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Operation Soteria Bluestone

Rape and sexual assault survivors' experience of the police in England and Wales

Survey Report I: January – June 2023

Katrin Hohl, Abigail-Kate Reid, Sarah Molisso, and Merili Pullerits

City, University of London

Published: September 2023

"I feel unheard, unvalued and unimportant."

"Talking about it still upsets me, but I was fully supported by the police at the time, which made so much difference to me, for the rest of my life!"

"Police have caused me untold mental health distress. If Police listened earlier my life would not have been made a living nightmare." [sic]

"It saddens me that someone else went through it because the police dismissed mine so quickly."

"I would rather be assaulted 1000 times over than go through the police process again"

"I wish I knew this officers name or badge number because she was incredible and honestly saved my life." [sic]

"I hope by sharing my overall positive experience of [police force] will aspire other forces to strive for this too. [...] It can be done! [...] Compassion, kindness and integrity goes a long way!"

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the survivors for their time and courage in completing this survey. We cannot put into words the gratitude and humility we felt when reading every survey entry, knowing that someone somewhere had gifted us with their knowledge from lived experience, and trusted us with their story. Many expressed that they are contributing to this research in the hope that doing so could improve things for others.

Our ambition in designing this survey was that it would enable anyone completing it to convey whatever they wanted to say about their police experience. The core aim of the survey report is to contribute to survivor voices being heard and acted upon within policing. To all survivors who completed this survey: thank you for trusting us with your response, we hope that you know how much your contribution means to us and that we have done your survey response justice.

We sincerely thank victim support organisations, police forces, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Victims' Commissioner's Office, and individuals for raising awareness of the survey through their websites, social media or in some other way – survivors would not have found the survey without you doing so. It takes courage and humility for police forces to actively seek out survivor feedback, and we commend all forces who are promoting the survey.

The survey was developed over the course of 18 months with the generous input of survivors, those supporting and advocating for survivors, officers, and academic colleagues. We are indebted to South Wales Police and the New Pathways ISVA Service for piloting an earlier version of this survey and the Safe Link ISVA service in Avon & Somerset for the cognitive testing of this questionnaire with their clients. We thank the dozens of sector organisations, police forces, and individuals who have provided valuable feedback on the questionnaire and the survey methodology as it went through its countless iterations and our sector consultation group. A special thank you to Duncan Smith, Helen Whittle and her team, David Lewis, James Kent, Amy Thomas, and Phil Sparrow.

We are indebted to Dr Olivia Smith, Dr Bethany Jennings, Dr Susan Hillyard, Dr Rosa Walling-Wefelmeyer, Dr Kelly Johnson, Dr Oona Brooks-Hay, Sophie Geoghan-Fittal, and the wider Operation Soteria Bluestone academic team for helpful comments on the early versions of the survey questionnaire, and to Sidney Marie Chin for operational support.

Acknowledgement of funding

This survey is funded by the Home Office as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone.

Content warning

Please note that this report makes recurring reference to sexual violence, domestic abuse, and suicide which some readers may find distressing.

If you are affected, you can find a list of support organisations and their contact details in the [help](#) section at the end of the report.

Suicide is preventable. Help is available from the [Samaritans](#) and other support services.

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About the survey

This report documents the findings of an [ongoing online survey](#) of survivors of rape and sexual assault and their experiences of the police in England and Wales as part of [Operation Soteria Bluestone](#). It contains the voices of the 1,968 survivors with police experience who completed the survey between 16 January – 30 June 2023. A further 190 survivors whose cases are not known to the police shared insights into why they chose not to report.

Key findings

The police experience is often life changing

1. **Police impact on survivors' lives:** The way police interact with survivors and approach their cases can be life changing. Survey respondents detailed how officers have protected them from further sexual violence or abuse, and some provided moving accounts of officers treating them with tremendous kindness, empathy, and care, and of officers going above and beyond to ensure a thorough investigation and to secure a conviction. Some survivors said this saved their lives. These respondents expressed deep gratitude to the officers. Sadly, they were a minority.

Three out of four of the nearly 2,000 survivors who completed this survey said that their mental health has worsened as a direct result of what the police did, or failed to do, in their case. More than half of respondents reported a negative impact on their physical health because of their police experience. Respondents told us about the perpetrator continuing to offend against them or others because the police did not take their report seriously. Some had suicidal feelings and have made suicide attempts. Many felt deep regret for having trusted the police with their case and wished they had never reported the crime. Some have not reported again even though the sexual abuse is ongoing. Some concluded that the police experience harmed them more than the sexual violence that brought them to the police in the first place.

Suicide is preventable. Help is available from the [Samaritans](#) and other support services.

2. **"I don't feel safe or taken seriously or supported":** Survivors' judgements of and trust in the police are shaped by whether officers treat them with procedural fairness.¹ Only 37% of respondents said that officers made them feel like they mattered and 37% that officers mostly/always took their needs into account. 42% of respondents did not feel believed, only half of respondents felt officers were

always/mostly respectful and kind, and 26% that officers understood what it was like for them. 31% of respondents said they did not always feel safe in the presence of the officers. Police officers cannot control the criminal justice outcome of a case, but they can control how they treat survivors: treating survivors with kindness, dignity, and respect (including respecting victim rights and needs) goes a long way in improving survivor experiences of and trust in the police.

3. ***“I always think if they’d tried harder with me it wouldn’t have happened to her”:***

Police acting to stop perpetrators and safeguard survivors is crucial. The findings show that the most common reason for reporting to the police is to stop the perpetrator from offending again. Yet, only 14% of respondents said they felt safer as result of what the police did, whilst 39% said they felt less safe, and 29% said there was no change in their safety. Of the respondents who withdrew their complaint, 45% said that police protecting them from the perpetrator would have enabled them to continue with their case. Police inaction has meant that some perpetrators have further subjected their victims to harassment, stalking, assaults, and sexual abuse, sometimes for years. Some survivors told us how the police ‘doing nothing’ in their case had empowered their perpetrator and assured them that there were no consequences to fear for their actions. Some survivors reported that their perpetrator has gone on to sexually offend against others.

4. ***“I can confidently say I will never be contacting the police for help again”:***

Survivor experiences impact on their willingness to report further sexual offences or other crimes to police in the future.² Half of respondents said that they have lost trust in the police because of what the police did, or failed to do, in their case. 56% of respondents said they are unlikely to report a rape to the police (again). Some of the survivors disclosed that they had been raped again since their report but have not reported this to the police. These respondents said that they have stopped reporting to the police because they fear the police more than they fear the perpetrator, even when the sexual abuse is still ongoing. This finding suggests that as a result of traumatic police experiences, some survivors have de-facto lost access to what should be a universal public service available to all – being able to call the police when in danger.

Inequalities in police experience

5. **Ethnicity:** The survey reached too few Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) respondents to enable differentiated analysis beyond a crude White/BME distinction. Black and Minority Ethnic survivors' experience of the police was significantly worse than that of White survivors across many indicators. For example, Black and Minority Ethnic survivors were less likely than White respondents to feel like the police had looked at all the evidence, made them feel comfortable, or made them feel like the rape or sexual assault was not their fault.
6. **Relationship to perpetrator:** The relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator significantly impacts survivors' police experiences. Survivors of intimate partner sexual violence by current partners consistently reported the poorest experiences with the police compared to other relationship types. For example, survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence were less likely to feel like their needs were considered and were less likely to say they would report sexual offences again in the future, compared with survivors of familial sexual abuse or those assaulted by complete strangers. Reasons for reporting to the police also differed by survivor-perpetrator relationship, with reporting for personal safety and 'telling, not reporting'³ more prevalent where the perpetrator was a current or former intimate partner.
7. **Autistic survivors and survivors with a physical disability:** Autistic survivors and survivors with a physical disability reported poorer experiences with the police compared to respondents who were not autistic or did not have a physical disability. Free-text responses by survivors with disabilities further supported the existence of inequalities in police experience. Some respondents said the officers in their case lacked understanding of certain conditions and its impacts, and some reported that their accessibility needs, and other additional needs had not been met.
8. **Independent victim support:** Survivors who wanted to be supported by an independent support worker, such as an ISVA (Independent Sexual Violence Adviser) but did not receive that support have a significantly poorer police experience compared to respondents who were being supported by an independent victim support worker. This finding was consistent across all indicators of police experience. A lack of availability of independent victim support is also a driver of victim withdrawal, with one in three respondents who have withdrawn saying that having access to a support worker and/or mental health support could have helped them carry on with the case.

Change is possible: what police forces can do now

9. **Survivor experiences in the past three to six months tend to be more positive:**

Respondents whose case had only come to police attention in the last six months or who had contact with police in the past three months reported, on average, significantly better experiences across survey indicators. This could be an early indication of the police response to rape and other sexual offences improving. Equally, this statistical finding may be partly or wholly the result of survivor experiences in the initial stages of the investigation tending to be more positive than in later stages of the process. It is common for police communication and progress in the case to slow down with long periods of inactivity after the initial weeks of the investigation are completed. The survey has not been in the field long enough to allow testing the extent of which this statistical finding is explained by the former or the latter, or a combination of both. The survey is ongoing until June 2024 and such analyses are planned for the 2024 survey report.

10. **Getting the basics right makes a huge difference to survivors:** Survivor experience of the police and future willingness to report were significantly better in cases in where officers had covered the basics. Specifically, where officers:

- i. offered a referral to independent victim support (and where an independent victim support worker was available to those who wanted this support)⁴
- ii. told survivors about their victims' rights⁵
- iii. did things to protect the survivor from the suspect⁶
- iv. looked at all the evidence⁷

When none of these steps were taken only 22% of respondents were willing to report again. This rises, on average, by 16 percentage points for any one of these actions taken and continues to increase, on average, by this amount with every additional action. 85% of survivors who had all four actions taken in their case said they would report a sexual offence (again) in the future.

11. **Procedural fairness is entirely within policing's gift to give:** The principles of procedural fairness include officers giving survivors some agency in what is happening in their case, listening to survivors, and treating survivors fairly, with kindness, dignity and respect.⁸ Amongst respondents who have withdrawn from the investigation, when asked what, if anything, would have made them continue, the most common response was *'more kindness and understanding from officers'* (49%). Treating survivors with respect includes good communication and taking survivors' needs into account. This is particularly important given 64% of respondents

reported to have at least one of the following: disability, learning difficulty, neurodiversity (including autism), mental health or other condition. No matter the criminal justice outcome of a case, how officers treat survivors is within policing's gift to give. Every police force can take steps to ensure officer interactions with survivors consistently adhere to the principles of procedural fairness.⁹

12. **Context-led engagement with survivors and context-led investigations:** In the free-text some survivors shared that they felt officers did not understand the nature of sexual offending that takes place in the context of marriages or long-term relationships. Others remarked how they felt officers did not understand how sexual offending impacts on them as male, autistic, gay, or disabled survivors, and that officers did not know how appropriately engage with them, or how this was relevant context to the sexual offending. This underlines the importance of officers taking the context of the victim, suspect and victim-suspect relationship into account when interacting with survivors and within their investigations.¹⁰
13. **Officers who perpetrate or condone sexual violence must be removed:** In the free-text comments 27 respondents disclosed that their perpetrator was a serving police officer at the time of the offence. Three perpetrators were still allowed to join the force despite the rape or sexual assault report made against them. Some of the survivors were serving officers themselves when they were raped or sexually assaulted by another officer in the force. Police perpetrated sexual violence impacts on all survivors: in the free-text response many respondents alluded to police forces tolerating or even protecting sex offenders in their ranks and felt this was directly relevant to their personal experience of the police not taking their report seriously, and not treating them with empathy, dignity, and respect.

Introduction

Aims and context

This survey aims to document how survivors of rape and sexual assault experience the police. It aims to contribute to the Operation Soteria Bluestone effort of transforming rape and serious sexual offences investigations in England and Wales. It is a tool for learning for police forces, of measuring, understanding, and reflecting on survivor experiences with a view to acting upon these findings in order to improve how police interact with survivors, and investigate what happened to them.

Key sources to find out more about Operation Soteria Bluestone: there is a [short summary](#), a [research report](#) and the [National Operating Model](#) for rape and serious sexual offences.¹¹

How to read this report

The data collected by the survey are extensive and rich. We did not want any of it to be diminished, which has resulted in a long report.

The main body of the report contains the high-level findings and outlines key differences between groups of survivors and their experiences with the police. All tables as well as a large range of additional tables with detailed breakdowns by case and respondent characteristics are provided in the Data Appendix in an effort to make as much of the survey findings as possible accessible to the wider public. We have included free-text quotes from survivors throughout the report to illustrate and contextualise some of the findings of the closed survey questions. All free-text quotes are included in their original form with no changes to spelling or grammar.

Terminology

This report uses the term 'survivor' throughout, recognising the empowering effect it can have, and in recognition and thanks to survivors who took the time to contribute to this study. The only use of 'victim' will be alongside established phrases such as 'victim withdrawal', 'victim support organisations', etc, or when quoting other reports and texts. The report also uses the term 'perpetrator' rather than 'suspect' or 'offender' because this report is about survivor perspectives. The terms 'suspect' or 'offender' are terms used when writing from a criminal justice system perspective. The survey asked about rape and sexual assault, and at times we summarise this as 'sexual violence' in the report.

Methodology

Sampling and dissemination

This ongoing survey is for people whose rape or sexual assault is known to a police force in England and Wales. For research ethics reasons, respondents must be aged 18 or over when they fill in the survey. The survey is advertised by police forces and victim support organisations and participants self-select into the survey. This is a large survey with around 2,000 eligible responses collected during the January - June 2023 period. However, the large sample size does not make it a representative survey. This means we cannot generalise from the findings of this survey to the experience of all rape and sexual assault survivors whose case has come to the attention of an English or Welsh police force.

The survey is not representative because we did not use a probability sampling method to select and recruit survey participants. Instead, we aimed to advertise the survey as widely as possible for survivors to become aware of it and to complete it if safe for them to do so. Probability sampling would have required identifying and contacting eligible respondents, for example by using victim data held on police systems to contact survivors or a very large population survey far exceeding the budget of this survey. We know that directly contacting survivors about the survey via text, email or phone may have put some at risk (for example, if the perpetrator is their current partner and may be monitoring their calls, texts, mail, or email).

