

Victim-survivor disengagement from police in domestic abuse cases: who, when and why?

Summary of Findings and Recommendations from Final Research Report

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Abstract

This is a Summary of Findings and Recommendations from the Final Research Report of the Victim-survivor Disengagement Study led by Dr Lis Bates during 2020 and 2023.⁵ This Summary presents new findings from that major mixed-methods study with police in England addressing survivor disengagement from criminal justice in domestic abuse (DA) cases. The research was carried out between 2020 and 2023, led by Dr Lis Bates with colleagues from the Open University and funded by the Centre for Policing Research and Learning at The Open University.

Despite initiatives to improve policing responses over several years, victim-survivor disengagement linked to evidential difficulties remains the most common reason for domestic abuse crimes to “fall out” of the criminal justice system. Outcome 16 cases, where the case was closed due to the victim not supporting further action, accounted for 52% of all domestic abuse crimes closed by police in 2023, over twice as high as this outcome for all crimes the same year.

This Project sought to generate new understanding about how, when and why victim-survivors disengage from police and how, in turn, police officers encourage and interpret victim-survivor engagement. Data relating to 2019 to 2021 was analysed from 88,949 police domestic abuse crimes across seven forces, 140 in-depth police case files, 31 survivor interviews, and focus groups with 15 police officers from three forces.

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⁵ The Full Final Project Report was made available to the Centre for Policing Research and Learning and its partner forces in January 2025.

Our findings confirm that victim-survivor disengagement remains the most common reason for police to close domestic abuse cases, with 58% of the 88,949 crime records showing that the case was closed because the victim was non-supportive of further police action.

Certain victim-survivor and case characteristics were found to statistically significantly influence disengagement rates. Victim-survivors in familial domestic abuse cases were more likely to disengage than intimate partners. Bivariate analysis found the following characteristics to be associated with higher disengagement (causality could not be inferred): victim-survivor *not* being deemed vulnerable by police, male and non-white victim-survivors, a lack of warning markers on the suspect's file for violence or weapons, no recorded suspect mental health issues, female suspects, the victim-survivor and suspect living together, the report to police being made within 24 hours of the incident, the risk level assigned by police being standard (or medium, compared with high), and no arrest being made. Binomial logistic regression on a subset of 13,683 cases (where some variables had to be excluded for missing data) showed the best predictors of victim-survivor disengagement to be: victim-survivors having mental health concerns, victim-survivors with no children, male victim-survivors, first-time reports, reports made within 24 hours of the incident, family member abuse (compared with intimate partner), sexual offences, and no arrest being made.

Uniquely, this study evidences for the first time the scale of victim-survivor disengagement at the very start of the police process – before, at, or just after an initial police response. In 46% of 140 domestic abuse case files examined, victim-survivors did not support further police action from the point of the initial police response. In almost all (74%, n=61) of the 82 case files with the police outcome 16 (victim does not support), victim-survivors disengaged either after making an initial report (17%, n=14) or at the initial police response (57%, n=47), with smaller numbers disengaging after the initial police response but before giving a formal account (15%, n=12) and only 2% (n=2) of outcome 16 cases making it to giving a formal account (statement or interview).

A range of reasons for disengagement are found, which it is proposed can be conceptualised in a dichotomous model. Firstly victim-survivors who disengage because their needs are met – which can be seen as an 'affirmative disengagement'. Secondly those who disengage because they encounter a barrier to supporting further action – which can be seen as 'negative disengagement'.

Interviews with victim-survivors underscore the vital continuing importance of prompt and respectful responses by police to domestic abuse reports reflecting tenets of procedural justice including good communication.

Focus groups with police reveal that both frontline and supervisory officers have some nuanced and clear understandings of what victim-survivors want from them in reporting domestic abuse. Yet police responses are too often hamstrung by practical restrictions – principally too little time and police resources to respond as they and victim-survivors would wish – and perceived constraints (often involving misunderstandings) of positive action policies.

A theory of disengagement is proposed, and recommendations are made to support police practice to target and improve victim-survivor engagement.

Overarching study findings and implications for policing

The following sections set out the **key findings, conclusions and practical recommendations for policing and policy from the Victim Disengagement Study**. A full Final Research Report has been made available to the Centre for Policing Research and Learning at The Open University (the Project funder) and its partner police forces. This Summary document is being published in parallel so learning can be shared more widely.

1. What works for whom and when: characteristics and timepoints influencing disengagement

A key finding of this study is that disengagement is driven by, and therefore looks different according to, key personal and case characteristics. Foremost amongst these is the victim-survivor relationship with the perpetrator; but there are also characteristics that made victim-survivors more likely to disengage which transcended relationship type; and there are cases which drop out at different timepoints in the criminal justice system.

1.1 Relationship characteristics: intimate partner vs familial abuse

Relationship was found to be a key factor in understanding characteristics of those disengaging. Binomial logistic regression found that family member abuse was statistically predictive of disengagement compared with intimate partner abuse when all other variables were held steady. This was borne out in the case file analysis too, where relationship materially affected both when and why victim-survivors disengaged, with familial domestic abuse linked more strongly with early disengagement and having a specific need; and current or ex-partner abuse more linked with barriers to supporting further action, especially fear or intimidation. It does seem to be the case that familial abuse victim-survivors were overall unlikely to support a prosecution when reporting to police.

1.2 Personal and case characteristics

1.2.1 Characteristics that predicted disengagement

Other factors significantly associated in bivariate analysis with victim-survivor disengagement across all cases were:

- the victim-survivor not being deemed vulnerable by police
- male victim-survivors
- non-white victim-survivors
- a lack of warning markers on the suspect's file for violence or for weapons
- no recorded suspect mental health issues
- female suspects
- the suspect being non-white
- the victim-survivor and suspect living together
- the report to police having been made within 24 hours of the incident occurring

- the risk level assigned by police being standard (or medium, compared with high)
- no arrest being made

Binomial logistic regression further explored which variables had the best predictive power to the outcome variable 'victim-survivor disengaged' across all cases. A best fit model (containing 13,683 cases from 3 forces) correctly predicted 65.4% of cases overall, and 67% of cases with the outcome victim-survivor disengaged. With the caveat that some variables had too much missing data to be included in the final model, those variables shown to be predictive of victim-survivor disengagement across all cases in the final model were:

- male victim-survivors
- victim-survivors with mental health concerns
- victim-survivors without children
- first-time reports
- reporting within 24 hours of incident
- family member abuse (compared with intimate partner)
- standard (or medium risk) cases
- sexual offences
- no arrest made

Police themselves identified the following characteristics as being linked to disengagement: repeat or 'revolving-door' victim-survivors, chaotic lives, dependency on the perpetrator (whether financial, alcohol or caring dependency), third-party reports, victim-survivors with children (which they attributed to police reports being made 'just about child contact'), lack of somewhere to escape to (e.g. refuge), and poor previous experiences of the police from the victim-survivor.

