stated and this applies to the police first response too. Our own definition of a police first responder to DA is the uniformed officer who will be part of a general emergency response shift of police officers and equates to the first police face-to-face contact that the victim-survivor and/ or perpetrator experiences. However, as our discussion unfolds, we shall challenge the appropriateness of this definition too.

As a reminder, the police response to DA has historically been deemed inconsistent or inadequate, this summary assessment being applicable across a wide range of jurisdictions (see

inter alia, Hoyle and Sanders 2000, Loftus 2009). Problematic attitudes amongst police officers were rife in the 1980s, with the most senior police officer at the time, Sir Kenneth Newman, Metropolitan Police Commissioner, quoted as saying '*Domestic violence and stray dogs … … rubbish work for police officers*' (Women's Aid n.d.). Studies of policing in that decade found similarly disparaging perceptions about policing domestic violence and abuse (Reiner 1985) which was seen as a private issue (Hoyle and Sanders 2000). This century, there has been little direct focus on frontline policing interaction. Over ten years ago Hester (2013) conducted a narrative analysis of case files and explored the ways in which victim blaming impacts victim-survivors' experiences as the role of the perpetrator is minimised. Earlier, ethnographical work by Loftus (2009) in a single English force revealed the still familiar story of DA being afforded a low priority relative to other crime types, and officers taking little or no action in response to certain incidents. More recently, research has focussed on the policing of coercive control (Barlow *et al.* 2020, Myhill *et al.* 2023) and police use of discretion and risk assessment tools (e.g. Black and Lumsden 2020, Barlow *et al.* 2021, Barlow and Walklate 2021, Myhill 2022). However, as noted previously there has been limited focus over the last 15 years on the complexities and great expectations attached to the first response officer within the wider multi-agency response to DA and the implications of this for victim-survivors engagement with the criminal justice response. We bring together an assembly of knowledge that highlights the significance of the first response to improving the overall response to DA.

Outline of four research projects

We draw on findings from an analysis of and reflections from four research projects led by the authors over the course of the last decade. They predate and post-date the COVID-19 pandemic and took place as austerity measures were introduced and increasingly felt by the public sector and other support services. Three of the projects focussed on recent developments and innovations linked to the policing of DA. One considered the specific problem of policing DA in rural areas and communities. Legal changes, legislative developments, a police*perpetrated DA super-complaint and high-profile criticisms of the police response have all been in the public spotlight as we conducted our research. Confidence in the police is at an all-time low. Risking over simplification, this constitutes the social, economic and political landscape within which we discuss the frontline police response to DA.

The four projects were all initiatives designed to reform or interventions aimed at improving the response to DA. Though the projects did not set out to specifically explore the frontline police response to DA, the onus on the first response was a dominant theme across each of them. A brief summary of each research project and its associated methodology is provided below. Note that ethical approval was granted for all research projects and research participants have been anonymised.

Project 1: responding to domestic abuse in rural communities

This project was partially funded by the N8 Policing Research Partnership and the research was conducted in 2019. It involved partnering with one police force based in rural England. The project incorporated an analysis of sixteen police case files; twenty in-depth interviews with police officers and representatives from partner organisations (this included first response officers); and finally interviews with victim-survivors who had interacted with the police about their experiences of DA and who lived in the rural community.

Project 2: police responses to coercive control

This project was funded by the British Academy and involved partnering with one police force in the South of England. The project took place in 2018. The project involved four methodological stages.

Stage 1: A survey with 198 frontline police officers. Stage 2: five focus groups and interviews with police officers of varying roles and ranks (25 participants in total, 22 men, 3 women). Stage 3: eight interviews with victim-survivors of coercive control. Stage 4: quantitative analysis of police DA data (2015-March 2018).

Project 3: domestic abuse: multi-agency tasking and co-ordination (MATAC)

This independent evaluation of MATAC was funded by the Police. The evaluation was conducted in 2014–2015. MATAC is a multi-agency initiative that focusses on identifying serial perpetrators of DA. The evaluation of the pilot of MATAC in one large northern police force involved quantitative analysis of police DA data, in-depth case studies, and interviews with various stakeholders including victim-survivors, perpetrators, police (including nine members of three Neighbourhood Policing Teams) and other multi-agency professionals and practitioners.