Probability sampling methods decide through a randomisation process who is included in the survey, and conversely, who is excluded - at random. It was important to us that any survivor aged over 18 years old whose case has come to the attention of a police force in England or Wales would have the opportunity to have their experience heard and included. The reason for excluding those aged under 18 at the time of the survey is due to the ethical requirements of the research as set by City, University of London. This survey has received ethics approval from the Department of Sociology Ethics Committee, City, University of London, reference ETH2223-0383 and ETH-2223-21334 for its extension into 2024.

The survey went live on 16 January 2023, is still live and currently planned to remain open until the 30 June 2024. The findings presented in this report pertain to the first (roughly) six-month period of the survey: January to June 2023.

The survey link and supporting materials were distributed to a mailing list of police contacts and sector partners that had expressed interest in the promotion of the survey in December 2022. The supporting materials included: a suggested text to

be put on websites, suggested tweets which included the hashtag #OpSoteria, two leaflets/posters (one of which was made to be dyslexic-friendly), the link to the live survey, a QR code to the live survey, and later on the City, University of London logo for promoters to use to differentiate this survey from other police surveys. Sector partners were offered £300 for their help in promoting the survey to cover printing and staff costs, and they, along with police partners, were offered City, University of London's printing and postal services to order the leaflets/posters.

We tracked as best we could the online impact of the survey and where it was advertised. In the period January – June 2023, seven fixed search terms were used to track the online promotion of the survey:

- i. tinyurl.com/1experiencesurvey
- ii. Soteria + Survey + Victim
- iii. Police + Survey + Soteria
- iv. Police Experience Survey
- v. Victim + Survey + Police
- vi. Soteria + Survey
- vii. Police + Survey + Rape

This search will not have captured every promotion of the survey on the internet, and it does not capture physical promotion of the survey via posters or by Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs), for example. Promotion of the survey was tracked from 170 different sources, organisations, and individuals with a total of 426 promotions. Of this, the survey was advertised by 21 (out of the 43) police forces in England and Wales, six Offices of the Police and Crime Commissioner, 73 sector organisations (including sexual assault referral centres (SARCs), and charities), and by the Office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales. The channels used to advertise the survey included websites, Twitter (49% of those tracked), Facebook (23% of those tracked), Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and press releases.

Survey mode

The survey is an online questionnaire hosted on the Qualtrics platform and is available in both English and Welsh. It is completely anonymous.

Questionnaire development and versions

The survey questionnaire and methodology were developed over the course of 18 months. The questionnaire was tested and reviewed by over one hundred survivors through focus groups, cognitive testing with survivors by Safe Link ISVAs in Avon &

Somerset, as well as through a pilot study with South Wales Police and the New Pathways ISVA service. In addition, the survey received comments and feedback from well over a hundred victim support advocates, academics, police officers, and third sector groups.

The questionnaire is programmed so that survey routing and question wording displayed to respondents adapts to their survey responses in order to minimize asking questions that do not apply to the respondents' situation. This means there are slight differences in questions respondents received depending on the circumstances of their case. For example, questions about court outcomes are only presented to respondents whose case went to court, while respondents who withdrew from the investigation process are presented with further questions about that (for example, reasons for withdrawing). Respondents who tell us their case is closed will see questions displayed in past tense, while those whose case is ongoing see questions displayed in present tense.

There have been three changes to the questionnaire since the survey went live in January 2023, with only minor amendments made during the six months to which this report pertains. These changes have been made in response to analysing patterns in survey response received in the first weeks of the survey. For example, we removed a follow-up free-text question about expectations compared to experiences of police, as respondents appeared to drop off from the survey at this point. We also added a summary question about overall experience with the police, and another question examining potential harms and benefits experienced by survivors as a result of their experience with the police. This was done to address respondent comments that the survey did not allow them to convey the extent of awful treatment they had received from the police and how gravely this impacted on their lives.

In response to a respondent wanting to tell us about an offence that they had reported to the police multiple times, we made it possible for survivors to complete the survey as many times as they wish to tell us about different reporting experiences. This option only became available on 1 July 2023 thus has not affected the survey period covered in this report (January – June 2023).

Sample size and questionnaire completion time

A total of 2,920 people clicked the survey start button between January and June 2023. 519 of those opened the survey but did not answer any survey questions. 334 people had not reported their case to the police which made the rest of the survey not applicable to them (because the survey is about respondents' experiences with

the police). These respondents were given the chance to tell us about their experiences including reasons for not reporting, and 190 did so. A few were under 18 and therefore not eligible to complete the survey. Finally, nine responses were identified as hoax responses and removed from analysis. This left 1,968 analysable responses. On average, the survey received 350 analysable responses per month, with slightly fewer responses in May, possibly due to the large number of bank holidays (survey engagement tends to be lowest on non-working days). Most responses were gained through posts on social media (37%), followed by police websites (16%), and then through ISVAs or other support workers (12%). All eligible responses were in English with no respondents making use of the Welsh language option.

The median (average) response time to complete the survey was ten minutes and 86% of respondents who started the survey completed all survey questions.

Analysis of the data

We used basic univariate and bivariate descriptive statistics in this report. A comprehensive set is provided in the Data Appendix. It also includes tables and cross tables not included in the main report. We used Chi-Square tests to test the statistical significance of differences between groups presented in the crosstabs. *For readability, p-values are not included in the main body of this report. Interested readers can find this information in the Data Appendix. Where the report states that differences are 'significant' this means they are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.*

The free-text responses to open questions were read and coded by both first named authors and analysed through thematic analysis.

A note on interpreting the results

The findings reflect the experiences of nearly 2,000 sexual violence survivors across England and Wales. Despite its size, it is not a representative survey of all survivors' experiences with the police because a non-probability sampling procedure was chosen. Respondents are self-selecting into the survey which is advertised by police forces, support organisations and the Victims' Commissioners Office via organisational websites, social media posts, posters, and word of mouth. The survey was also shared on Twitter by over 100 private Twitter accounts between January and June 2023.

This sampling approach also limits our ability to compare between forces. At present there is large variation between police forces in whether, how and how

frequently they and local victim support organisations are promoting the survey, resulting in very uneven number of responses, and potential biases in which survivors may see the survey advertisement, or not. Because of these limits to directly comparability of police forces areas, this report is not breaking findings down by police force area.

The survey is open to all survivors with experience of police forces in England and Wales, no matter how long ago. As such the report covers current and past experiences, and the report and Data Appendix comments on differences between police experiences in recent months and those that are longer ago. Our sampling approach means we must be cautious when drawing inferences or making interpretations of changes in police experiences over time.

Our findings naturally exclude those who cannot complete this survey because they did not survive sexual violence or the police experience (more on this in the analysis of free-text responses where suicidal feelings feature). The survey is likely to exclude survivors who might have seen the advertisement but chose not to take part because it may not have been safe for them to do so, for example because they might be in an ongoing relationship with the perpetrator. The findings also do not include survivors who do not speak English or Welsh, do not have access to a digital device and/or the lack of an easy read/British Sign Language version of the questionnaire prevented them from taking part. This is a common issue in survey research and a source of bias because it excludes the voices of some survivors. An easy-read version of the survey and a British Sign Language video about the survey are in development and expected to become available later in 2023.

Responses by police force area

Table 1 below details the number of survey responses received per police force area up until 30 June 2023. Police forces who worked with local victim support organisations and/or local media to advertise the survey and repeatedly promoted the survey themselves through their social media received the most responses.

Some survivors will have more than one rape or sexual assault case with a police force or have experiences with multiple police forces. In this survey period, we asked survivors to tell us about their most recent case only, and they were able to tell us about their experiences in other cases, or with other police forces, in the free-text section.

Table 1: Number of survey responses per police force

Force	Total responses	Force	Total responses
Greater Manchester Police	220	Essex Police	21
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	188	Warwickshire Police	21
Devon & Cornwall Police	167	Cleveland Police	19
Thames Valley Police	119	Cambridgeshire Constabulary	18
Metropolitan Police Service	115	West Mercia Police	17
Hampshire and IOW Constabulary	107	Surrey Police	15
Dorset Police	90	Derbyshire Constabulary	14
Gloucestershire Constabulary	79	Bedfordshire Police	12
Lancashire Constabulary	66	Hertfordshire Constabulary	12
Gwent Police	61	South Yorkshire Police	11
Durham Constabulary	58	Wiltshire Police	11
West Yorkshire Police	52	City of London Police	10
West Midlands Police	51	Norfolk Constabulary	8
Dyfed-Powys Police	49	Police Scotland	8
South Wales Police	38	Leicestershire Police	7
North Wales Police	37	Cumbria Constabulary	6
Merseyside Police	35	British Transport Police	6
Kent Police	34	Northamptonshire Police	5
Nottinghamshire Police	34	Suffolk Constabulary	5
North Yorkshire Police	33	Humberside Police	4
Cheshire Constabulary	29	Lincolnshire Police	3
Sussex Police	25	Police Service of Northern Ireland	2
Northumbria Police	24		

Respondent profile

Demographic characteristics

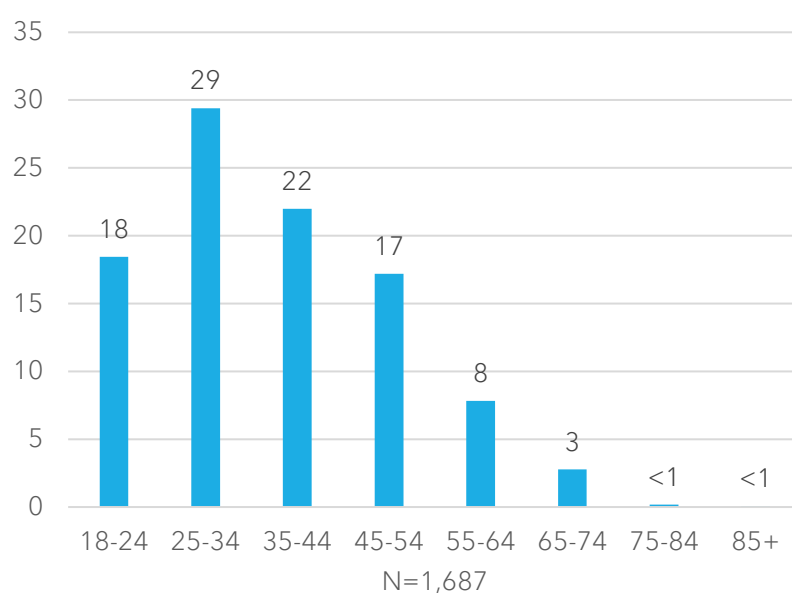
A total of 87% of respondents are White British, rising to 92% when including all White backgrounds (see Table 2). All other ethnic groups jointly account for 8% of the respondents, with no one ethnic group making up more than one percent of respondents. By comparison, 81.7% of the population in England and Wales are white, 9.3% from Asian ethnic groups, 4.0% from Black ethnic groups and 2.9% have mixed ethnicity.¹² National police recorded data on the ethnicity of survivors of sexual assault are not available, which means we cannot assess to what extent this survey is comparable to the national police recorded rape and sexual assault picture with regard to these variables. Extensive missing data on survivor ethnicity in police data is also highlighted in the Year One findings from analysis of Operation Soteria Bluestone pathfinder force data.¹³ Prevalence data from the nationally representative Crime Survey for England and Wales found the following prevalence rates for rape and sexual assault by ethnicity: 3.6% for individuals of Mixed ethnicity; 2.9% for Black or Black British; 2% for White; 1.4% for Asian or Asian British; and 0.8% for any other ethnic group.¹⁴ These data are again not comparable to our survey data because they relate to prevalence rates, and because rape and sexual assault data from the crime survey include survivors regardless of whether they reported the sexual violence to the police.

Table 2: Survey respondent ethnicity

Ethnicity	N	%
White English/Welsh/Scottish/N. Irish	1460	87
White Other	59	4
Prefer not to say	36	2
White Irish	24	1
Mixed Other	18	1
White and Black Caribbean	16	1
White and Asian	11	1
Asian Pakistani	11	1
Asian British	9	1
Asian Indian	7	<1
Black Caribbean	7	<1
Any other ethnic group	7	<1
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	5	<1
White and Black African	4	<1
Asian Other	3	<1
Black British	3	<1
Asian Bangladeshi	1	<1
Asian Chinese	1	<1
Black Other	1	<1
Arab	1	<1
Black African	0	0
Total	1684	100

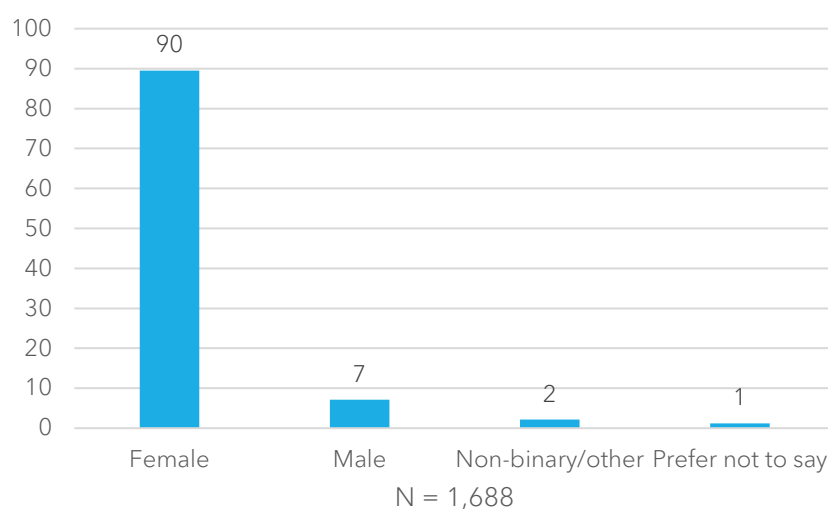
The most common survey respondent age is 25 to 34 years (29%), with respondent age ranging from 18 years to over 85 years old (see Figure 1). When excluding child survivors (those aged below 18) from police recorded data for comparability purposes, our survey sample and police recorded sexual offences include a similar proportion of survivors aged 25-34: for year ending March 2022, 29% of both male and female survivors aged 18 and above fell in this age bracket in police recorded data. However, the proportion of younger survivors was lower in the survey than in national police recorded data. Whilst survivors aged 18-24 comprise 18% of the respondents of the survey, the corresponding proportions in police recorded data are 33% for female survivors and 24% for male survivors.¹⁵