1.2.2 Agreement between datasets on which characteristics mattered

A number of factors found to be significant in statistical analysis were straightforwardly supported in the case files and police focus group. Firstly, a higher risk level assigned by police was statistically associated in both bivariate and logistic regression analysis with greater engagement. As outlined above, this may well be reflective of the speedier and more intensive police and non-police interventions and support – including independent advocacy – offered to victim-survivors deemed high risk, rather than anything intrinsic about their case.

Secondly, third party reports were consistently associated across datasets with disengagement – perhaps logical, as it indicates that the victim-survivor themselves did not seek police involvement.

Thirdly, arrest made. Quantitative analysis found that arrest was associated with victim-survivor engagement. Again, this may be underpinned by the risk level and a corresponding quicker and more intensive level of support and help from police and partners, rather than arrest per se – so caution is advised in interpreting this as a strong argument for positive action to arrest in all cases.

Fourthly, it can be seen from across the quantitative data, case file data and police focus group data that is that there is a group of 'non-traditional' cases where victim-survivors who are marginalised on certain characteristics are more likely to disengage. These include cases with male victim-survivors, female perpetrators, younger victim-survivors, non-heterosexual victim-survivors and those with minoritised ethnic heritage. Arguably it could also include victim-survivors with mental health issues. Interviews with male victim-survivors suggested that they worried they would be

disbelieved or dismissed by police. Case files showed that some younger and minoritised ethnic heritage victim-survivors disengaged because they did not want family or community to know. Police focus groups also recognised that marginalised groups were more likely to disengage, but (some officers) put this down to domestic abuse being more ‘normalised’ in certain minoritized ethnic communities.

1.2.3 Inconsistencies between datasets on which characteristics mattered

Other factors found to be significantly statistically associated with disengagement in the statistical analysis of the large quantitative police dataset were found to be more nuanced or contested when examined in case files and/or police focus groups.

Firstly, repeat reports to police seem to have a mixed relationship with disengagement. Quantitative analysis suggested that repeat victim-survivors were more likely to *engage*, whereas police perceived that they were more likely to *disengage*, and to form part of a ‘revolving door’ profile of often chaotic and/or alcohol-dependent victim-survivor and perpetrator dyads. One possible explanation for the discrepancy between datasets is that police tended to only describe current partner cases, whereas case files and quantitative analysis considered the whole range of relationships. Police also focused most on the group they perceived to be the highest volume disengagers, i.e. those ‘revolving door’ or ‘entrenched domestic abuse’ current couples who came in and out of the police, with multiple reports of domestic abuse and often chaotic lives. Early disengagement by this group is supported by the quantitative analysis finding that those reporting within 24 hours of the incident were more likely to drop out. As discussed in Chapter 4, these victim-survivors seem to be the ones most likely to encounter ‘compassion fatigue’ or frustration from the police, and most likely to be targeted for positive action. This in turn makes it harder for these victim-survivors to get procedural justice and to get a victim-led response, which may drive further disengagement. These ‘revolving door’ couples are an important group; but so too are other groups identified in chapters 1 and 2, who police talked about less but who still constitute a large part of the volume domestic abuse disengagers – familial domestic abuse victim-survivors, first time reporters, and those just seeking help or advice.

Secondly, the perceived dangerousness of the perpetrator. Quantitative analysis suggested cases with perpetrators with warning flags for weapons or violence or mental ill health were more likely to engage, as were victim-survivors in cases deemed high-risk by police; yet case file analysis suggested that victim-survivor fear and intimidation in cases with highly dangerous and violent perpetrators was one key driver of disengagement, especially in partner cases. In analysing case files, the team recorded the flags and warning markers formally attached by police to the case file, and also their own analysis of the case history and logs of investigation. It was the perception of the research team that police flags and warning markers often did not accurately capture the risks and dangers identified in the case file, and so these may be at best poor indicators of risk and dangerousness, and at worst give false confidence. As with repeat victim-survivors, there may be a non-linear relationship between perpetrator dangerousness and disengagement, with some victim-survivors being fearful or intimidated into disengaging from police, and others being so concerned for their or others’ safety that criminal justice engagement is seen as their only route to protection. Overall, it was consistently true that cases rated high risk by police remained more engaged – this may reflect that they got a quicker and more intensive criminal and safeguarding response, rather than that high-risk victim-survivors were more likely to engage in and of themselves.

Thirdly, the influence of children. Quantitative analysis and police focus groups found that those with children were more likely to engage; whereas case file analysis found that those with children were more likely to drop out. Police focus group participants perceived that those with children engaged more either because they were using the police to ‘get the upper hand’ in child contact disputes, or because they were fearful that disengagement would look bad to social services. Case files on the other hand identified that victim-survivors with children disengaged more because they were fearful about children’s services involvement. Interviews with victim-survivors reported feeling unfairly judged and dismissed by police as reporting ‘just child contact disputes’. Taken together this perhaps shows that a gulf remains between police and victim-survivors in terms of legitimacy and concern about domestic abuse affecting children, which is driving some victim-survivors to disengage (or engage) when they do not wish to.

Fourthly, victim-survivor vulnerability. Quantitative bivariate analysis found victim-survivor vulnerability to be associated with engagement; whereas logistic regression found victim-survivor poor mental health (a key vulnerability) to be predictive of disengagement. In interviews, victim-survivors often talked about feeling vulnerable and police not always recognising or acknowledging this. As with perpetrator dangerousness, this discrepancy may be in part down to poor accuracy with use of police flags on case files. Previous work (e.g. Walker et al, 2021) has found victim-survivor mental health to be predictive of criminal justice attrition.

Fifthly, suspect mental health. Bivariate quantitative analysis showed that suspects without mental health flags were more associated with disengagement; whereas case files showed that a strong reason for disengagement related to the victim-survivor calling the police in order specifically to seek mental health help for the perpetrator, and not wanting to take further action. Again, this discrepancy may be reflective of poor accuracy with police flags on case files – or perhaps that police do not routinely ask or record about suspect mental health; something that might be improved by recommendations we make in section 5.4 about asking and recording the victim-survivor’s reasons for calling police.

1.3 Timepoints

This study uniquely evidenced the volume and extent of victim-survivor disengagement at the earliest points of their interactions with the criminal justice system. In almost half (46%) of the total 140 domestic abuse case files analysed (with any crime outcome), victim-survivors did not support further criminal action from the point of the initial police response.

Early disengagement is particularly pronounced for outcome 16 crimes. In almost all the 82 outcome 16 case files analysed, victim-survivors either did not engage with police from the very earliest point of initial report (timepoint 1; 17%), or they disengaged *at* the moment of the initial police response (timepoint 2; 57%). Smaller numbers disengaged between initial response and giving a formal account (statement, video interview) (timepoint 3; 15%); and only very few after giving a formal account but pre-charge (timepoint 4; 2%). In a further 7/82 cases (9%) it was not possible to identify the timepoint.

The most common reasons for disengagement at these earliest points were that the victim-survivor was calling for immediate help for themselves (to achieve immediate safety action or de-escalation from police) and/or the perpetrator (e.g. mental health help, especially for family members) or that they wanted help, information or advice. Some victim-survivors had this need for an immediate police response met and then disengaged – this was particularly true for familial cases over partner

cases. Therefore, these victim-survivors could be said to engage until their needs were met, and disengagement could be seen as a chosen or affirmative outcome.