Project 4: violence against women and girls: relentlessly pursuing perpetrators

Funded via the College of Policing under the Violence Against Women and Girls: Relentlessly Pursuing Perpetrators national funding stream, this 2023 project involved planning an evaluation of a Stalking Screening Tool (SST). The planning involved an on-line survey and interviews with single point of contact officers (SPOCs).

In each of these research and evaluation projects, the focus was on the problem of DA and associated crime types where the police were the first responders. Findings are presented under two main headings: opportunities and challenges. First, we provide examples of the opportunities the first responder has when attending DA incidents, in particular in providing a 'window of opportunity' to support victim-survivors. Second, we present findings attesting to the challenges first responders face when attending such incidents.

Opportunities for police as first responders

The first response is a pivotal moment in the overall policing response to DA. The code of ethics requires police first responders to:

- gather information and intelligence,
- assess threat and risk, then develop a working strategy,
- consider powers and policy,
- identify options and contingencies,
- take action and review what happened.

There are then, a number of expectations associated with the first response. First, an initial assessment of the *victims*' needs at the scene forms part of the appropriate actions. First responders must consider a host of factors including safety, children, medical treatment, photographs and body worn camera (BWC) evidence of physical injuries and disturbance, risk assessments and statements. Second, with regards to the *perpetrator* first responders need to be attentive to warning markers and previous history, demeanour, statements, charge and arrest considerations. Third, first responders are expected to be aware of issues concerning the scene and location including factors such as address history, children, risk to officers, type of property and property searches, evidence of disturbance, CCTV and more. The latter expectations concern the quality of the investigation which will include securing victim testimony and maximising the evidential value of the complainants' initial account, all of which is mediated by past and present inter-personal relationships.

To further contextualise these expectations, the frontline policing 'moment' is usually the first point of contact the victim-survivor has with a particular uniformed police officer. How that

individual officer(s) responds is important in myriad ways. The first response officer has an opportunity to make a difference in adult and child victims' lives. This verbal and non-verbal interactive moment in time is important for the victim's journey to safety and justice. The significance of this role was recognised by several senior police officers we interviewed in our projects. Senior officers from Projects 2 (Coercive Control) and 4 (Relentlessly pursuing perpetrator) respectively, told us how pivotal the encounter is with respect to victims' safety:

> It's a key moment (the frontline response). Getting that right and making sure the victim is safe and supported is fundamental to success of the case really.

> How they deal with the incident as first responder will have a huge impact directly on family's lives.

The first response often takes place in a moment of crisis and potential hostility towards the frontline officer themselves. Another senior police officer from Project 3 (the MATAC) told us:

> The way they approach the incident and the considerations they make can influence the whole investigation.

The nature of the response can therefore be fundamental in instilling trust and confidence in the overall policing process. The Casey Report (2023) highlights that women's trust and confidence in the police is low, particularly in terms of the ability of the police to respond effectively to VAWG. Ensuring the victim-survivor and any children feel safe, listened to and heard are central aspects of an effective frontline response. Senior officers we interviewed readily explained these important features of the frontline response to us.

A key tool used for information gathering during the police first response, particularly from victim-survivors, are risk assessment tools. As noted above, first response officers are required to undertake a risk assessment in all DA incidents, as per national policy (e.g. Domestic Abuse Stalking and Harassment – DASH or Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment – DARA). The contradictory issues with the risk assessment process (Barlow and Walklate 2021) and tools (Medina *et al.* 2016, Turner *et al.* 2019) are well documented. We also know that such assessments are not always completed, suggesting discretionary judgement may influence frontline response officers' decisions regarding perceived levels of risk (Myhill and Johnson 2015, Barlow and Walklate 2021). However, in spite of these concerns with the process, tools and use of risk assessments, engaging in dialogue about fear, safety and security beyond the doorstep can mobilise protection and safety plans to support the victim-survivor/s. A supervisory officer from Project 2 told us about this opportunity:

> Although we know the issues with DASH, it can provide an opportunity to find out what is going on, see the potential risks that are there and should be used as a way of asking more questions to provide the right support.