Figure 1: Respondent age in bands (%)



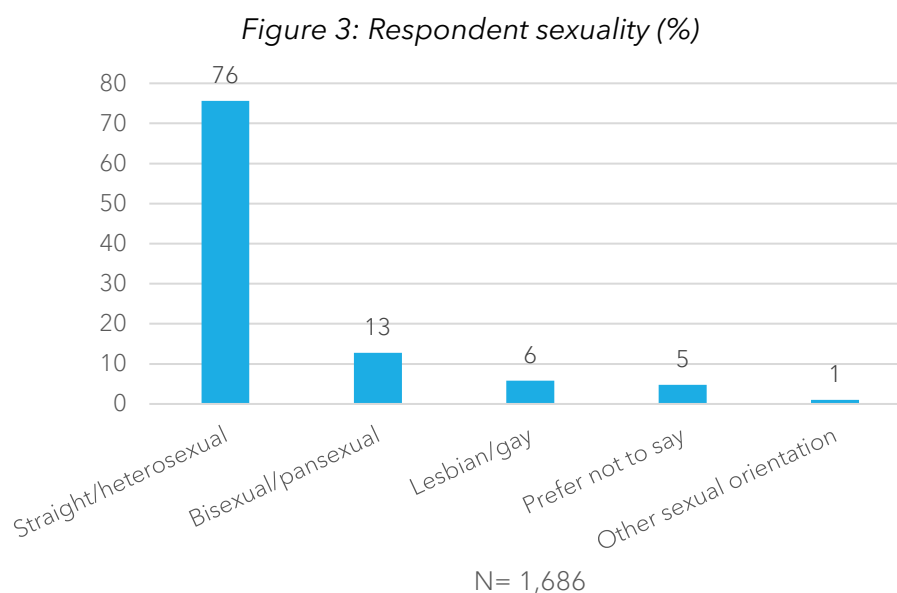
90% of respondents were female, 7% male, 2% identified as non-binary and 1% preferred not to say (Figure 2). For police recorded crime for the year ending March 2022, the proportion of female survivors of sexual offences was 86%.¹⁶

Figure 2: Respondent sex (%)

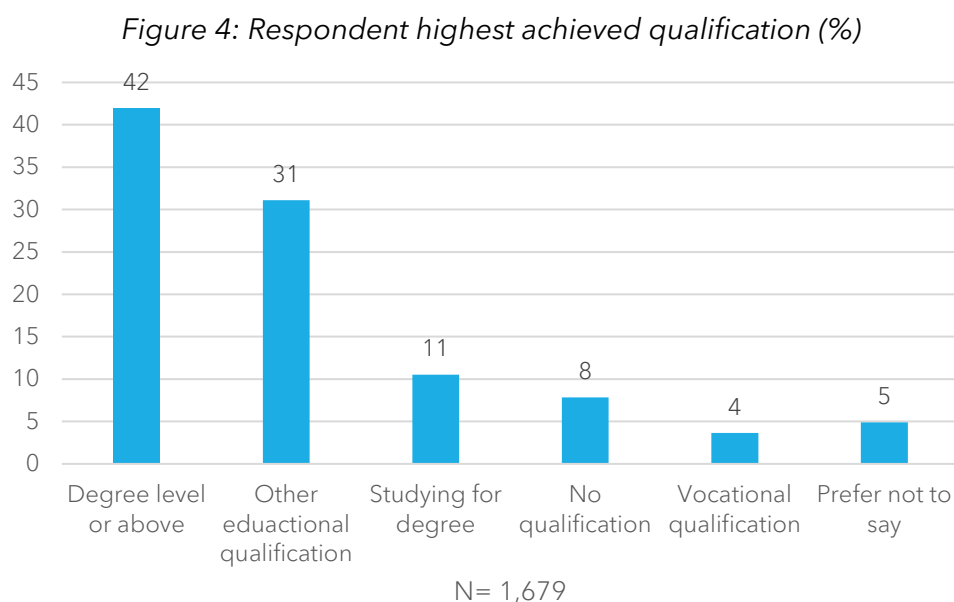


Regarding respondent sexual orientation, 76% of respondents were heterosexual, 13% bi- or pansexual and 6% lesbian or gay (5% preferred not to say and 1% stated some other sexual orientation) (see Figure 3). Police recorded data on the sexual orientation of sexual assault survivors is unavailable, which means we cannot assess to what extent our survey make-up is representative of police recorded rape and sexual assault. The Crime Survey for England and Wales contains data on survivor sexual orientation and shows higher prevalence of sexual violence among gay/lesbian survivors (12.8%) and bisexual survivors (16.4%) compared to

heterosexual survivors (1.7%).¹⁷ However, this is not directly comparable to our survey.



Over 50% of respondents reported having a university degree or were studying for a university degree at the time of completing the survey (see Figure 4). 35% reported having some other educational or vocational qualification and only 8% of respondents reported having no qualification.



Do police experiences vary between demographic groups?

When comparing police experiences between respondents of different ethnic groups we had to use the crude categorisation of White, and Black and Minority Ethnic, because the survey reached too few Black and Minority Ethnic respondents to allow for a more detailed analysis. Black and Minority Ethnic survivors' experience

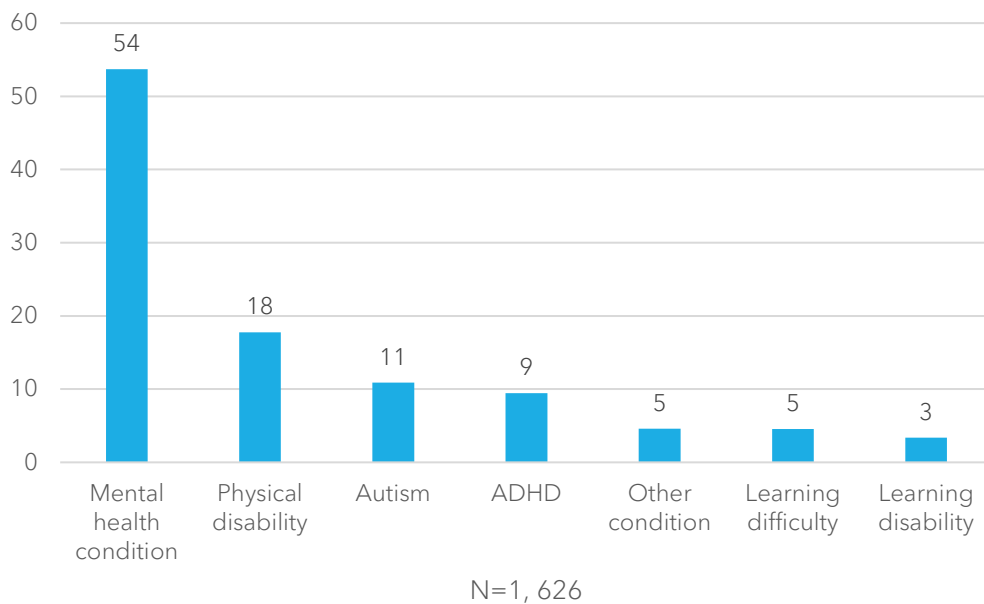
of the police was significantly worse than that of White survivors across a range of indicators, except for the broad summary question of how good a job police had done overall, and of how their experience compared to their expectation.

Survivor experiences did not appear to systematically differ across most indicators according to survivor sex. However, male survivors were less likely than female survivors to feel that the police did something to protect them from the suspect; the officers were kind; the officers made them comfortable; and the officers treated them like they matter. In the free-text response section of the questionnaire some respondents shared that they felt they were discriminated against, or officers were unable to understand their experience because of their gender. Further, some male survivors noted that they felt discriminated against because they were gay, were not taken seriously as an adult man reporting something that had happened to them as a child, or that there was a lack of understanding of male victims of domestic abuse.

Mental health, disability, and neurodiversity

More than half (54%) of respondents disclosed mental health conditions. Physical and learning disability, autism, ADHD, and other forms of neurodiversity were prevalent, too (see Figure 5). A quarter (27%) of respondents had more than one of these conditions, and only 36% of respondents had no condition. Based on our findings, it is more common for a survivor to have at least one of these conditions, than not having any and that police forces must equip officers to adequately engage with survivors with additional needs. It is also worth noting that in the survey we only ask respondents whether they have the conditions, yet some explicitly state in the free-text that they have developed mental health conditions as a result of their damaging police experience.

Figure 5: Proportion of respondents with conditions or disabilities (% selecting each item)



How does this impact on police experience?

The number of conditions (none, one, multiple conditions) plays a role in survivors' police experience. When compared with respondents who report no conditions, those who report multiple conditions in particular were more likely to report poorer experiences of police communication, officer behaviour and attitudes across survey indicators. Analyses of specific conditions highlight that autistic survivors and survivors with a physical disability reported poorer experiences with the police when compared to survivors who are not autistic, and do not have a physical disability. Some illustrative examples of differential experience will be included throughout the report, with further detail available in the Data Appendix.

Case Profile

Who are the perpetrators?

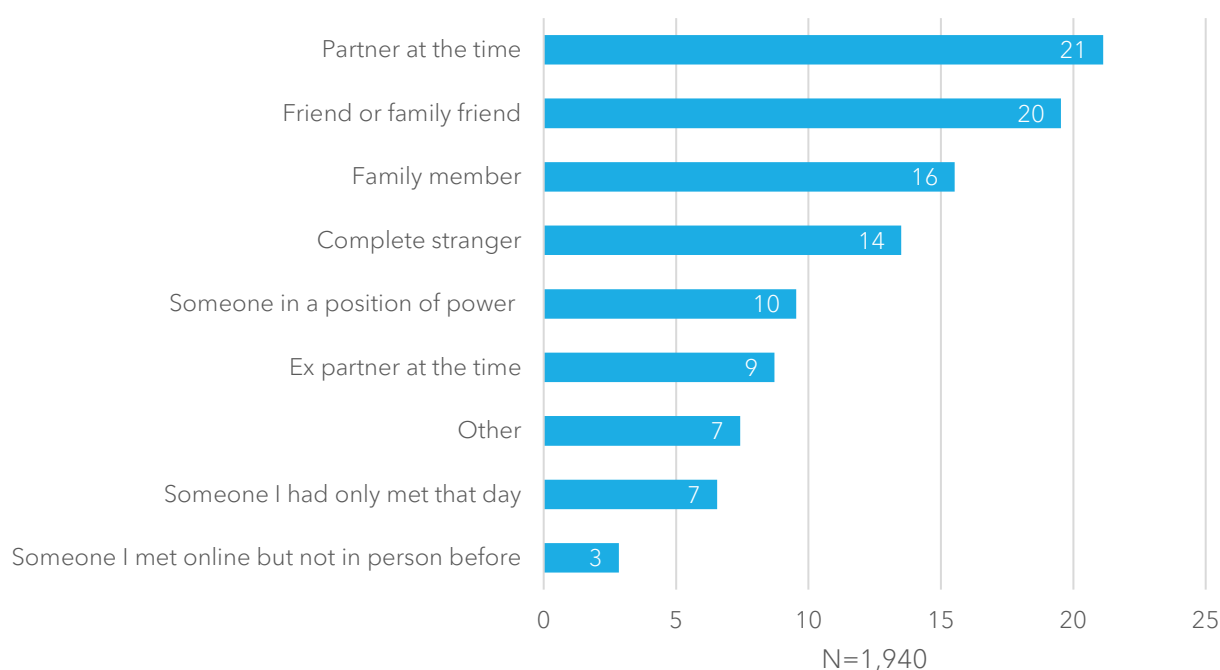
Operation Soteria Bluestone research, in line with other studies, has shown that criminal justice outcomes vary systematically depending on the relationship between the perpetrator and survivor. For example, perpetrators who rape their partners are far less likely to be charged than perpetrators who rape complete strangers.¹⁸

Current and ex-partners accounted for one in three (30%) of the rapes and sexual assaults respondents in this survey, followed by friends or family friends (20%) and family members (16%) (see Figure 6). Cases involving strangers accounted for about one in four (24%) cases: 14% were complete strangers, and a further 10% de-facto strangers: 7% someone the survivor had only met that day and 3% someone the survivor had met online but not in person before the day they were sexually assaulted by that person. Differences were visible by survivor gender: for women the most common type of perpetrator was a current or former partner (32%), whilst for men the most common type of perpetrator was a friend or family friend (32%).

It is not possible to directly compare our survey data to national police recorded sexual offences due to differences in how these are recorded and categorised. However, we see an overarching similar pattern between our survey and police recorded rapes: the most common type of perpetrator for female survivors was an intimate partner (46%), whilst for male survivors it was an acquaintance (38%) for both rapes and other sexual offences.¹⁹

It emerged from the survey that perpetrators have abused positions of power, including using their professional role to gain access to their victims. Survey respondents named a range of roles including taxi drivers, medical professionals, security guards, and massage therapists. In addition, six respondents used the 'other' free-text section of this question to tell us that the perpetrator was a serving police officer. A further 21 respondents mentioned in the free-text section at the end of the questionnaire that the perpetrator was a serving police officer at the time of the rape or sexual assault. One survivor shared with us how the investigating officer in their case used the situation to rape them, saying that people "*would not believe that is something that could happen*", an ultimate abuse of the officer's position.

Figure 6: Type of perpetrator (% selected)



How do police experiences differ according to the type of perpetrator?