But others did not receive a timely police response (and some waited days or weeks), were driven to disengage by being highly fearful or intimidated by the perpetrator, or received a poor police response, which acted to drive them to disengage from police, and this can be seen as a negative disengagement outcome. Chapter 3 reviews the full range of reasons – both affirmative and negative – for disengagement by each of the four timepoints. Section 5.3 below also describes needs and barriers reasons for disengagement and recommends police responses.

Overall, the rate of attrition of cases at these earliest stages in the criminal justice process proves the concept and need for this research study, namely that in a large quantitative dataset across seven forces, over half of domestic abuse crimes were closed for the primary reason that the victim-survivor did not support a prosecution. This emphasises the important role of police in achieving justice outcomes for victim-survivors of domestic abuse and supports the need for more research focusing on the *pre-charge* stage of the criminal justice process, especially in relation to victim disengagement and withdrawal. It also underscores the serious need for further focus on asking and understanding victim expectations from police, and tailoring responses accordingly.

1.4 Recommendations for policing

Recommendation 1: Segment victim-survivor cohorts – understand which personal characteristics drive disengagement and use this to target engagement interventions. Rather than looking at Outcome 16 disengagement cases as one group, police should segment cases to understand key personal and case characteristics which can influence disengagement and target their interventions accordingly.

- Firstly, disaggregate intimate partner from familial domestic abuse cases and understand that familial cases are overall less likely to want a criminal route and more likely to want help or support for the perpetrator.
- Secondly, understand that disengagement is significantly quantitatively associated with certain reporting and police response characteristics:
 - ✓ Report to police made by a third party.
 - ✓ Report made to police within 24 hours of incident.
 - ✓ Sexual offences (in a domestic abuse context).
 - ✓ Police assigned standard or medium risk (rather than high).
 - ✓ No arrest made.
- Thirdly, understand that disengagement is significantly quantitatively associated with certain personal or case characteristics – but these seem to have a more nuanced relationship, whereby victim-survivors may disengage or not depending on their individual circumstances:
 - ✓ Victim-survivor and perpetrator living together.
 - ✓ Victim-survivor mental health issues identified in police file.

- ✓ First-time reports to police. However, there is also a sizeable group of repeat victim-survivors (especially those in current partner relationships and with 'chaotic' lives e.g. alcohol or drug dependency) who also persistently disengage. We conclude that repeat victimisation can drive both disengagement and engagement.
 - ✓ Perpetrators without warning markers or flags on their police file for violence or weapons. However, there is a group of opposite cases where victim-survivors with perpetrators with these warning markers disengaged more due to fear. We conclude perpetrator violence and dangerousness can drive both disengagement and engagement; but also that these police warning flags often do not capture violence well.
 - ✓ Victim-survivors without children. However, case files and interviews found that children can lead to disengagement due to fear of social services involvement and police judgements that reports are 'just child contact disputes'. We conclude that children can drive both disengagement and engagement.
 - ✓ Victim-survivor not deemed vulnerable by police. However, victim-survivor having mental health issues known to police was statistically associated with disengagement. We conclude that victim-survivor vulnerability and mental health have a complex relationship with disengagement; but also that police vulnerability flags may not always be accurate.
 - ✓ No police-recorded suspect mental health issues. However, case files found that many victim-survivors called police to get mental health help for perpetrators. We conclude that suspect mental health can drive both disengagement and engagement; but also that police may not always know or accurately flag suspect mental health issues.
- Fourthly, understand that disengagement is significantly associated with 'non-traditional' demographic characteristics:
 - ✓ Male victim-survivors.
 - ✓ Younger victim-survivors.
 - ✓ LGBTQ+ victim-survivors (and suspects).
 - ✓ Victim-survivors (and suspects) from minoritised ethnic heritages.

Recommendation 2: Understand that victim-survivor attrition happens at the earliest stages.

Understand that disengagement is happening at the very earliest timepoints. At least three-quarters of victim-survivors in outcome 16 domestic abuse cases disengaged either before or at the point of initial police response (74% of 82 outcome 16 casefiles, rising to 82% of the 75 casefiles where the disengagement timepoint was known). Some of these disengagements can be seen as positive choices (see following sections); but others are due to victim-survivors getting a slow or poor initial police response and losing trust. The importance of a timely police response that sets out actions and options is critical.

Recommendation 3: Work with victim-survivors who *do* engage. Although not the primary focus of this report, police should note that we found that victim-survivors who *are* engaged and support further police action are being lost in domestic incidents which are never crimed, and in domestic abuse crimes with other outcomes, especially 15 (evidential difficulties).

Recommendation 4: Conduct a review of the accuracy of warning, violence, mental health and vulnerability flags applied to victim-survivor and suspect records, as they are inconsistently used

and do not accurately capture risks and dangers. In comparing the flags on person files with the content of notes and records within the linked domestic abuse case records, the research team found that police flags and warning markers frequently did not accurately capture the risks and dangers identified in the case files. Thus such markers may at best be poor indicators of risk and dangerousness, and at worst give false confidence about the victim-survivor's safety and vulnerability.

2. Getting the policing basics right is critical for engagement

As has been found time and again in domestic abuse activism and policing research, despite excellent pockets of police leadership, there remain some fundamental failings which mean not all victim-survivors get a consistent response from police which meets the basic requirements set out in policing policy and guidance. This study has attempted to focus primarily on new learning rather than re-visiting criticisms, but both victim-survivors and police themselves told the Project about policing responses which fell short of basic good practice, and it is important to capture those too. This section 5.2 sets out findings about disengagement which relate to the police response.

2.1 Timely response

Both interviews (Chapters 3 and 4) and case file analysis (Chapter 2) found time delays – both in initial response to a report, and in progressing a criminal case – to be a sizeable barrier reason for disengagement and a major cause of dissatisfaction as reported by victim-survivors. This is in line with existing research. We suggest it is possible that the influence of time delays on victim-survivor disengagement has an even greater effect in cases which end in other outcome codes than Outcome 16, but also that the significance of time delays is generally under-captured in police case files. Rapid Video Response (RVR) where the victim-survivor gets a video call with an officer has been shown to improve engagement and satisfaction in appropriate low-level non-emergency DA cases, and may be useful in some of these early disengagement cases (Rothwell et al., 2022).

2.2 Respectful treatment – procedural justice

Many victim-survivor interviewees (chapter 3) described 'barrier' disengagement reasons as relating to poor experience of the police process or police attitudes. Victim-survivors talked about *how they wanted to be treated* and *how they felt about the police response* as much as *what they wanted police to do*. Of note, they described feeling dismissed or not a priority to police, and poor communication/lack of updates about their case. These have been reported in previous studies, especially on procedural justice, although did not come through the case file analysis presented in Chapter 2, presumably because this perspective can only really come through asking victim-survivors directly about their experiences. This shows how important procedural justice can be for driving disengagement or engagement, which has implications for what police ask victim-survivors and how they record their own, and victim-survivor decision-making, in case files. Again, there is a link here to 'revolving-door' couples where police frustration with repeat reports may contribute to victim-survivors feeling they have not had procedural justice and, in turn, drive further disengagement.