This is echoed by senior officer respondents in Project 4 where the innovation was designed to lead to a bespoke and detailed safety plan following on from the frontline dialogue. Such safety plans will be tailored and specific about the safeguarding measures put in place with the aim of keeping the victim-survivor and any children safe and reducing the risk of harm. Such plans should be discussed with the victim-survivor and they ought to be bespoke to their individual needs. However, the extent to which this happens in reality is variable (Myhill *et al.* 2023).

A further key aspect of the first policing response is an opportunity to gather evidence, including obtaining direct testimony from the victim-survivor. When the first response takes place soon after the call to the police – either as a blue-light call or early scheduled call – the victim-survivor may be more likely to want to speak to the police about their experience (Westera and Powell 2017, Barlow and Walklate 2021). Other forms of evidence may also be gathered at this point including evidence of criminal damage and physical violence, some of which may be captured on BWC. Victim-survivors withdraw from police investigations for many and varied reasons, including fear that the abuse will escalate and that children will be taken away (Wiener 2022). Obtaining other forms of evidence during the initial response can therefore provide opportunities for investigations to continue, even in the absence of victim-survivor testimony. This was noted by a number of our participants In Project 4, two senior officers told us:

> We can never assume we are going to have the support of the victim right through the whole investigation.
>
> By collecting all evidence from the start this might influence a guilty plea or assist with an evidence led (victim-less) prosecution should the victim withdraw their consent further down the line.

In sum, the potential value of the frontline response when attending DA incidents, particularly for victim-survivors, cannot be underestimated. The police first response is an opportunity to identify the needs of victim-survivors and mobilise support. However, alongside these opportunities, there are challenges as recognised by frontline officers themselves, senior officers, other practitioners and victim-survivors across the four studies. Furthermore, it is clear that not all of the challenges we examine in the next section are being addressed. Indeed, we garnered very little from our interviews about how these opportunities are bolstered by timely supervisory or back-office safeguarding hub information derived from multi-agency sources that might be made available to the frontline teams as they engage in this first response dialogue. Some police forces have introduced specialist DA cars and teams, including 'frontline advisors' who accompany first response officers so that they can provide direct support to victims and point out important victim-related cues and evidence. However, innovations such as this have not been a panacea. As well as providing an opportunity to gather evidence, safeguard/ assess risk and instil trust and confidence in the police, the frontline response is also fraught with challenges and obstacles to maximising the potential of this pivotal moment.

The contemporary challenge for police as first responders

Given the onus on police as first responders, it may be expected that there are high levels of support for them to gain the most out of this interactional encounter with victim-survivors and perpetrators. However, the main drivers for frontline policing are often tempered by the leadership and organisational culture of the police force, as well as wider government funding restrictions and priorities, which can impact resourcing of the frontline (Myhill 2022). Frontline police may feel forgotten, neglected and not understand their value within the wider organisation, all of which can affect the quality of their work. Several challenges associated with such issues were identified in our collective research projects. Here, we will focus on three. The first is a contemporary concern about an 'inexperienced workforce' which appears to be impacting frontline policing. The second is not a new challenge but, over the last ten years or so the problem of 'evidential issues' has been heightened in light of rapid digital and technological developments and platforms for perpetrating crime. Third, we explore what we have termed 'cultural legacies' to capture the lingering persistent and inherent issues with the police response to DA, with particular implications for victim-survivors.