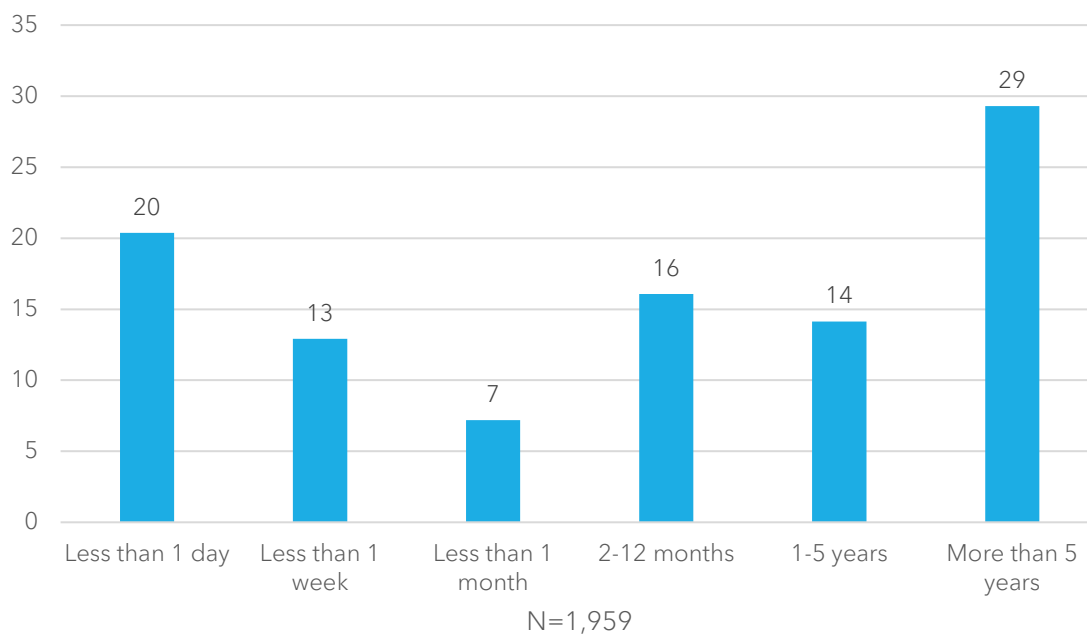
Experiences of the police vary depending on whether the perpetrator is a current intimate partner, family member, or complete stranger. Survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence consistently reported poor police experiences across indicators. Specific examples will be discussed throughout the report and tables with detailed breakdowns of the differences are provided in the Data Appendix.

Time between the assault and police recording

Most survivors do not report a rape or sexual assault to police immediately. This can be due to range of (good) reasons and is not unusual. In the past this was often referred to as 'delayed' reporting and research has shown this to be associated with lower prosecution and conviction rates.²⁰

In this survey, police were told about the rape or sexual assault on the same day in 20% of cases, and within a week in a further 13% of cases (see Figure 7). 29% were brought to police attention more than five years after they happened. The survey included a higher proportion of 'delayed reporting' cases than national police recorded sexual offences between April 2019 and March 2022, where 75% of cases were recorded by police less than a year after the offence, and only 15.3% were recorded 5 years or more since the assault.²¹

Figure 7: Length of time before the police knew about the assault (%)

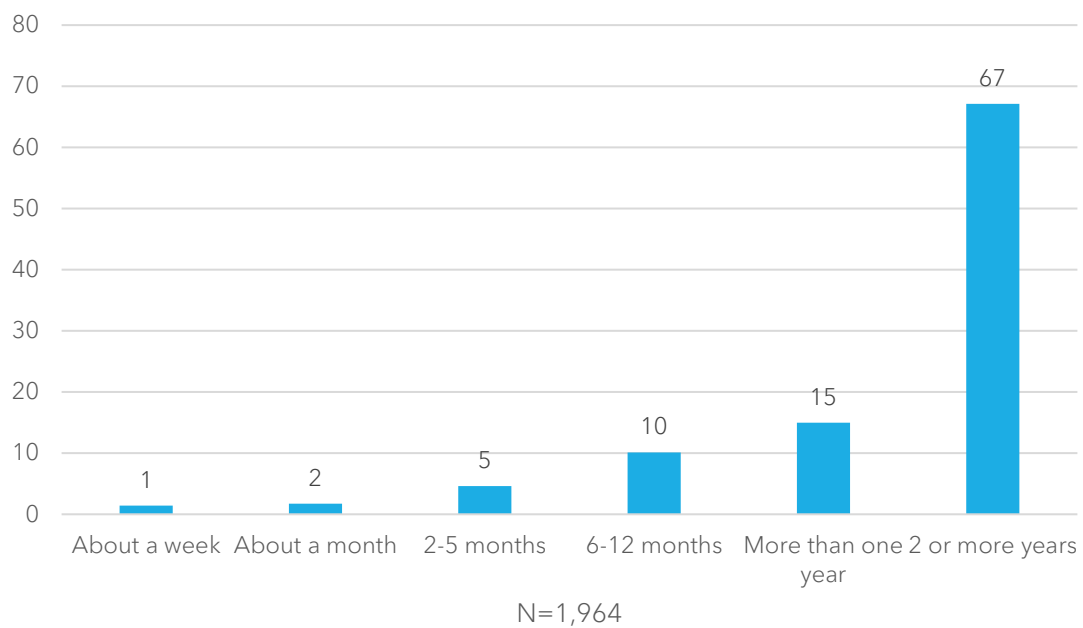


Time since police disclosure and current case status

This survey overwhelmingly captures survivor experiences that have come to police attention some time ago (see Figure 8). 67% of cases respondents are telling us about have been known to police for over two years, a further 15% have been known to police for one to two years. Only 3% of cases have come to police attention within the last week/months, 5% in the past 2-5 months, and a further 10% in the past 6 to 12 months.

Two in three (68%) respondents told us about a case that was closed (see Figure 9). The fact that most responses pertain to police experiences that happened some time ago and/or where the case is now closed does not lessen their relevance for policing today. In their responses many survivors reported that their police experiences had lasting or ongoing impacts on their safety and the safety of others, their mental or physical health, and other aspects of their life (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Longer term consequences can only be measured if the survey includes survivors whose police experience was months, years or decades ago.

Figure 8: Length of time police have known about the case (%)



Turning to the reasons why the case closed, the most common reason was the police having closed their case without a suspect being charged (32%) (see Figure 10). Some used the free-text to share the reason that police gave for closing the case:

"I was told that because I stopped fighting that it was not rape so there was no crime."

Other reasons given for the closure of cases included: police not taking any action in response to the report, incompetence during the investigation, pressure from the police or others not to continue, insufficient evidence in the case, or the death of the suspect.

Some also used the free-text to explain that while the case was closed, the sexual violence was still ongoing. This theme re-emerged in the free-text box at the end of the survey where some respondents said that the sexual abuse continued because the police failed to stop the perpetrator even though a rape or sexual assault had been reported to the police.

"The man who raped me did it again very soon after [...]. It saddens me that someone else went through it because the police dismissed mine so quickly."

Figure 9: Case status (%)

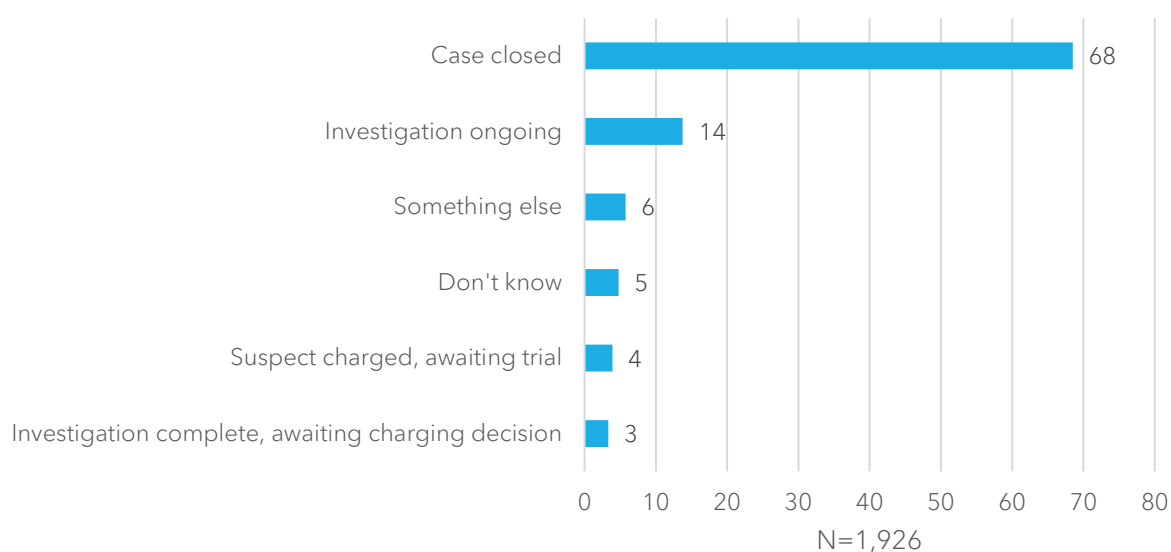
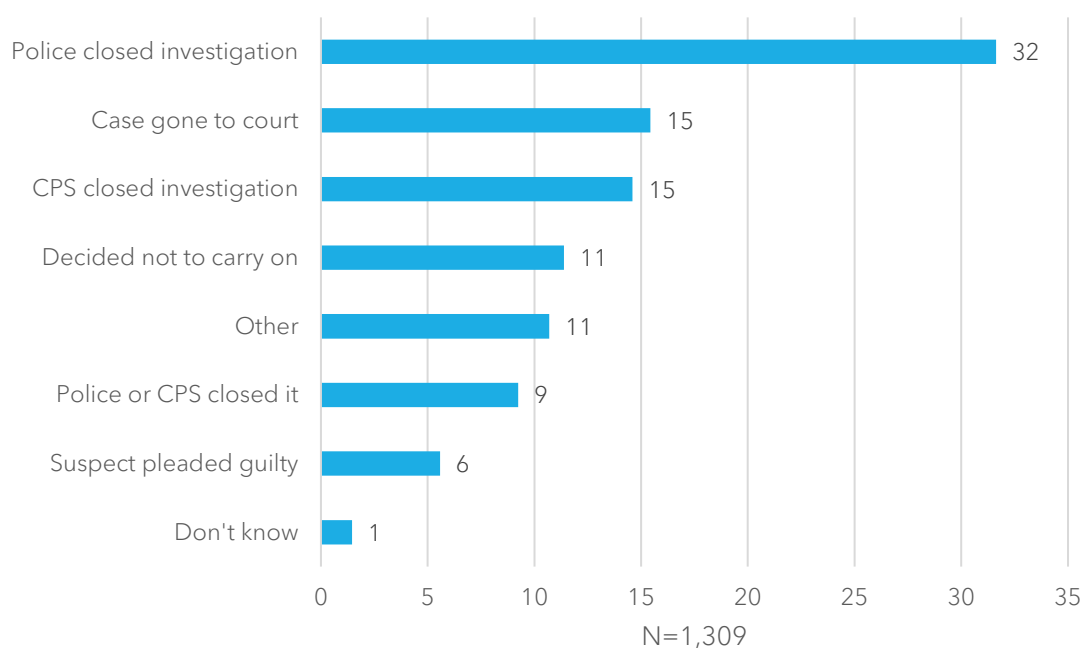


Figure 10: Reason why case was closed (%)



5% of respondents said they did not know what their current case status is.

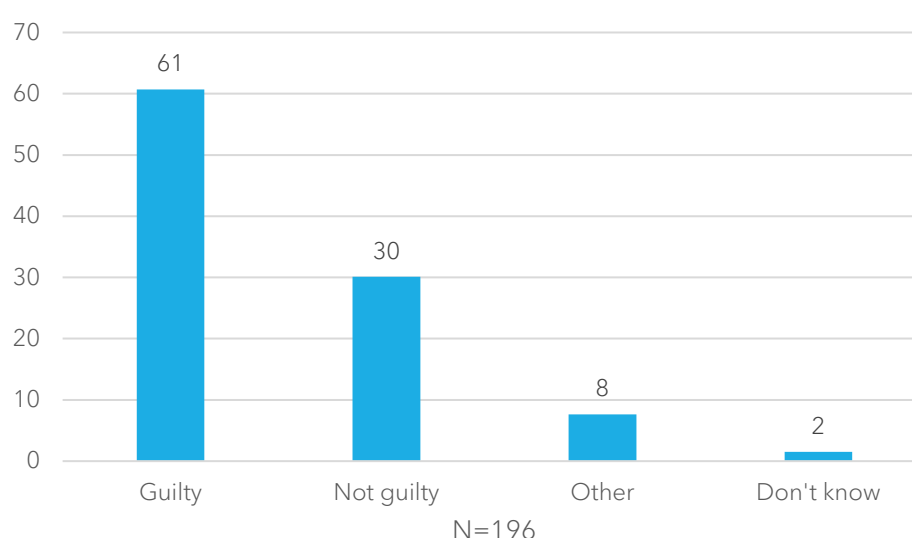
"I made a report, there have been some emails, they have mentioned a statement, I'm not sure but I haven't heard from them since [several months ago]"

"They contacted me twice in the space of 5 minutes by telephone when I was busy so I didn't answer, they didn't give me any contact information to get in touch and they never contacted me again. I filled out an online form a few weeks later asking them to contact me again but no one ever did"

For 14% of respondents the investigation was ongoing, and 7% were waiting either for a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision or for trial.

For the 196 respondents who said their case was closed because it had gone to court, a guilty verdict was reached in 61% of cases, and a not guilty verdict in about a third (30%) of cases (see Figure 11). Nationally, the conviction rate for cases in which a suspect has been prosecuted stood at 63.5% for 2022 (note: this statistic is specifically for rape, but the survey asks about both rape and sexual assault).²² About one in ten of the respondents' cases that had gone to court resulted in some other outcome, such as a hung jury.