Reasons that victim-survivors remained engaged were even more closely related to procedural justice: being reassured and validated, good individual officers, being given choice and voice, having processes explained and realistic expectations set, and being kept informed.

2.3 Independent advocates for victim-survivors

A core non-police related reason that victim-survivors described for remaining engaged was the value of independent domestic abuse advocates who kept them informed and liaised with police on their behalf. Advocates were described as being instrumental in victim-survivor decisions to remain engaged in the process, even where there were also negative experiences (e.g. time delays). A similar point was also made by victim-survivors on the value of specialist support within the police as well as external to it, with a number of victim-survivors suggesting that there should be dedicated units in the police dealing with domestic abuse and sexual violence.

2.4 Recommendations for policing

- **Recommendation 5: Timely Responses.** Police need to ‘get the basics right’ by responding to domestic abuse reports in a timely way – cases where an initial response was not provided to victim-survivors, even for days or weeks after the report, will lead to victim-survivor disengagement. Forces should monitor and be held accountable for timely initial responses. Use of Rapid Video Response (RVR) and such initiatives, for lower-risk domestic abuse reports, may help achieve this.
- **Recommendation 6: Domestic Abuse Knowledge.** ‘Getting the basics right’ includes first responders having some basic knowledge of coercive control and domestic abuse – implementing the Domestic Abuse Matters programme is key here. Ideally, as suggested by victim-survivors themselves, forces would also implement dedicated domestic abuse units.
- **Recommendation 7: Procedural Justice: Respectful and fair treatment.** The way victim-survivors are treated and experience the police response is key to retaining engagement. If police act on the key procedural justice factors identified in this study by victim-survivors, they will reduce disengagement, namely:
 - Take reports seriously, listen and show empathy (even with repeat victim-survivors).
 - Give victim-survivors options and choices where possible.
 - Set and manage realistic expectations of police and criminal justice system.
 - Where possible, have a single police point of contact for the victim-survivor.
 - Give regular updates. Whilst reducing delays in progressing a case to charge is not in the gift of police alone, police can retain victim-survivor engagement by regular and realistic communication about the progress of their case. The importance of this to survivors cannot be overstated.
- **Recommendation 8: Independent advocates.** Wherever possible, refer victim-survivors to independent domestic abuse advocates, notify advocates of key developments in cases, and involve advocates in supporting victim-survivors through giving statements, evidence and court proceedings. Right 4 under the Victims Code of Practice (2020) states that victims have a right to referral/signposting to support services.

3. Needs and barriers: what victim-survivors want and get from police

Case file analysis and interviews showed that, as well as being driven by personal or case characteristics (section 1), disengagement was driven by what victim-survivors wanted the police to do when they called for help. This section summarises the study's hypothesis that disengagement can be seen as both arising from victim-survivors calling with specific needs (which were met or not met) and from barriers which they encountered in their interactions with the justice system.

3.1 Needs and Barriers: A typology of disengagement

We propose that reasons for disengagement seen in case files can be grouped into two overarching conceptual types: 'needs and barriers'. The former represents cases where the victim-survivor reported to police because they had a specific ask or need which, if met, often meant they did not want further police action. Needs were often about immediate safety or help, and non-criminal justice safeguarding actions. The latter represents cases where there was a barrier to the victim-survivor supporting further action, leading to disengagement when it may not have been what they wished to do.

The 'needs' reasons included: victim-survivor wanting mental health help or support for the suspect, wanting police action to ensure the victim-survivor's immediate safety, de-escalation of a mounting family dispute, wanting to log the incident, have words of advice given to the suspect, or help retrieving belongings. The 'barriers' reasons included: victim-survivor fearful of or intimidated by the suspect, poor police handling (especially delays, minimising and victim-blaming), concern about involvement of children's social care or of criminalising their partner, the report being made in the context of counter-allegations, incidental disclosures, and not wanting family or community to know about abuse.

Overall, victim-survivors who had specific needs from police related highly to disengagements in the case files at timepoints 1 (initial report) and 2 (initial police response); whereas those disengaging due to barriers tended to relate to timepoints 2, 3 (post initial response, pre formal account) and 4 (post formal account, pre charge). Overall, there was a larger range of barriers than of needs, and timepoint 2 had the widest range of different reasons for disengagement.

3.2 Recommendations for policing

- **Recommendation 9: Respond to 'specific need' or 'barrier' reasons for disengagement.** The following table sets out suggested police practice responses to the 'needs' and 'barriers' reasons for victim-survivor disengagement as found in this study.

Specific need	Recommendations for police practice
Victim-survivor wanted help for suspect, especially around mental health (familial domestic abuse)	For lower-level familial cases (especially involving perpetrator mental health concerns), an initial response from police to safeguard the suspect and refer them to appropriate local mental health support can be sufficient. Where a case is high risk, additional action such as arrest or other safeguarding measures may be required.

	Ensure strong referral pathways to local mental health services (we know police often are plugging the gaps). Right 4 under the Victims Code of Practice (2020) states that victims have a right to referral/signposting to support services. Familial domestic abuse victim-survivors were less likely to want or tolerate a criminal justice response – it is still important to ask and record their wishes though.
Victim-survivor wanted police to act quickly to ensure their immediate safety (usually by removing the suspect; partner domestic abuse)	Respond quickly and take action to secure victim-survivor safety in partner cases where they raise immediate safety concerns. These are the cases where positive action including arrest or evidence-led prosecution, and other safeguarding measures such as protection orders, may be best targeted. In a number of cases (but not all), an all-important quick response met the victim-survivor's needs and was a sufficient positive outcome in itself. Assess whether an immediate safeguarding response alone is sufficient alongside risk assessment, especially around repeat and high-risk, controlling partner abuse. Sometimes further safeguarding or criminal justice action will also be required. Police delays, even in making an initial response (sometimes of days or weeks), were a key driver of victim-survivor disengagement – they lost confidence and their need was not met. Consider building victim-survivor requests for immediate safety help in partner cases into call triage and prioritisation decisions (perhaps via the new initiative to put DA experts in police control rooms). This is both because it is an indicator of risk, and because of the opportunity for a quick response in itself to be a positive outcome for some victim-survivors.
Victim-survivor wanted police to de-escalate a situation on the spot (primarily familial domestic abuse)	Attend and de-escalate familial abuse cases involving multi-member family disputes and/or drunk individuals. For many familial domestic abuse reports, attendance to de-escalate was sufficient and the victim-survivor wanted nothing further.
Victim-survivor wanted to log or record the incident only – or words of advice for the suspect (generally these were harassment cases involving family or ex partners)	Listen to and act on the specific ask from victim-survivors who wish only to log an incident or request words of advice. They are making a specific request from police which stops short of formal criminal justice action but relates to having some 'authority' behind the message to the suspect to cease their behaviour. As with de-escalation, police meeting this need can be seen as a positive outcome. This response may not be appropriate in ex-partner cases involving coercive control, stalking or harassment (which can be

	high-risk) or other repeat or high-risk DA cases. Assessment of risk should always be holistic, considering the history and pattern of incidents (not just the current incident). Ask and listen carefully to victim-survivor wishes in terms of <i>what</i> they are reporting and what they want to happen – and not chase incidental disclosures, even if they are for more ‘serious’ crimes.
Victim-survivors wanted help retrieving belongings	Act on the specific ask from victim-survivors who want protection to retrieve belongings. This is a clear and specific need which is often highly meaningful to them. Where police can meet this need it can be seen and recorded as a positive outcome in itself.