Inexperienced workforce

Prior to their election in December 2019, the current Conservative government had pledged to recruit an additional 20,000 police officers by 2023. The recruitment drive was split into different waves and published information on workforce uplift to 30th June 2021 suggests 10,140 additional officers were recruited, 9814 of which can be attributed to the uplift programme (gov.uk 2021). These new and inexperienced officers have formed part of the first response teams in neighbourhoods over the last five years. With regards to improving the first response to DA within this context, it was hoped that a professionalised workforce (via qualifications such as the Policing Education Qualifications Framework, PEQF), may positively impact the victims' journey to safety and justice. In spite of such ambitions, The Casey Report (2023) highlights issues with an inexperienced and overworked workforce within the Metropolitan Police and notes how frontline policing has been eroded in the wake of the profound austerity measures affecting the service. Casey reports how this has weakened the frontline point of connection with the public and it has '*put frontline policing at the back of the queue*' leaving them *demoralised and let down,* impacting its response to male violence perpetrated against women and children (Casey 2023, p. 14).

Findings from the projects in focus for this paper similarly highlight that the frontline of policing is staffed by inexperienced and youthful officers. In Project 4, a senior officer told us *we're talking about very, very, very young in-service officers within our force*. These first responders are charged with responding to call-outs with very little information to hand about the victim and/or the perpetrator and often with no knowledge about any relationship there may be/have been between the parties they are called out to. A supervisory officer from Project 3 (MATAC) talked about the youthfulness of officers and went on to say:

> … … ..educating young, we've got such a plethora of inexperienced officers. Anything we can give them to help guide them through … . They've got to know everything so if we can equip them with those tools that they can work through methodically … .

Though the legislative framework is a common denominator and official guidance exists, there is variation in how legal provisions translate into sub-national policies and how policies are implemented at local multi-agency levels. The tools and technology that officers may have to methodically work with vary from police force to police force. Whilst some of the tools relating to the policing of VAWG are fairly standardised, others take different forms. Looking at risk assessment tools discussed previously, some forces use DASH, others DARA and there are other tools in use beyond these examples. In many police forces, the use of such tools is in a state of flux as they move towards embedding a more standardised version. The sheer volume and changing nature of these aids in assessing risk and determining needs give rise to confusion, complications and slows the process and procedure for gathering information about the relationships between parties and about the persistence of behaviours. This is particularly challenging for inexperienced officers adopting such new tools and implementing policies on the frontline. Even those pioneering the use of first responder tools within forces admit … *its really hard. It is … .. It's a lot to ask for. I would feel overwhelmed* (Senior officer, Project 3 MATAC).

Furthermore, frontline officers lack the depth of specialist knowledge required for responding to more complex cases of domestic abuse. In Project 1, where we examined the problem of responding to DA in rural communities, we discovered that even more experienced response officers lack the knowledge and awareness of the ways in which broader contextual factors can influence experiences of DA including rurality, minoritised identities and factors such as intergenerational violence (Barlow *et al.* 2022). In this same project, despite victim-survivors, IDVA's and other third sector workers highlighting that intergenerational violence was common in rural, farming communities, frontline police officers we interviewed did not perceive this as an issue as one told us:

> Intergenerational violence isn't an issue really. We just deal with all domestic abuse the same as any other job.

Each of the four projects we draw evidence from highlights the ways in which first response officers typically respond to jobs in isolation, rather than understanding the 'everywhereness' (Pain 2015) and 'everydayness' of DA (Stanko 2015). Having a young and inexperienced work force, remotely supervised by those with similar incident-focussed understandings of DA (Barlow *et al.* 2020), inhibits the development of a more effective response for victim-survivors and children.

Evidential issues

A further challenge and expectation of the first responder is engaging in reliable and full evidence gathering (Westera and Powell 2017). The wider context in which policing DA takes place is one in which there has been seismic digital and technological change. Perpetrators would appear to have taken advantage of this, whereas police are failing to do so. This is especially evident with regard to the problem of repeat and coercive and controlling abusive behaviour (Barlow and Walklate 2022). With the increase in emphasis on evidence-led prosecutions, collecting evidence that will stand up in court despite the possibility of victim retraction has become increasingly important. Collecting evidence in coercive control cases is particularly challenging for frontline officers. Two quotes from

police officers in Project 2 (Coercive Control) illustrate how the gathering of evidence, where no obvious physical assault has taken place, is challenging:

> Trying to find supporting evidence is hard. Because it's not like an assault where you have a black eye. It generally happens behind closed doors to the point where there is no evidence (Frontline officer).