Figure 11: Court outcome (%)



Victims' Right to Review: "I don't know what this is"

The survey asked respondents if they were aware of the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme. VRR entitles the victim to request a review of police or CPS decisions not to charge and/or prosecute a suspect in their case.²³

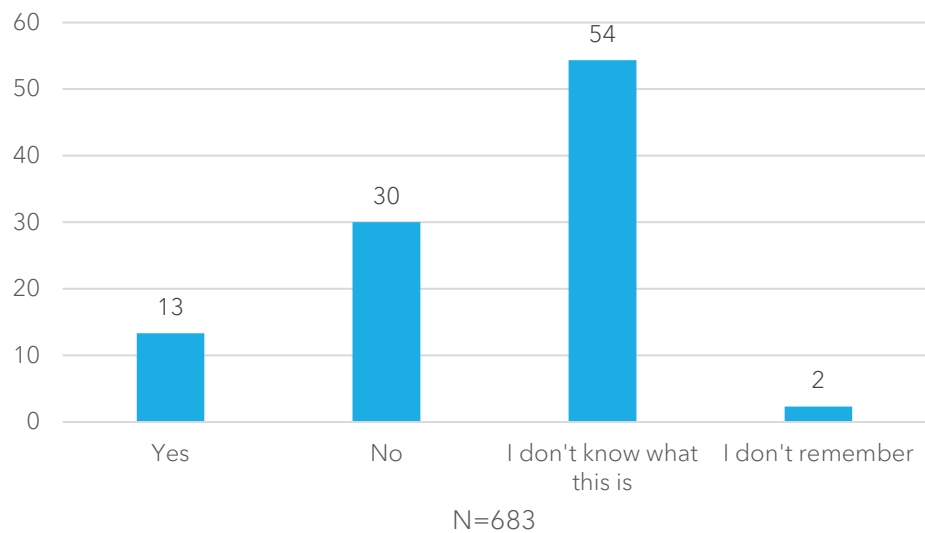
Our survey reveals that more than half of survivors (54%) to whom the VRR scheme might have been relevant did not know about it (see Figure 12). Free-text responses mirror this finding, but also show that even where survivors did know about it, they sometimes found the police to be obstructive, and other times felt they simply could not go ahead with the process as their experience had been too difficult already.

"I did not pursue appeal or review, I was already traumatised by what had happened to me. I did not wish to be abused further."

Of those whose cases were closed by the police or the CPS, only 13% made use of the VRR scheme. Elsewhere in the survey we asked respondents whether police had

told them about their victim rights, and two in three (66%) said either that the police did not do this or that they were not sure whether the police had done this. Collectively, these findings point to the need of raising awareness to ensure that survivors are aware of their rights and can exercise them, if they would like to do so.

Figure 12: Whether Victims' Right to Review was used (%)



Reporting, non-reporting and 'victim withdrawal'

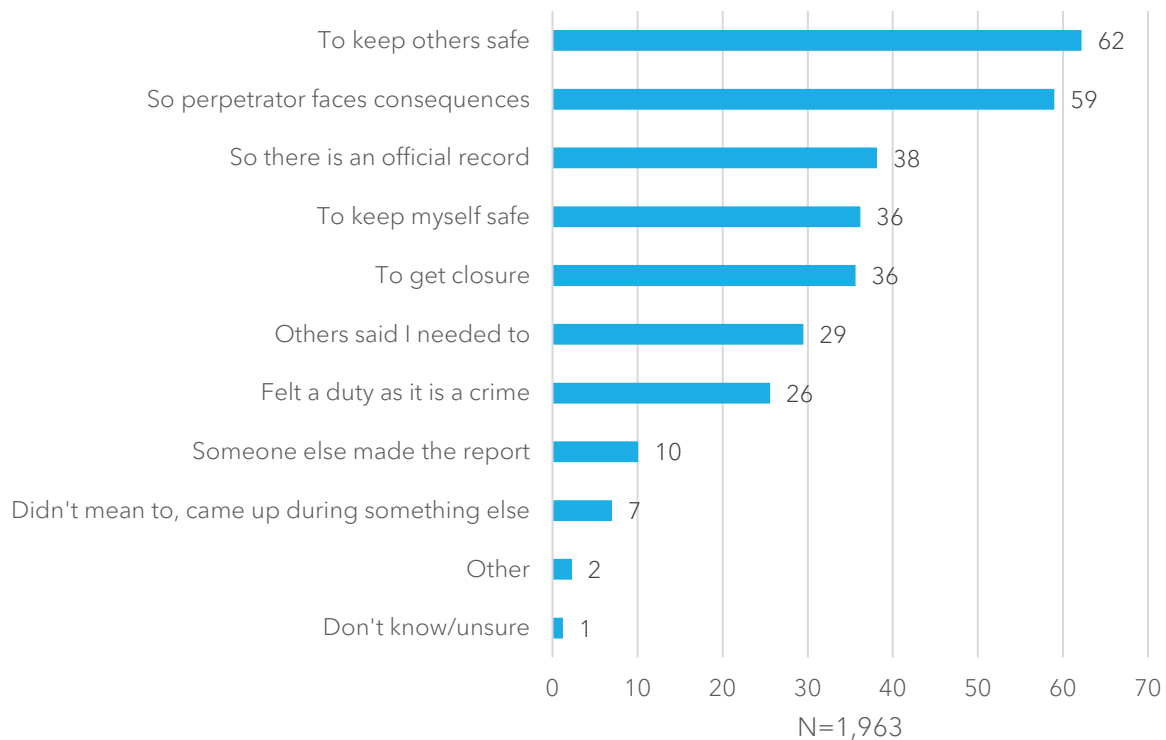
Reasons for reporting

Reporting a rape or sexual assault to the police is a brave action. Survivors report a rape or sexual assault to police for a variety of different reasons: in this survey, survivors said they reported to keep others or themselves safe (62% and 36%, respectively), and so the perpetrator would face the consequences of their offending (59%) (see Figure 13). Other reasons central to the reporting decision included having an official record of what happened (38%); to get closure (36%); feeling a sense of duty to report the crime (26%); or because others had told them they needed to report it (29%). Themes that emerged as reasons for reporting in the free-text responses included: the abuse of someone else coming to light; wanting justice on behalf of others; for validation that what had happened to them was wrong; empowerment; and to be believed or heard.

"[I reported] to send the message to myself and my abusers that I was not scared of them anymore. to regain spiritual, psychological and emotional power back which had been taken by them" [sic]

In this survey, nearly one in five respondents did not report the rape: either someone else did (10%) or the rape came up as part of something else (for example, during police contact for something else, such as ongoing domestic abuse) (7%), referred to as 'telling, not reporting'. This was a slightly lower proportion of 'telling, not reporting' cases than identified through Operation Soteria Bluestone case file reviews.²⁴

Figure 13: Reasons for reporting (% selected)



Reasons for reporting vary depending on the relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator. We outline some of these differences below (for more information see also the Data Appendix).

Current or former intimate partner perpetrator: reporting to '*keep myself safe*' was noticeably more common among current partner (44%) and ex-partner (56%) perpetrators compared to other relationship types. Cases of 'telling not reporting' (where the report came up as part of something else rather than being reported directly by the survivor) were also more common where the perpetrator was a current or former partner at the time. Further Operation Soteria Bluestone research has shown that sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner is a strong indicator of coercive controlling behaviour.²⁵ Coercive controlling domestic abuse is highly dangerous and we recommend that officers are attuned to signs of coercive control surrounding a rape or sexual offence disclosure and take this into consideration when interacting with the survivor, and in any actions officers take – or decide not to take – in response to the disclosure.²⁶

Complete and de-facto strangers and abuses of position of power, job role or trust: Reporting so the '*perpetrator would face consequences*' for their actions was more prevalent for stranger attacks (65%) and cases where the perpetrator was a friend or family friend (64%) compared to other relationship types. Similarly, reporting because they '*felt a duty as it is a crime*' was more prevalent in cases of

complete and de-facto strangers and of people abusing a position of power, compared to when the perpetrator is well-known to the survivor such as a current or former intimate partner or family member.

Family members as perpetrators: *'Reporting to get closure'* was a more prevalent reason for reporting for survivors of familial sexual abuse compared to other relationship types.

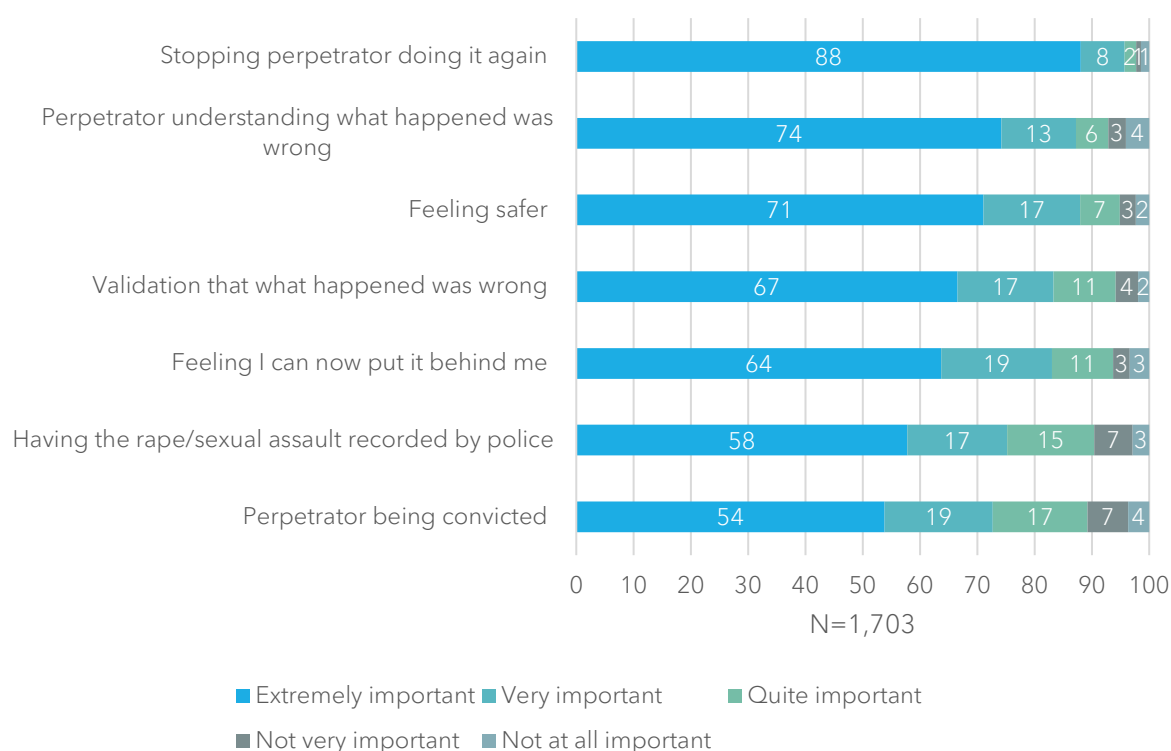
These are of course just tendencies: each case is different, and many survivors gave more than one reason for reporting. Additionally, sometimes there was more than one perpetrator/relationship type present. However, the findings make clear the importance of officers actively considering the reasons for reporting because they carry useful information, for example about risks and safeguarding, and about what a survivor might need from the police.

What would be a good outcome?

We also asked respondents what a good outcome of the case being known to the police would have been for them. Survivor reasons for reporting show the motivations for going to police in the first place. The importance of what would have been a good outcome is different in that it reflects what, with hindsight, would have made it worthwhile. It is also applicable to all survivors whose case has come to police attention, including those who did not wish to make a report, but police came to know about the sexual violence nonetheless (for example. third party reporting or 'telling, not reporting').

An overwhelming majority (88%) of respondents said that an extremely important outcome of police knowing about their case would be stopping the perpetrator from doing this again (see Figure 14). Other extremely important outcomes were the perpetrator understanding that what they did was wrong (74%), and for the survivors to feel safer (71%). Importantly, the perpetrator being convicted in court was the least extremely important outcome, with just over half (54%) of respondents saying it was extremely important. This finding has significant implications when considering what survivors need from police: to stop known perpetrators from committing the crime again. It underlines the importance of police acting to disrupt known perpetrators and making good use of the range of legitimate tools police have at their disposal for perpetrator intervention (see 'Pillar 2' of Operation Soteria Bluestone).²⁷

Figure 14: Importance of each potential outcome of case being known to the police (%)



Reasons for non-reporting

"[I was] Worried police would take advantage of me in my vulnerable state and take advantage aka cause further trauma."

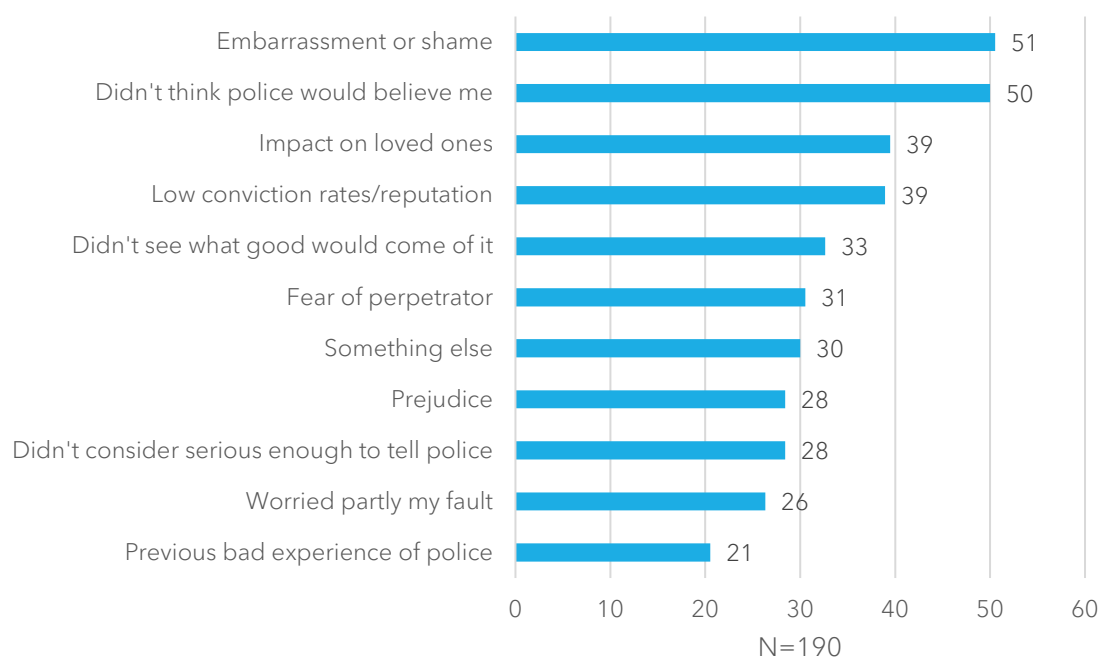
The focus of the survey is on survivors who have had experience with the police. A total of 334 people said at the start of the survey that police did not know about their case and of these, 190 responded to the multiple-choice question about reasons for not reporting. The most common reasons for not reporting were embarrassment or shame (51%) and not thinking that the police would believe them (50%), followed by impact on loved ones (39%) and low conviction rates/reputation (39%) (see Figure 15). Answers to the 'something else' category and free-text comments also highlight a range of other reasons why survivors did not report to the police.