Barriers to further engagement	Implications for police practice
Victim-survivor fearful /intimidated /coerced by suspect	Whichever risk assessment tool is used, police should ask about and hone in on fear and intimidation, especially in partner cases. High levels of fear should lead to a higher risk rating and inform prompt action. Listen to what the victim-survivors are saying and research their known or recently-disclosed domestic abuse history. It was plain in a substantial number of case files analysed in this study that the victim-survivor was scared but this did not always translate to a high-risk rating or concerted efforts by police to respond urgently or engage the victim-survivor. Deploy tools to identify the most dangerous and coercive perpetrators – e.g. Recency-Frequency-Gravity (RFG) Matrices, harm indices, serial perpetrator lists. Refer into domestic abuse specialist support (e.g. IDVAs) to try to engage victim-survivors. Consider all tools to protect victim-survivors including protection orders; and, where appropriate, arrest and/or evidence led prosecution. This group is likely to be repeat victim-survivors and there may be a good opportunity to re-engage them even if they disengage at this incident. Try to keep channels of communication open and victim-survivor left feeling supported and believed, even if they disengage at this episode.
Delays in police response meant victim-survivor lost confidence / safety need was not met	Get the domestic abuse policing basics right every time (as outlined in 5.2). It remains so important to respond well: quickly, listen to and believe the victim-survivor, communicate well about next steps, and where possible empower them to choose. Getting

Poor police handling, e.g. minimizing or victim-blaming	this core policing response right keeps victim-survivors engaged. Delays (including to getting an initial response at all) and poor police handling were key reasons for victim-survivor disengagement. Give a timely response – or at least a communication about when and how the victim-survivor can expect a response. As above, Rapid Video Response (RVR) and similar initiatives can help here. Avoid minimising and victim-blaming. In particular, avoid using judgmental language for instance when victim-survivors respond to suspect contact – it is common, and often a way of managing their own safety. Explain the victim-survivor’s choices and options, what happens next, and keep up communication between stages. Avoid police jargon and understand that CJS processes can appear intimidating and complex. Right 3 in the Victims Code of Practice (2020) states that victims have the right to be provided with information on the criminal justice process by police; and Right 6 states that victims have a right to be informed about key decisions. Domestic Abuse Matters training can help improve domestic abuse awareness and response across all levels of a force.
Victim-survivors not wanting to criminalise partner Victim-survivor concern about children’s services involvement	Consider alternatives to criminal routes – e.g. protection orders, civil orders. Do not minimise domestic abuse reports as just ‘parental disputes’. Where children are involved, explain processes and implications clearly to the victim-survivor. For instance, explain that an automatic referral is made where children are present, and what action that might lead to in what circumstances. Use language that reduces the common sentiment of feeling trapped and victim-blamed by social services.
Counter allegations	Be aware that male victim-survivor may be more likely to disengage because they fear that their report (rightly or wrongly) may be seen as a counter-allegation.
Incidental disclosures	Pursue the offence that the victim-survivor is reporting, rather than the incidental disclosure they are not.
Minoritised groups (e.g. younger victim-survivors / minoritized ethnicities) may not want family or community to know	Be aware that some groups of victim-survivors may be more likely to disengage (as discussed in 5.1). Be mindful of victim-survivor personal characteristics and context – consider whether they fit into a group who may be fearful of

	others finding out that they have reported (e.g. younger, BAME, LGBTQ+, those with an honour context). These victim-survivors may need more support or time to engage. They may need extra communication and information at each step. Referrals to specialist support services relevant to the victim-survivor's personal characteristics can help retain engagement.
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4. Ask and record what victim-survivors want from police

The previous section 3 showed the importance of police understanding why victim-survivors report and what they want police to do (or not do). This section reviews whether police currently understand and record what victim-survivors want and makes recommendations accordingly.

4.1 What victim-survivors say they want from police

Some of the most important insights from the victim-survivor interviews were their descriptions of why they called the police and what they expected and wished for the police to do. Around a quarter of interviewees said that they did not know what to expect when they contacted the police. The majority however were able to describe their expectations in calling police, which closely reflected some of the 'needs' reasons for calling police identified in section 3 above: in particular, wanting the perpetrator warned, abuse logged, immediate safety achieved (perpetrator arrested or removed), and help for the perpetrator. There were important additional reasons identified by victim-survivors which did not come through the case files: primarily wanting to feel protected and made safe (whether for themselves or others, e.g. children), wanting support, advice or advocacy, seeking information about the criminal justice process and their options, and wanting to regain control.

4.2 Police understandings of what victim-survivors want

On the whole, police showed nuanced understandings of the range of victim-survivor wishes in calling police. They understood specific victim-survivor needs, the barriers they encountered to supporting further action, and the importance of being victim-survivor led whilst recognising the complexities and ramifications of taking positive action.

In terms of victim-survivor 'needs' from reporting, police picked up on the common need for immediate safety or de-escalation – although tended to associate this with current partner repeat or 'revolving door' reporters, who they said then disengaged.

Police described a range of 'barrier' reasons for disengagement. Almost all mirrored reasons found in case files and interviews. Time delays was identified by police as a critical driver of disengagement – both in terms of the initial police response to the victim-survivor (one gave an example of police only responding three days after the report was made), and in terms of CPS delays to reaching court. domestic abuse and young/young in service officers facing telling older couples how to have a relationship. The criminal justice process 'taking over' was another reason police identified, as was fear/intimidation by the suspect, and not wanting others (e.g. family or community) to know. The one new reason identified by police and not identified in the other datasets was victim-survivors not

having anywhere to go, no decent housing options available, which meant they stayed with the perpetrator.

Police recognised that their role played an important part in victim-survivor decision-making, particularly around the amount of time they had available to spend with the victim-survivor which they felt was insufficient. Many said that if they could increase the time available to respond to each incident it would definitely improve victim-survivors' trust in police and increase engagement. The role of police further affected victim-survivor engagement in terms of officers being increasingly young in age and service which they felt played a particularly important part given the dynamics of relationship abuse.

In terms of the different time points of victim-survivor disengagement, police correctly identified that disengagement was occurring at the earliest points – either upon police arrival, or soon after initial report. This tallies with the case file analysis findings. One possible implication is that there is a cause and effect between officers' perception that most victim-survivors do not want a prosecution and victim-survivor engagement, whereby victim-survivors are put off further engagement as they do not believe police can or wish them to proceed. In frequent repeat cases, this may also be driven by officers' compassion fatigue. Another possible implication is that there is an opportunity for police to offer something more – or at least better explain options and give more consistent information to the victim-survivor – at the point of initial report, to encourage more victim-survivors to remain engaged.