> it's just one of those offences. It's about proving the perpetrator and victims mindset, without being able to go into their brain and pulling it out, its really hard to do. It's incredibly difficult to evidence and I know our frontline officers struggle with what to look out for (Senior officer)

This uncertainty about what to look out for was also echoed in the survey conducted with frontline officers for the same project, whereby only 56% of respondents said that they felt 'knowledgeable and confident' in evidencing coercive and controlling behaviour, compared to 86% in cases of DA equating to actual bodily harm. The coercive and controlling behaviour legislation requires police officers to understand and respond to domestic abuse as a cumulative process occurring over and through time (Barlow *et al.* 2020, Barlow and Walklate 2022). For the first response officer, who has limited time to spend at the scene of any given incident, with little in the way of background information or wider context from the call handlers or multi-agency partners at their fingertips, this is a weighty expectation. This is further complicated when the first response may come days after the initial call. In Project 2, coercive control cases were less likely to be a category 1 'blue flashing light' emergency response compared to other forms of domestic abuse which are more closely associated with physical violence. At face value, this may suggest coercive control is not taken as seriously. However, it may also be due to the types of behaviour that are reported by victim-survivors when the initial call is first made to the police call centre. For example, historical cases of coercive control may not warrant the same emergency response as someone who has just been seriously injured by a partner who is still at the scene. As one supervising officer from Project 2 told us, first response officers are in many ways '*governed by the control room*'. Across all four projects, we found that how a call is initially categorised at the call handling stage, can dictate when the frontline response begins, governs how the police officer approaches the encounter at the scene and subsequently impacts the level and category of response that the victim-survivor receives. The provision and availability of real-time updates for police first responders seemed grossly disparate between and within police forces. Few forces have equipped frontline officers with adequate digital and technological devices that have the capacity to give them timely access to quality information related to the call-out on handheld devices at the scene.

Where there is the likelihood of coercive and/or controlling behaviour patterns to victim's experiences, it is unlikely that victim-survivors contact the police to specifically report this, thus leaving it to emerge during an investigation. In such cases, the call to police is usually made a number of days prior to the first response, there may never have been or no longer be 'physical evidence' present and the victim-survivor may feel disheartened by perceptions of a slow response, often leading to disengagement (project 2, coercive control). Gathering good quality evidence that will stand up in court in this context is a challenge, particularly when this process is being carried out by a predominantly young and inexperienced workforce.

The challenge officers face in responding to 'slow' coercive control call-outs, represents just one of the many time factors impacting victim-survivors' journey to safety and justice. In Project 1 (DA in rural communities), there were further challenges in such cases in terms of inaccessibility due to the rural landscape and geography and the time it takes to get to victim-survivors who are particularly isolated. A first responder told us:

> Rural areas around here are just enormous. So it doesn't matter where you are, it can be so difficult to get to people in good time. It's sometimes difficult as well because are we going to go knocking on someone's door ages after they called if we don't know if the perpetrator is back again?

The above quote highlights that the vast remote spaces which police officers often have to travel to get to a victim-survivor means that a quick response, even in an emergency situation, is not always

practically possible. Evidence gathering in this context raises similar challenges to those discussed above in relation to coercive and controlling behaviour.