These 'other' mentions included that the perpetrator themselves was a police officer, fears that the police would further assault the survivor in their vulnerable state, and awareness that involving the police risked further trauma or harm to the survivor. Further 'other' mentions included not realising that what had happened was rape/sexual assault at the time or feeling like they would not be taken seriously as a male victim when reporting a crime that is typically seen as a form of violence against women and girls. Some respondents expressed that they did not report

because they felt responsibility for the perpetrator or because of the impact on people connected to the perpetrator.

“He was a doctor and I didn't realise that it was wrong what he did to me until I told my [family member]. I [was only young] at the time.”

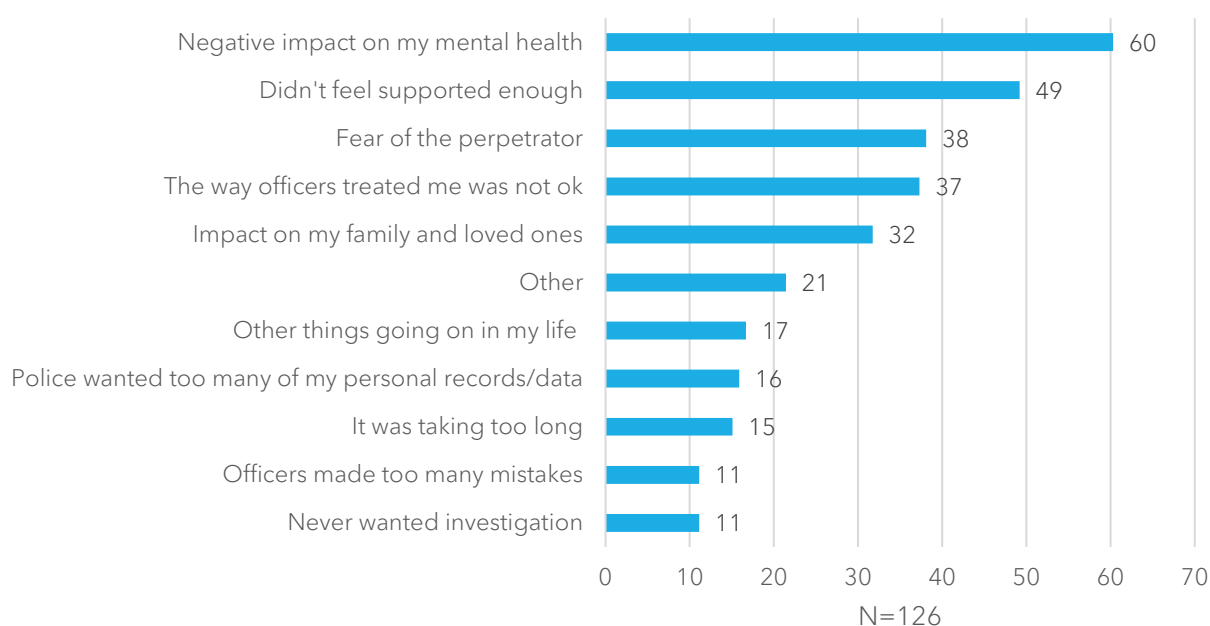
Figure 15: Reasons for not reporting (% selected)



Reasons for not continuing ('victim withdrawal')

Reasons for not continuing with a rape or sexual assault case highlight the toll the criminal justice process takes on survivors' mental health: it is the most frequently mentioned reason for withdrawing (60%) (see Figure 16). A repeated theme in the free-text comments was the extensive strain on mental health caused by the lengthy timescales involved in the case. About half (49%) of those who did not continue with the case said that one of the reasons was because they did not feel supported enough. One in three (32%) cite one of the reasons as the '*impact on family and loved ones*', bringing to the fore that the negative impact is not confined to the survivor, but can ripple out to affect those close to them to such an extent that the survivor feels they cannot carry on with the case as a result.

Figure 16: Reasons for not continuing with the process (% selected)



Worryingly nearly 40% said their reason for not continuing was because of '*fear of the perpetrator*', indicating that the police and wider criminal justice system were unable to effectively safeguard the survivor from the perpetrator for them to feel safe enough to continue. Under the '*other*' response category, survivors mentioned pressure from police to withdraw their complaint, or pressure from the perpetrator or their associates (including within the police) to drop the case.

Responses also highlight how police failings in engaging with survivors or inadequacies in investigating the case result in survivors feeling unable to carry on: 37% of respondents said a reason for withdrawing was that the way police treated them '*was not okay*'; that '*police wanted too many personal records and data*' (such as mobile phones) (16%); that the case '*was taking too long*' (15%); and that '*officers made too many mistakes in the investigation*' (11%).

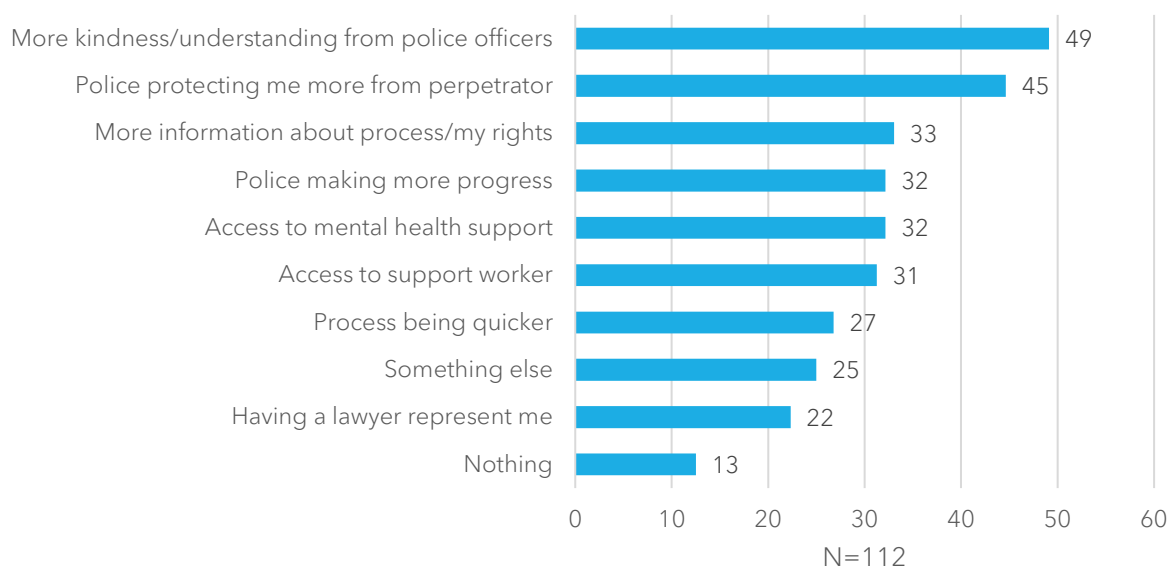
Other reasons included external pressure to withdraw, either from the perpetrator or their family, or, as mentioned above, the police. Further reasons included a lack of awareness around honour-based violence. Some simply felt there was no hope – with repeated mentions that it was the perpetrator's word against theirs. Others felt shame about details of their case being revealed, a sense of personal guilt, or a responsibility to the children of the perpetrator. Some stated that continuing with the case would have had wider negative implications like inability to access vital mental health support as it could be used in a trial or having to become homeless.

Things that would have helped survivors continue with the case

Respondents who withdrew from the process were asked what, if anything, might have enabled them to carry on. The most common responses were *'more kindness and understanding from officers'* (49%) and police doing more to protect them from the perpetrator (45%) (see Figure 17). Access to *'more information about the process'* and their rights (33%), *'mental health support'* (32%) and *'access to a support worker'* (31%) were also commonly cited, as was *'police making more progress with the case'* (32%).

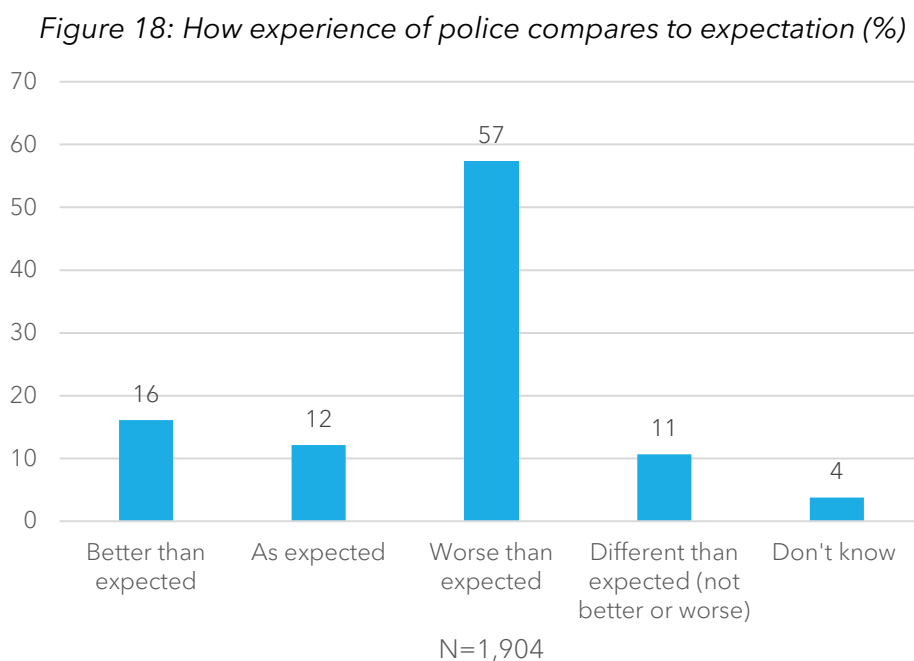
The role police understanding, behaviour, and communication play in survivors' ability to carry on with the process was also evident in free-text comments. Some cited that honest and open communication or improved police understanding of the context of the offence would have helped, for example in cases of honour-based violence and gang-related sexual violence. Other respondents noted how even the most basic actions such as: not being subjected to inappropriate comments from the police; not being coerced into dropping the case; being believed and respected; or the police simply treating them *"like an actual human being"* would have helped them continue.

Figure 17: Things that would have helped those who withdrew to continue (% selected)



Survivor experience of the police

Prior to being asked more detailed questions evaluating their experiences with the police, respondents were asked about their overall experiences with the police and how their experiences compared to their expectations (see Figure 18). It is clear from the findings that survivors' evaluation of how the police were doing is overwhelmingly negative: slightly over half (52%) of respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed that the police were doing a good job in their case overall (see Data Appendix). When asked about how their experiences aligned with their expectations, almost three in five (57%) stated that their experience with the police was worse than they expected. Only 16% of survivors stated that their experience was better than they expected.



The findings also reveal differences in survivor evaluations of the police experience between respondents with different protected or case characteristics. Only 31% of survivors of intimate partner sexual violence by a current partner agreed that the police were doing a good job overall, far fewer than survivors where the perpetrator was a family member (57%) or complete stranger (46%). On the other hand, those who had more recent contact with the police, or with a more recently reported case had a higher proportion of survivors agreeing that the police were doing a good job overall (60%, and 57% respectively). See Data Appendix for a full breakdown of survivor evaluations of their police experience by the respondent demographic variables and case characteristics captured in the survey.

Police (in-) actions in the case

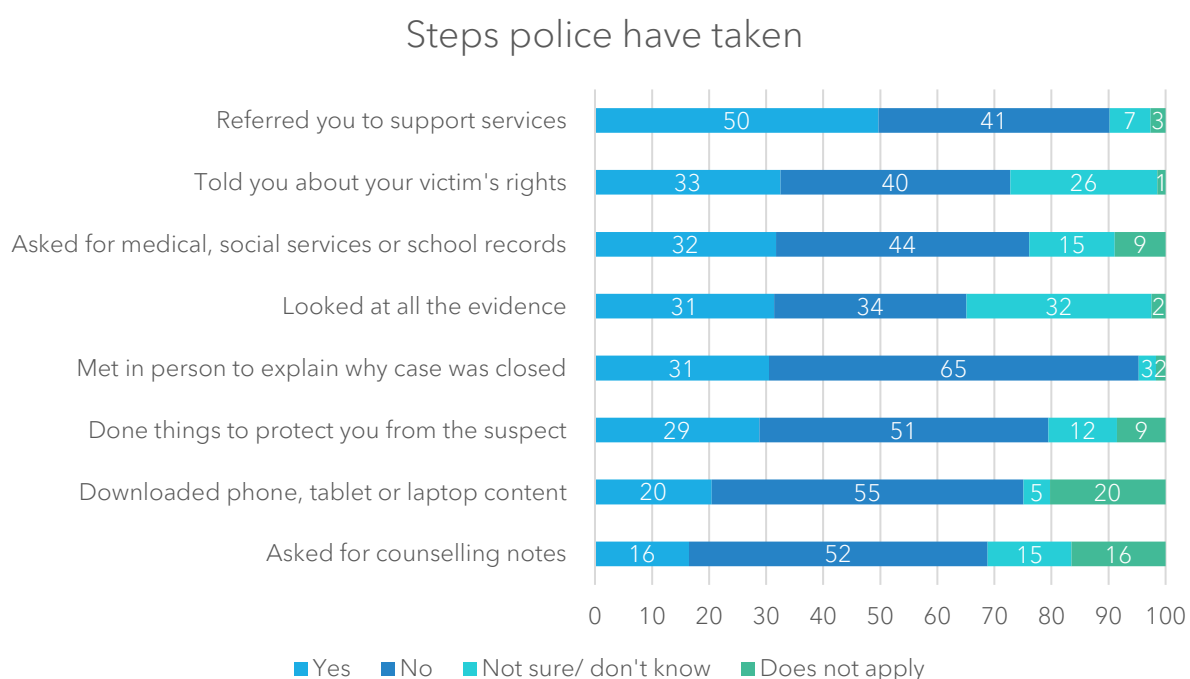
Respondents were asked about a range of actions police may or may not have taken in their case. The list includes investigative and safeguarding steps, for example, downloading the survivor's phone, asking for their counselling notes, doing things to protect the survivor from the perpetrator, or looking at all the evidence in the case. It also includes steps to support or engage with the survivor, such as making a referral to an independent victim support service, telling them about their victim rights, or if police closed the case, meeting with the victim in person to explain why they closed it (see Figure 19).