Police were aware of victim-perpetrator control dynamics and how dependency on the perpetrator and being fearful of the perpetrator interacted negatively with victim-survivor engagement. Police also recognised that victim-survivor status in terms of being either high risk and/or repeat victim-survivors impacted differently upon their ability and desire to remain engaged.

Whilst on the whole the police showed good understandings of the range of things that victim-survivors wanted from reporting and reasons why they disengaged, comparison of the police responses with those of victim-survivors and case file analysis shows some gaps in police understanding too. Police did not pick up on victim-survivors often wanting to 'help' the perpetrator, wanting perpetrators to be warned, wanting to log abuse only, and fears over children's services involvement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, although police did identify lack of police time and tired/disinterested officers as a challenge, they did not identify the extent to which victim-survivors reported that poor police responses such as minimizing, victim-blaming or not understanding domestic abuse influenced disengagement. Finally, police did not explicitly show awareness of the level of confusion or lack of expectations that many victim-survivors had at first contact – and the related fact that many victim-survivors contacted police to seek support, advocacy, advice and information about the justice process.

Police emphasis on immediate threat removal led them to conclude that victim-survivors 'hardly ever' wanted a prosecution. Whilst this wish for immediate safety help/threat removal was replicated in the case file analysis and the victim-survivor interviews, there is a potential missed opportunity here for police to engage better and offer something more in terms of protection at first response – especially for intimate partner abuse. There is a risk that over-simplifying that all victim-survivors do not want further action becomes an 'easy way out' for police.

4.3 Police not routinely asking victim-survivors what they want

A key finding from this study is that whilst both victim-survivors and police were fairly well-aligned on their understandings of what victim-survivors want from police, and how this leads to engagement or disengagement, it did not seem to be standard police practice to routinely ask or record what victim-survivors wanted from reporting.

Very few interviewees said police had asked them what they wanted to happen and given them options: one was able to say she wanted no action taken, others wanted criminal justice action but were not given that. Most told us that they were not asked or given options by police. It was clear from these participants that most did not call the police explicitly seeking a criminal justice outcome; instead, they were hoping to feel safer (not necessarily knowing how this could be achieved). As a consequence of not being given options or adequate information on the process, many felt their only option would be criminal action and some felt this would place them at greater risk or put them out of control. In these cases, investigating a crime may lead to the 'help' a victim was hoping for, but this was not guaranteed, and as evidenced in the case files, risk and safety concerns were not always addressed during the police investigation. This shows the importance of police also offering non-criminal justice options.

The fact that most of our interview participants were not asked what they wanted from the police meant that most did not have their expectations fulfilled because they assumed, or were told, that the only option was a criminal justice one. If officers were given the discretion to ask victim-survivors what they wanted and give a greater range of options, this would not only help victims feel listened to, but could lead to greater victim satisfaction if their expectations were fulfilled.

The evidence gathered in this study demonstrates why not asking victim-survivors about their wishes and expectations, and not capturing whether or not they choose to disengage and why, is damaging:

- Police often inferred disengagement, rather than explicitly asking the victim-survivor if they wanted to disengage or were disengaging.
- Disengagement was often passive and informal (e.g. not returning police calls) rather than active or formal (e.g. retraction statements).
- Police did not routinely ask or record victim wishes from reporting, and whether they supported further action at the start of the case e.g. at initial police response.
- Police further did not routinely ask or record victim wishes at case closure or confirm that they were choosing to disengage at case closure.
- Police told us in focus groups that they often knew already what victims wanted, or that did not want to ask what they wanted as they feared they couldn't meet those expectations or felt that wishes were irrelevant as they were expected to take positive action or be evidence-led.
- Analysis of case files closed outcome 16 found little evidence that they were wrongly closed and that the victim-survivor in fact supported further action – yet in victim-survivor interviews very few described disengaging. This might be because these represent two different cohorts of victim-survivors, but might also indicate that police are not confirming and recording victim wishes in closing cases.

- As we suggest in this study, there are a lot of domestic abuse cases where the victim-survivor had specific needs which could be positively met by police. These victim-survivors may choose to disengage as a clear and active choice, but not asking or recording victim wishes on case closure means that this choice is not captured and the disengagement continues to be seen as a negative outcome.
- Some victim-survivors may be open to 're-engagement' – without capturing wishes and choices around disengagement, police cannot identify whether they may be open to future re-engagement.

Victim-survivors who were satisfied with the police response were those where the police had met their expectations (which were not necessarily related to a criminal justice outcome). Yet in our research, the majority of victim-survivors were not asked what they wanted from police involvement, suggesting there is little chance that their expectations will be met if they are not even asked what they are.

4.4 Recommendations for policing

- **Recommendation 10: Explain options and processes to victim-survivors at initial response.** Make it standard police practice to give victim-survivors information on police, criminal justice and safeguarding processes and options at initial response. This was not happening as standard in the cases reviewed, and victims interviewed, for this project. This recommendation is supported by Right 3 in the Victims Code of Practice (2020) which requires police to provide information on the criminal justice process. We propose forces do this by developing a standard Domestic Abuse Information & Options Sheet which can be used by first responders.
- **Recommendation 11: Ask and record victim-survivor wishes at first response.** Police should routinely *ask* victim-survivor wishes and expectations from reporting to police at the first response and *record* the answer in the Case Log. This was not routinely happening. We propose police use a Victim Expectations Proforma for capturing this. A draft Proforma is at Annex A – we will consult with partner forces on this draft document, but include it so that other forces can use it as a template if they wish.
- **Recommendation 12: When closing a case, check and record that victim-survivor is actively choosing to disengage.** At case closure, routinely check that victim-survivors are choosing to disengage, tell them the outcome code their case is being given, ask and record their reason for disengaging in the police case file. We propose using a Victim Disengagement proforma for police to use and save in the final decision case log. A draft proforma is at Annex B – we will consult with partner forces on this draft document, but include it so that other forces can use it as a template if they wish.
- **Recommendation 13: Communicate that a final decision is NFA due to victim disengagement to victim-survivors.** Right 6 in the Victims Code of Practice (2020) states that victims have a right to be told the reason for a final decision. Police could use a version of

the 'NFA letters' used to communicate CPS decisions to take no further action in RASSO cases to communicate to victim-survivors final police decisions to NFA relating to disengagement.

- **Recommendation 14: Replace police Outcome code 16 with new codes which disaggregate disengagement.** This study concludes that Outcome 16 is too broad and conflates many different profiles, circumstances, victim choice (or lack of) and victim satisfaction (or lack of) regarding disengagement. That has led to all disengagement and Outcome 16 cases being lumped together and seen as negative. At the same time it has perpetuated a lack of understanding of when and why disengagement happens and whether it is a positive or negative choice. We recommend that Outcome 16 be replaced with codes which capture: timepoint of disengagement; whether it was an affirmative (needs met) or negative (needs not met) disengagement; and whether it was formal or informal disengagement (e.g. withdrawal vs not responding to police contact).