The accounts of first responders featured in the four projects discussed in this paper suggest that due to the limited time that police officers are able to spend at DA call-outs, officers tend to draw on what is visible, actionable and doable when collecting evidence at the scene. This usually equates to looking for physical evidence, such as signs of visible injury and criminal damage. However, cases of coercive and controlling behaviour do not always feature such evidence. This is particularly applicable to cases of historical and slow forms of abuse as noted above. The victim-survivors direct account is therefore crucial in capturing the nuanced evidence of the impact and harms of such abuse. The importance of such trace measures is not always understood by first response officers, as evidenced by the below quotes from frontline officers in Project 2 (coercive control):

> One case I turned up to slightly after my colleague, as I was finishing up another job. Must have been about 20 min later and I was turning up, it was like he was leaving. This had been a serious domestic assault on the call log. I asked what was happening, and he said he had asked a few questions, done the DASH and that was it. But it was clear he hadn't properly listened to her account. He can't have done in that time. I did try and go back in and ask more questions, but it was already too late by then, she had disengaged.

> Sometimes when you're taking a statement and there isn't anything else to go off, you just know CPS will say this is one word against the other. You know it isn't going to fly in court when it's just the victims' statement and that's pretty much it.

These extracts suggest there are a number of issues at play. Firstly, that victim-survivor testimony may not be valued or seen as 'true evidence' by frontline response officers. Research suggests there is no better assessor of risk than listening to the victim-survivor themselves, their voices are a key component of an empowering policing first response (Burman and Brooks-Hay 2018, Barlow and Walklate 2021). Capturing detailed statements during the initial response is particularly important when it is victim-survivors themselves who have called the police. They may be more open to share; may be able to recall information more readily; and if they receive a supportive and positive policing response, they may be more willing to continue to engage with the policing investigation. Even if, for many and varied reasons, the victim-survivor does choose to retract their statement later in the process, an inquisitive and empowering frontline response may mean that the survivor will be more likely to contact the police again in the future should they need to. Secondly, these two quotes suggest that in coercive and controlling behaviour cases in particular, first-response officers may be missing other evidential opportunities that could corroborate victim-survivor testimony. This includes other witness accounts. Finally, the latter quote, in particular, suggests that first-response officers may be overly focussed on the potential for prosecution, rather than the opportunity to safeguard and protect. Policing targets within police forces and pressures to secure charges for DA will no doubt contribute to this missed opportunity to safeguard. These challenges are further exacerbated by cultural legacies impeding the police response to DA more broadly.

Cultural legacies

We have alluded already to the wider organisational culture at play within different police forces, however, there is evidence of an overarching stubborn cultural legacy to the policing of DA. This legacy surfaced in our earlier contextualisation of the frontline response to DA, where we discussed problematic attitudes amongst more senior and experienced police officers dating back to the previous century. It is important not to under-estimate the enduring quality and strength of this insidious collective of cultural inhibitors to a more positive and impactful policing of DA. First-response officers, including those with considerable experience, voice their frustrations about policing DA. Frustrations emerged from their desire to do more to protect victim-survivors, but having limited time, resource and capacity to do this: *Sometimes you just feel helpless when you know there is only so much we can do* (Experienced response officer, Project 2, coercive control). For some officers,

frustration is centred on their limited ability to intervene in cases of repeat victimisation, particularly when the victim-survivor retracts or withdraws their statement. For example:

> People we deal with, sometimes they call so many times, maybe 10 times in 2 weeks, and they don't want to do anything when we get there. Sometimes it may be minor, otherwise more serious, and that is so frustrating, because what can we actually do there? (Frontline officer, Project 2, coercive control).

The above quote may read as saddeningly familiar to those engaged in DA research and those in a victim support capacity. It highlights how first-response officers can lack an understanding and compassion for the many and varied reasons as to why victim-survivors disengage and withdraw from a police investigation. Worse still, a small number of first response officers that we spoke with across the projects held openly hostile views towards victim-survivors of DA. For example, officers from Project 2 (coercive control) explained:

> There are those type of victims that just have their own agenda and with domestic abuse, victims do have their own agendas. They say things to make themselves look better, so its hard to get the full picture (Frontline officer)

> Victims abuse legislation like coercive control. If you put legislation like coercive control out there in the public, you run the risk of feeding the engine, so to speak, and people making things up. You know, people saying 'he controls what I wear' and I think to myself 'if that's what you're allowed to wear, I'd hate to think what you're not allowed to wear then'. So it's useful when you get a genuine case, but for some it just isn't (Senior Officer)

Our analysis suggests that in spite of having more legislation, policy, training and evidence-based education related to DA than has ever been in place before, the attitudinal issues and scepticism identified in the early 1980s policing research still persists today and percolates through to the inexperienced frontline police responders. This suggests that the cultural shifts needed to fundamentally change the policing response to DA are still very much needed.