Making a referral to an independent victim support service occurred for half (50%) of the respondents, rendering it the most frequent supportive step. Other supportive actions occurred less frequently, for example, telling survivors about their victims' rights, looking at all the evidence, meeting in person to explain why the case was closed (if applicable), or doing things to protect them from the suspect, with only about a third of responding saying that the police did these.

It is noteworthy that 32% of respondents were not sure whether the police had looked at all the evidence and 26% were not sure whether the police had told them about their victims' rights, possibly pointing to a lack of clear communication from the police.

When it comes to digital and third party disclosures, a marked finding is that asking for survivors' counselling notes (16%) occurred almost as frequently as downloading their phone, tablet, or laptop content (20%).

Figure 19: Steps police have taken in case (%)



Information and communication

Respondents were asked about the quality of police communication, including whether officers were easy to get hold of, whether they contacted survivors when they said they would, whether they contacted them in good time when key things happened in their case, and whether they explained things well. Across these indicators only about two in five survivors felt that the police always or mostly did these things (see Data Appendix). These findings suggest room for improvement on police providing clear, timely and reliable information about their case to survivors.

Encouragingly, respondents who had contact with the police in the last three months were significantly more likely to feel like the police always or mostly did the above. For example, whilst 35% of those who had not had contact within the last three months felt that the police always or mostly explained things well, this was the case for 49% of those who had contact with the police within the last three months.

Respondents' evaluation of the quality of police communication varied systematically depending on who the perpetrator was. Survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence were least likely to have positive experiences of police communication, and survivors of family member sexual violence were most likely to feel police communication was always or mostly good (see Data Appendix for figures).

Additionally, respondents with a physical disability reported worse experiences of police communication across indicators compared to those without a physical disability: for example, whilst 37% of respondents without a physical disability said that the police always or mostly contacted them in good time whenever key things happened in their case, the corresponding proportion for survivors with a physical disability was 27%.

Understanding, kindness, and respect

Survivors were asked questions relating to their experience of aspects of procedural fairness.²⁸ Only about half of respondents said officers were always or mostly respectful and kind (see Figure 20). Most respondents felt a lack of understanding from the police: only one in four (26%) felt that the police always or mostly understood what this was like for them, whilst more than a third (36%) felt that the police never understood. Furthermore, only 37% said that the police always or mostly took their needs into account, which is important for ensuring that all survivors are better able to participate in the police investigation process.

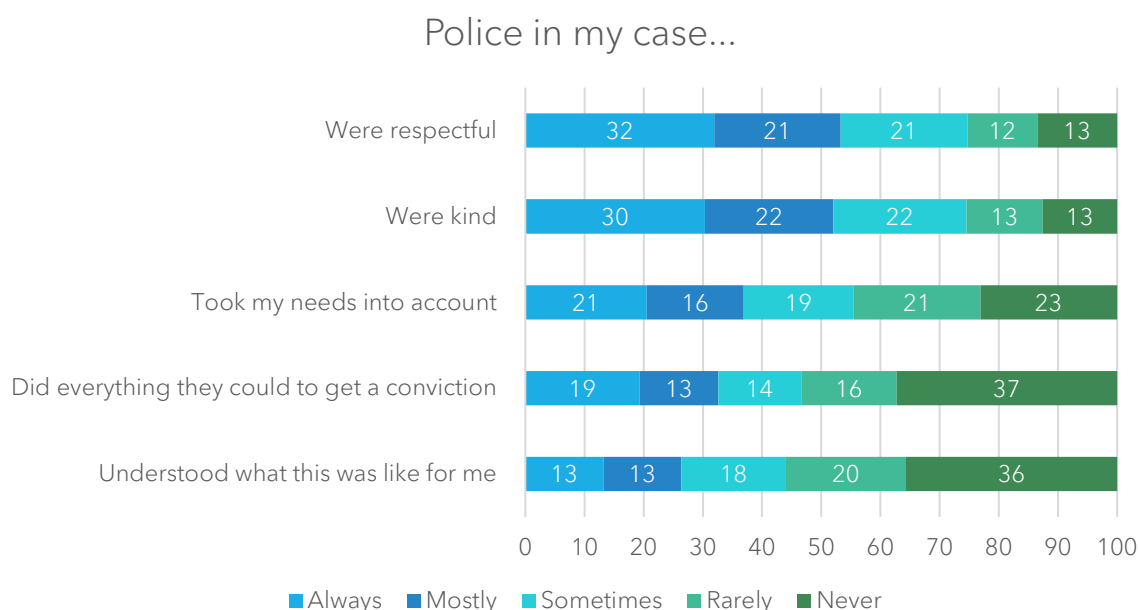
Differences between experiences of police empathy, kindness, and respect can be seen by recency of police contact, with those with more recent contact being significantly more likely to state that the police always or mostly did these things. For example, 49% of those who had had contact within the last three months said that the police took their needs into account, compared with 31% of those who had not had contact, and 63% of those with recent contact said that the police were respectful compared with 49% of those who had contact more than three months ago. Similar patterns were visible by the length of time police had known about the case and case status, with more positive views by survivors in cases where police had known about their cases for a shorter period of time or whose case was still open as opposed to closed. This finding could be due to improvements in police engagement with survivors in recent months and/or due to experiences of the police process being generally better in the early stages of the investigation. The survey needs to run for several more months before we are able to disentangle the two potential effects.

Autistic survivors reported more negative experiences. Autistic survivors were significantly less likely to say officers understood what it was like for them (16% compared to 28% of survivors who are not autistic), and less likely to say officers were mostly or always kind (39% compared to 53% of survivors who are not autistic).

Further differences in experiences related to procedural fairness were present by type of perpetrator. Survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence were less

likely to feel officer did all they could to secure a conviction (27%), compared to 46% of respondents whose perpetrator was a family member.

Figure 20: Police empathy, kindness, and respect (%)



Feeling safe, believed, and like I matter

A further core aspect of procedural fairness is to feel that officers act with one's best interest at heart (sometimes called 'trustworthy motives').²⁹ Less than half of respondents (43%) felt that the police always acted in a way that made them feel what happened to them was serious (see Figure 21). Only one in five respondents (19%) felt that officers always cared about them.

Procedural justice theory also concerns the importance of survivors being believed and listened to. The survey findings show only slightly over two in five survivors always felt listened to (45%) and believed (42%) (see Figure 22). Noting that due to trauma some survivors might feel more generally unsafe in the presence of others, another marked finding is that one in three survivors (31%) did not feel safe in the presence of the police officers handling their case.

Concepts of procedural justice stress the importance of survivors having a sense of voice and active participation. Whilst victims are not decision makers within the criminal justice process and their role within it effectively that of a witness, officers can give victims a sense of active participation and control over their involvement in the process, and influence how they are supported and safeguarded. Examples of this include considering: whether they wish for an ISVA to support them through the process or for another support service referral; whether they would like to meet the officer ahead of their Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interview; the timing of the ABE

interview; and whether they consent to officers accessing their medical or school records, or making a digital download from their phone once the officer has explained the reasons for doing so and discussed with them the parameters of the phone download.³⁰ A striking finding is the limited control survivors felt they had over their case: 63% felt that they rarely or never had some control over what happened in their case.

Again, recent police experiences appear to be significantly better across indicators than those that happened more than three months ago: 55% of respondents with more recent contact felt believed and 48% felt like they mattered, compared with only 37% and 32% respectively for those who had not had contact within the last three months.

Consistent with earlier findings, survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence were less likely to always or mostly feel like officers in their case made them feel like what happened was not their fault (43%, compared with 58% in cases involving perpetrators who were family members and 51% where perpetrators were complete strangers). Autistic respondents and respondents with a physical disability also reported worse experiences, being significantly less likely to say they felt safe in the presence of police officers, or believed and listened to (see Data Appendix for figures).

Figure 21: How police made survivors feel (i)

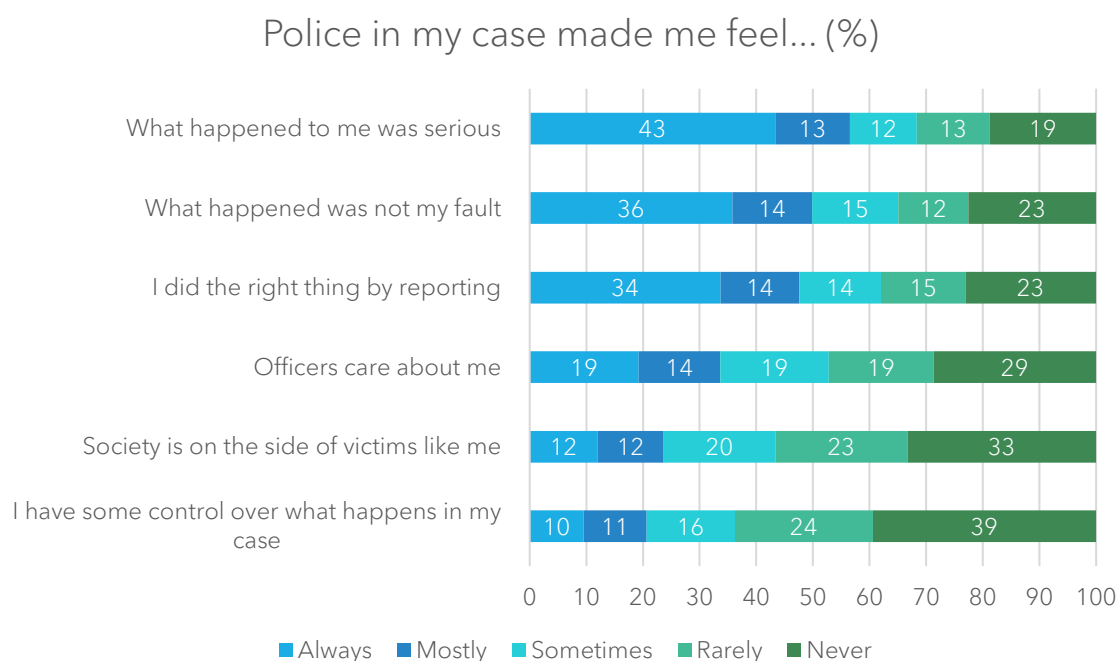
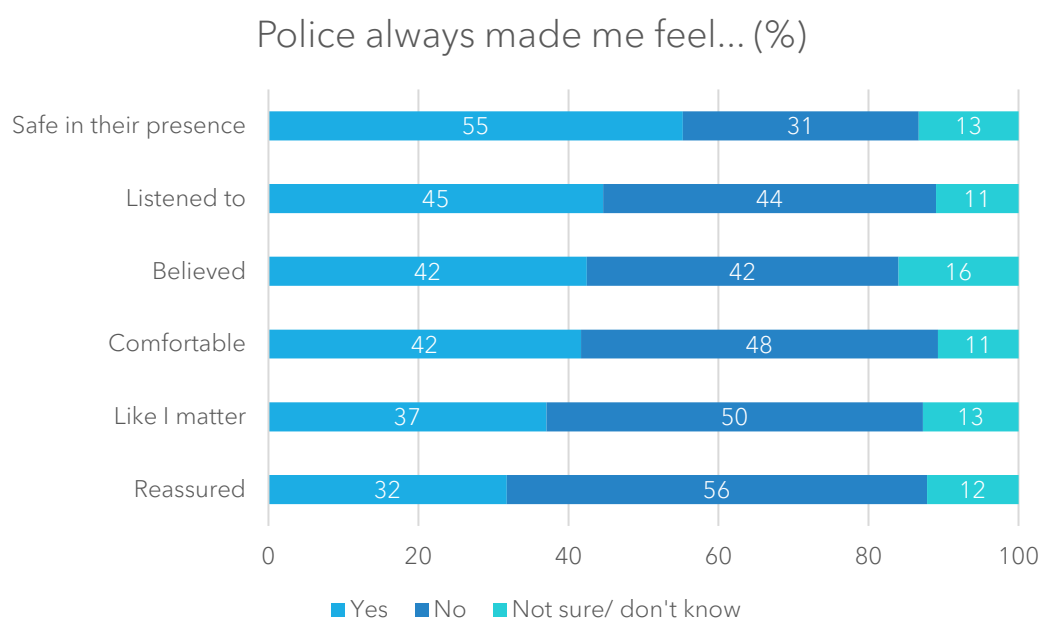


Figure 22: How police made survivors feel (ii)



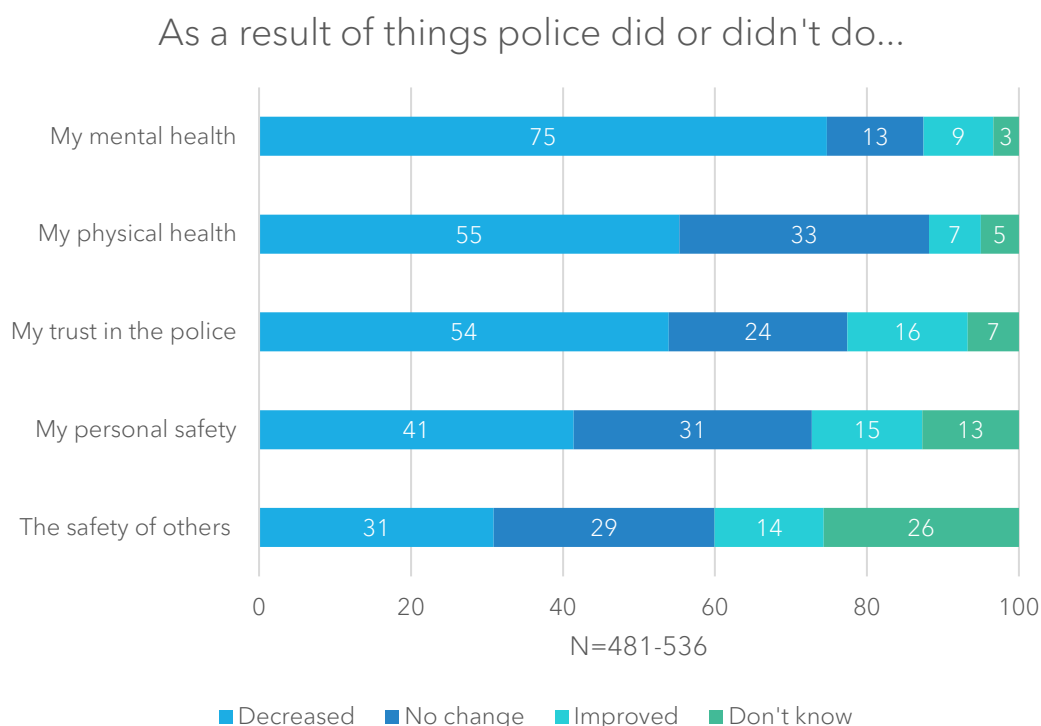
The impact of the police experience on survivors' lives

Respondents were asked whether police actions (or inactions) impacted on various aspects of their life (see Figure 23). An overwhelming 75% of respondents said their mental health had worsened as a result of their police experience. 55% of respondents said their physical health decreased, 54% said their trust in police declined, 41% of respondents said their personal safety declined, and 31% stated the safety of others reduced as a result of what police did or did not do in their case. Reporting of positive responses was rare, ranging from physical health increasing for 7% of respondents, to trust in police increasing for 16%.