Implementing Recommendations 10-14 should support police to better understand their profile of disengagement in domestic abuse cases, reasons and timepoints for disengagement and thus target victim-survivor support, criminal action and safeguarding more efficiently. Recommendations 10-13 could be promoted by the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC as best practice; and HMICFRS could consider reviewing forces' implementation of these recommendations as part of their inspections.

5. Policing targets, context and resourcing

Police showed good understandings of the importance of being victim-led, but explained that they could not always act on what the victim-survivor wanted – either because of the requirements of police policies and guidance (e.g. positive action to arrest or to build an evidence-led prosecution case even if the victim-survivor did not support further action), because of a lack of time or resources, because it was not in their power to do so, or, sometimes, because they felt the victim-survivor was wrong (e.g. they had not understood the risk they were at and therefore needed persuading or acting on behalf of). One consequence of all these constraints was that police felt less inclined to ask victim-survivors what they wanted or offer options, as they felt they would raise expectations that they may not be able to meet.

5.1 Practical constraints: police time and resources

Police described that the most significant challenge to meeting victim-survivor needs was a chronic lack of police time available to each domestic abuse case to build proper rapport, persuade the victim-survivor to trust them, or make adequate risk assessments. This was a source of deep frustration for police, who in the main really wanted to do better by victim-survivors and understood a lot of what would aid that in terms of trust-building, listening and reassurance, but were being allocated only short time slots to respond to each domestic abuse incident due to high volume of domestic abuse reports and chronic under resourcing of police. There was a real and tangible effect of the police knowing what they needed to do yet not being able to do it. This risks having a knock-on effect on the service they deliver - i.e. one laden with frustration or compassion fatigue. A second practical challenge was identified as young in age or young in service (i.e. inexperienced) police

officers (relating to the uplift), and a third challenge was described as tired or uninterested officers, especially when picking up a new domestic abuse report at the end of a long shift.

All these practical challenges speak to a lack of support and resources within policing to properly respond to domestic abuse reports and do the work necessary to improve victim-survivor engagement, rather than a lack of understanding or interest on the part of the police involved. It is encouraging that police proactively identified that their response as an institution often has the power to influence victim engagement – both negatively and positively.

5.2 Scope constraints: what is outside police jurisdiction

A further challenge for policing was victim-survivors wanting action or support from them that was not in their gift to provide. One example is the significant impact that time delays in progressing a case had on victim-survivor disengagement: whilst some delays (e.g. to initial response or in progressing investigation) are within police control, decisions to charge are in the jurisdiction of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

Another example of scope constraints was victim-survivors wanting safeguarding, advice or support action from police that they felt they could not, or were not best placed, to give. This included things like help or advice around mental health (the perpetrator's or theirs). In some cases, police were able to refer or signpost to other partners for support, where that support was available.

5.3 Policy constraints: victim-survivor led vs positive action

Clear challenges came through the police focus groups about the inherent tension between positive action and evidence-led prosecutions policies and being victim-survivor led. There were differences in understanding between the College of Policing policy on positive action, the interpretation of senior/specialist officers and of frontline officers.

The College of Policing guidance states that:

“Police officers have a duty to take positive action when dealing with domestic abuse incidents. Often this means making an arrest, provided the grounds exist and it is a necessary and proportionate response. Officers must be able to justify the decision not to arrest in those circumstances.” “Never ask the victim if they want the suspect arrested. That is your decision”. (CoP, 2018)

Senior and specialist officers in focus groups were of the view that the police response should be victim-survivor led:

The whole system is designed to identify what the victim-survivor wants and help give them options. (Detective Inspector)

In contrast, frontline officers seemed to feel more constrained by what they perceived the policy and guidance on positive action to be:

But we have to record it and act on it – there is no choice where we are going with it. (Frontline officer)

It was clear from these focus group discussions that there were some differences in understanding around what ‘positive action’ meant, especially amongst frontline officers, seemingly arising from the College of Policing wording around not asking the victim-survivor’s views on arrest. This was leading frontline officers in particular to feel unempowered to ask victim-survivors about what they wanted or interpreting that they could not be victim-survivor led. There is a real and tangible effect of the police knowing what they need to do yet not being able to do it which has a knock on effect on the service they deliver- i.e. one laden with frustration.

5.4 Recommendations for policing and government

- **Recommendation 15: Central and local government and police commissioners must resource police properly to respond to, and prioritise, domestic abuse.** This study has found unequivocally that police are chronically under-resourced to respond to this high-volume, high-harm crime. Instituting Violence Against Women and Girls as a strategic policing priority may help, but for domestic abuse, there remains insufficient policing time made available especially to respond quickly and sensitively at initial response, which is so vital for victim-survivor engagement and protection; and to do the all-important ongoing communication piece with victim-survivors. Recommendations in this report aim to identify cases where disengagement and case closure can be a positive and quick outcome, which should free up some police resource for those wanting and needing an ongoing police response.
- **Recommendation 16: Police supervisors should empower frontline officers to interpret positive action policies in a more varied manner, moving away from the interpretation that positive action only means arrest.** To increase the positivity felt by victim-survivors *and* police officers, police forces should encourage and specify a broader understanding of what positive action can entail. This might include taking action other than arresting the offender – such as referral or signposting to independent advocates, mental health services, immediate removal of the perpetrator (e.g. via breach of the peace, or a DAPN/O or (forthcoming) DAPN/O).
- **Recommendation 17: Actively manage victim-survivor expectations of policing, both process and outcomes.** Where police cannot provide what the victim-survivor wants (whether for scope or practical constraints), or is not best placed to do so, police should be clear and honest about limits to their ability to take action. On the whole victim-survivors welcomed where police had done this, provided it was communicated with clarity and empathy.

6. Towards a theory of disengagement

6.1 Affirmative and Negative Disengagement

Based on the categorisation of reasons why victim-survivors disengaged in this study into ‘needs’ and ‘barriers’, we propose a working theory of disengagement around two groups:

(1) 'Affirmative disengagement'. Victim-survivors had specific needs or wishes from engaging with police – primarily for safeguarding, information or advice – and these needs were met. The victim-survivor never or no longer wished to pursue criminal justice action. This group accounted for many of the victim-survivors found in the case files to have disengaged at or shortly after initial response, at timepoints 1 or 2, (which was the majority of all victim-survivors with code 16). These disengagements could be viewed as a positive choice. Victim-survivors here could be described as disengaging for these reasons:

- They received immediate help/safety e.g. removal of perpetrator;
- They got immediate de-escalation of the situation;
- They received protection (e.g. safeguarding action, order);
- They only wanted to log what happened, and it was logged;
- They received advice or support;
- They received help for the perpetrator;
- They received a positive / empathetic / empowering response from the police which they were satisfied with.