Concluding thoughts: the onus on frontline police officers as first responders to domestic abuse

We have highlighted the ways in which the role of the first police responder within the context of DA is represented as pivotal with significant and wide-ranging expectations attached to it. Although research on the policing of DA has proliferated, there has been little specific focus on the interactional capacity and capability of the frontline officer. The implications discussed here are therefore of significance to other jurisdictions across the globe.

The first response officer is required to understand the nature of what is going on at the scene quickly, identify the victim and perpetrator – which can be particularly complex in coercive control cases (Barlow *et al.* 2023), assess risk, gather evidence and intelligence, and make decisions regarding charge and arrest in the broader context of pro-arrest and potentially without victim testimony. They therefore need to be *doing the fundamentals of investigation well* (Westera and Powell 2017, p. 164) with an eye on the next steps for the case. These are high-stakes opportunities. Situating all these expectations within the context of an inexperienced workforce and rapid but uneven use of new tools and innovations, it is a challenging area of police work. Furthermore, the nature, timing and context of the first response can differ on a case-by-case basis. Officers at the scene often have little information to hand about repeat calls and perpetrator antecedents. In many forces, officers have limited access to technology and digital devices that may provide a flow of such important safeguarding information gleaned over time from multi-agency partners. A disjunct between senior police and supervisory rhetoric and the frontline reality emerges. Supervision and support do not appear to be reaching the frontline, where often ill-equipped first responders are balancing safeguarding, evidence gathering and the many other expectations discussed in this paper. These challenges and complexities often negatively impact the journey to justice for those victim-survivors whose experiences come to the attention of criminal justice practitioners. According to Newburn (2022), in the context of policing DA, suspicion and cynicism militates against a belief in the victim. In this context, as in other contemporary police reform, the effort is doomed to fail or

it is severely limited due to the inherent and unavoidable complexity of policing and the inevitable and inescapable error in the very nature of it, 'it is the constraints and intricacies of such encounters that are what makes policing fundamentally fallible' (Newburn 2022, p. 435).

In sum, DA takes up a considerable amount of police time (VAWG Strategic, Threat and Risk Assessment, 2023). Offences that frontline officers respond to on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour basis will heavily feature DA calls. The expectations placed on first response officers, as discussed here, are significant and need to be situated in this wider context. A solution that is often provided to address some of these challenges is more training. However, the extent to which more training and closer supervision can solve the underlying problems discussed here is questionable, particularly given the persistent minimisation of DA in police work (Loftus 2009) alongside the ever-changing legal framework in which such training and/or education is required to respond. The frontline police officer is one (important) role in the wider multi-agency response to domestic abuse. Although multi-agency approaches are centralised in DA investigations, including Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) and MARAC's, there is variability across police forces in the extent to which multi-agency working is adopted in – or even seeps into – the frontline response. This is an opportunity lost in terms of officers being supported to make a difference. There is further opportunity to consider and innovate as to what a multi-agency first response to DA may incorporate. Some forces already incorporate IDVA's into their frontline response, and there is potential to expand this further and consider how other specialist services could be drawn upon, including support for mental health and substance misuse. However, such approaches are costly and given the current context of austerity noted previously, these suggestions may be difficult to implement in practice. In conclusion, in spite of an ever-changing landscape for the first response officer, the emphasis on the first response providing a window of opportunity to appropriately safeguard, intervene and listen to victim-survivors should remain in sharp focus for all partners involved in safeguarding from DA. In the broader historical and structural context of contemporary policing reform, however, the onus placed on police first responders comes with significant limits, already hindering the likelihood of long-term positive impact on victims' journey to (criminal) justice.

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