(2) 'Negative disengagement'. Victim-survivors **either** faced barriers to supporting further action which caused them to withdraw support at different times in the process; **and/or** had specific needs and wishes from reporting which were unmet. Barriers or unmet needs might relate to the victims' personal characteristics or circumstances, or to their experiences of the policing process – in particular poor police handling and/or delays. These negative disengagements occurred at timepoints 2, 3 and 4, meaning that they disengaged throughout the criminal justice process – but they accounted for all the later-stage disengagements. These disengagements can be seen as a negative outcome, and one which the victim-survivor frequently did not choose. Victim-survivors could be described as disengaging for these reasons:

- Disclosure was inadvertent and the victim-survivor never wanted police action taken;
- They wanted a charge brought, but did not get one (or, the incident was not crimed);
- They were fearful/intimidated/coerced by the perpetrator;
- They received poor interpersonal treatment by police e.g. disbelief, minimised, victim-blaming, lack of empathy, officers not understanding abuse, judging victim for alcohol use or lifestyle;
- They had a poor experience of the criminal justice system, e.g. delays, intrusive lines of enquiry, no communication; negative impact on their mental health;
- They had negative previous experiences of reporting to police (e.g. inaction, feeling judged).

This working theory of disengagement is intended as an aide to re-frame how disengagement is seen and as a guide for how police might act to understand and improve negative disengagement reasons, to approach uncertain disengagement, and to understand how affirmative disengagement can be recognised and acted upon. It is not intended to be prescriptive nor to be used to predict how victim-survivors can and should be expected to act following police reports, nor – critically – to limit

what police and agencies offer victim-survivors. It should never be assumed that victim-survivors do not want further police action, nor should police attempt to triage them based on their personal characteristics or predicted engagement. This is about putting victim-survivors at the core of decision-making – empowering them by asking, listening, giving information and options, checking understanding, and recording their wishes.

6.2 Recommendations for policing and government

- **Recommendation 18: Fundamentally re-frame disengagement and criminal justice attrition away from being a failing.** Rather, some disengagement can be seen as affirmative, when victim-survivors disengage because their needs are met, safety achieved or help provided. Whilst police should always inform victim-survivors about their options and use professional judgment about offering further action, we conclude that criminal attrition should not unequivocally be assumed to be bad.
- **Recommendation 19: Following this, de-stigmatise the concept of disengagement in policing.** De-stigmatising disengagement will allow police to discuss it with victim-survivors from the point of initial response, to ask and understand the reasons why victim-survivors disengage, acknowledge affirmative disengagement, and make police officers feel more positive about the work they do with victim-survivors in getting them their desired outcomes.
- **Recommendation 20: Policy-makers should re-think language and targets around disengagement.** Rather than blanket criticism of disengagement and attrition and targets to reduce them, police should instead be held to account for ‘meaningful outcomes’ for victim-survivors.
- **Recommendation 21: Stop judging victim-survivors for disengaging.** Perhaps as a consequence of being under pressure to reduce disengagement, police often judged or criticised victim-survivors for disengaging, especially in the words used in case file notes and sometimes to victim-survivors directly. This can directly reinforce their unwillingness to engage with police again in future. Yet this currently happens in a context with no meaningful understandings of when, why and whether victim-survivors do disengage (as highlighted in this study). Police should avoid judging or criticising them for disengagement – both in terms of how they speak to victim-survivors directly about their decisions, and how police write *about* them in case files.

7. Further research

Further primary research in this field would benefit from exploration of police decision-making processes and subsequent actions also as these are likely to be interrelated with victim-survivor decision-making in complex and nuanced ways. As well, matching case files and victim-survivor interviews in the same cases would be valuable, to allow comparison of victim-survivor and police perspectives and actions.

8. Overall Conclusion: Re-frame Disengagement

Victim-survivor disengagement and withdrawal continue to be seen by policing and policy-makers as a 'dirty secret', a negative outcome to be avoided and reduced. We propose that a fundamental re-think is required. This study has found that there are multiple and nuanced reasons why victim-survivors disengage; that key to addressing disengagement is better understanding victim-survivors' reasons for reporting in the first place and their wishes from police (which can be understood in a framework of needs and barriers), and that personal and case characteristics also make some more likely to disengage. All this points to the conclusion that not all disengagement is negative – instead, some early disengagements and withdrawals *can* be positive decisions. In some cases police already recognise this and provide a quick, non-criminal justice response and meaningful outcome for victim-survivors. These need to be reframed as positive outcomes. In other cases, disengagement is involuntary and unwanted and unsafe for victim-survivors, especially where there is high fear and controlling abuse: these are the cases on which police and policy-makers must focus their efforts and resources. Adopting the recommendations in this report and fundamentally re-framing disengagement can free up police resources, time, effort and energy to focus on those victim-survivors who want and need more from police and partner agencies.

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Annexes

Annex A: Victim Expectations Proforma (draft)

This draft proforma is suggested for use by forces at first response to domestic abuse reports. Responding officers should routinely ask and record domestic abuse victim-survivor wishes and expectations at this point and record the answer in their Case Log.

- 1. Why is the victim-survivor reporting to police?**
- 2. Does the victim-survivor know what they want police to do?**
- 3. What is that? (ie. what do they want police to do?)**
- 4. Are there any barriers preventing the victim-survivor supporting further police action (e.g. previous poor experience, fear)**

Annex B: Victim Disengagement proforma (draft)

This draft proforma is suggested for routine use by forces at case closure for any domestic abuse crime being closed Outcome 14 or 16. It could also be used at closure of any non-crime incident. It is intended to support the officer closing the case to:

- Check that the victim-survivor *is* disengaging
- Tell them the outcome code their case is being given
- Ask and record their reason for disengaging

Please complete sections 1 to 5 below.

1. Has the victim confirmed they want to disengage?

- Yes/ No/ Don't Know (if don't know, why?)

2. Have you told the victim that their case is being recorded as Victim Does Not Support? (i.e. outcome 14 or 16)

- Yes/ No/ Don't Know (if don't know, why?)

3. What is their reason for disengagement? (where possible, ask the victim – if that's not possible, say why and record your view on the reason – but make clear it's a police view)

3a) Victim answer or Police answer (select one)

3b) Disengagement reasons (tick all that apply)

Needs met reason

- Never wanted police involvement – didn't report themselves
- Wanted perpetrator removed and they were
- Wanted perpetrator warned and they were
- Wanted help for perpetrator and got it
- Wanted other safeguarding, and got it (please specify what)
- Wanted help from a non-police advocate and got it
- Only wanted incident logged
- Wanted help getting belongings back and got it
- Other – please specify ...

Barrier reason

- Unhappy with police response (please specify why....)
- Time taken for initial police response too long
- Time taken to progress case to charge too long
- Afraid of perpetrator if pursue criminal case
- Reunited with perpetrator
- Didn't want children's social care involved
- Didn't want to prosecute child's father

- Poor previous experience with police
- Don't want others to find out (anyone in particular e.g. parents, friends, school)
- Police saw report as false or counter allegation
- Other – please specify ...

3c) What is the one most significant reason of those ticked above?

4. Victim feelings about disengagement (*ask victim*)

- Positive outcome / Negative outcome (*pick one*)
- (Optional): Why?

5. Timeline of police stage disengagement (*police to complete – circle one*)