Survivors whose cases are closed, or who have not had police contact within the last three months reported a greater reduction in trust in the police, and in mental and physical health than those whose cases remain open and those who have had recent contact with officers (see Data Appendix for figures).

Please note this question was not part of the initial questionnaire but was added halfway through the data collection period in response to the large number of free-text responses detailing how the police investigation had impacted on the survivor.

Figure 23: Benefits and harms of police action or inaction (%)



The devastating mental health impacts of police engagement were extensively highlighted in survivors' free-text responses. Some stated that their experience with the police was so traumatising that it was worse than the assault itself.

"I would rather be assaulted 1000 times over than go through the police process again [...]"

Whilst police investigations have the potential to contribute to improvements in survivors' personal safety and mental health, at present these positives appear to only be realised for a minority of survivors.

Willingness to report (again) in future

We asked survivors about their likelihood of reporting sexual offences to the police (againⁱ), encouraging a friend to report sexual offences, or reporting other crimes to the police (see Figure 24). This can be seen as an approximate measure of a survivor's overall feelings toward the police as well as a gauge for the likelihood of their willingness to report to the police in the future. Only one in four respondents (26%) would be very likely to report a sexual offence to the police again, bearing in mind 17% of respondents did not report themselves but stated that their case had

ⁱ About one in five respondents had not reported the rape or sexual assault to police, instead someone else had reported it (third party report), or it was an instance of 'telling, not reporting'.

come to police attention inadvertently. One in three (35%) would be very likely to encourage a friend to report a sexual offence.

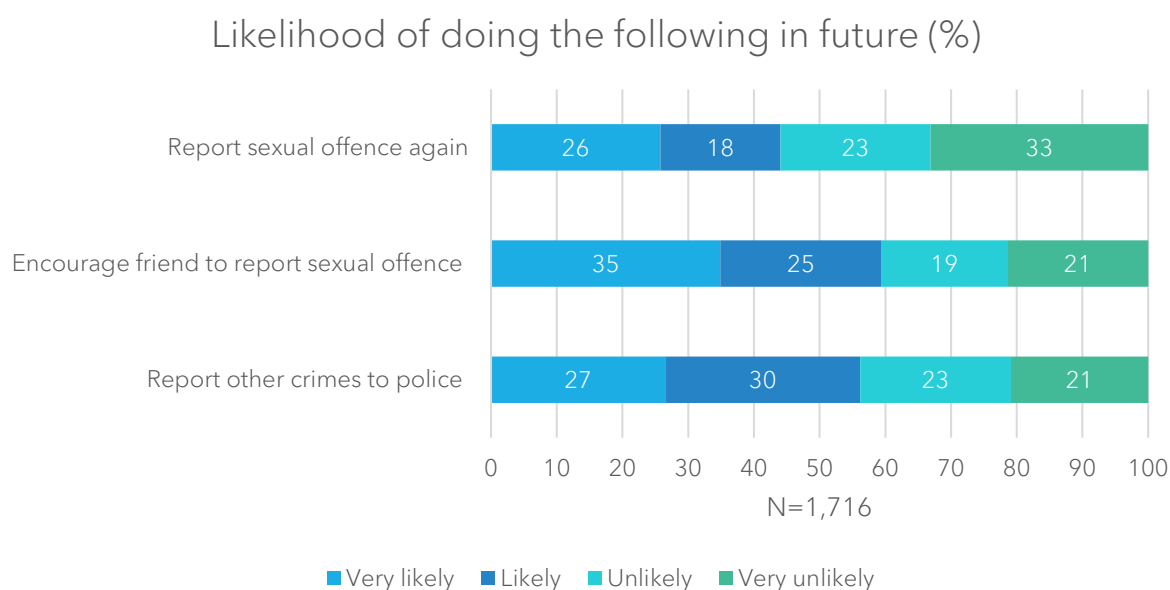
Willingness to report other crime types (non-sexual offences) is also shaped by survivors' experiences and judgments of the police.³¹ In this survey, only one in four (27%) would be very likely to report other crimes to the police. Additionally, only 26% of those who were very unlikely or unlikely to report a sexual offence again would be likely or very likely to report another crime to the police. Conversely, almost all (94%) of those who would be likely or very likely to report a sexual offence to the police again would also be likely or very likely to report another crime to the police (see Data Appendix).

There is little difference between those who did not intend to report to the police in the first place and those who did, in terms of their overall likelihood of reporting a sexual offence in future; and no difference at all in overall likelihood of reporting a non-sexual offence: 45% who intended to report were likely or very likely to report a sexual offence in future, compared with 41% who did not intend to report the sexual offence on this occasion.

Responses to free-text questions also highlighted the extensive impact that survivor experiences with the police had on their trust in the police and their willingness to engage with police again. In their responses, some survivors explicitly mentioned that they have been sexually assaulted again but they did not report this as a result of their previous experience with the police, and others mentioned that they would never report any crime to the police again.

"the police experiences devastated me and seeing a police car gives me a panic attack, I would never call them again not for any crime against me or my property. Never again." [sic]

Figure 24: Future reporting behaviours



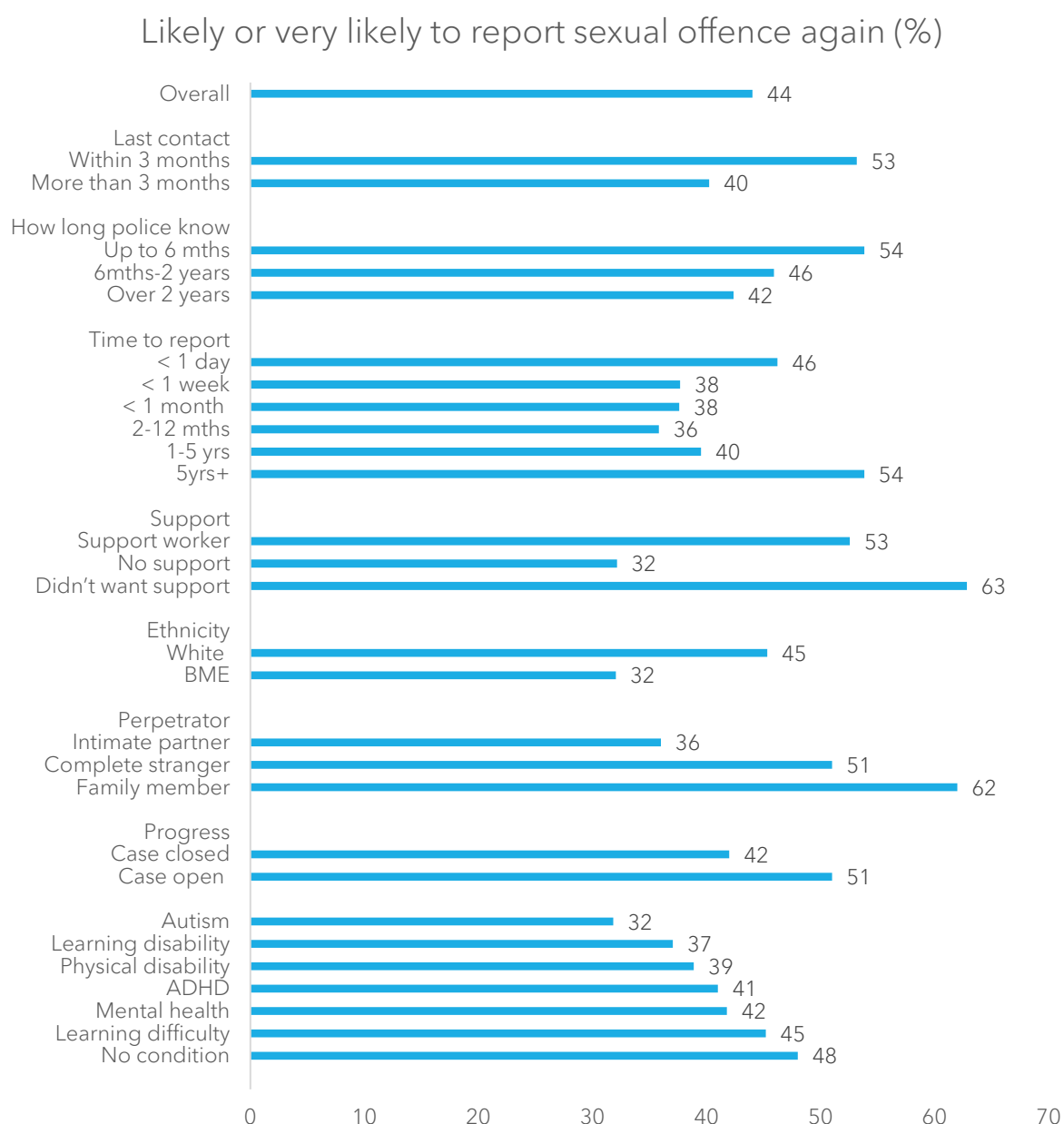
Differences in likelihood of reporting a sexual offence again were present across different groups of survivors (see Figure 25). In particular, a significantly lower proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic respondents were very likely or likely to report a sexual offence again: whilst 45% of White respondents were very likely or likely to report a sexual offence in the future, only 32% of Black and Minority Ethnic respondents would do the same.

Survivors of intimate current partner sexual violence were also less likely to report future sexual offences (36% likely or very likely) when compared to survivors of family member (62%) and stranger sexual violence (51%). Respondents were also more likely to report a sexual offence again if they had police contact within the last three months. This could be due to a range of reasons, such as having had less time to become disillusioned with the police and the wider criminal justice system response and timelines, or due to improvements having taken place. Respondents whose cases were open were also more likely to report a sexual offence again compared to those whose case was closed, and who had therefore been through a full process and knew the outcome of their case.

The findings also highlight the relationship between supportive police actions and the likelihood of a survivor reporting a sexual offence again. For survivors who said that all four supportive actions (looking at all the evidence, protecting them from the suspect, telling them about victims' rights, and referring them to support services) had happened, 85% were likely or very likely to report a sexual offence again,

compared with only 22% where none of these actions had occurred.ⁱⁱ Relatedly, the likelihood of reporting a sexual offence again is high for those who always felt like they had some control over their case, where 90% were likely or very likely to report a sexual offence again. We can see from these findings that there are concrete steps within police control that they can take to improve the experiences of survivors.

Figure 25: Future reporting behaviours with other factors

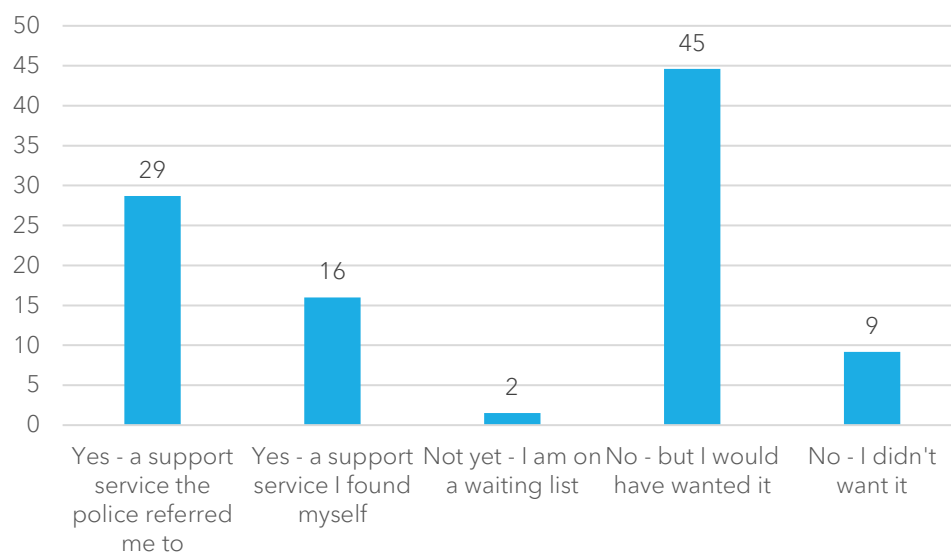


ⁱⁱ The additional supportive action of 'met in person to explain why their case was closed' was excluded from analysis here as it did not apply to all respondents.

The importance of the availability of independent support

The availability of an independent support worker to support a survivor through the criminal justice process significantly impacts on how survivors experience that process. In our sample, 29% of respondents received support from a support service the police had referred them to and 16% were supported by a support service they had found themselves (see Figure 26). Only 9% of respondents said they did not want support.

Figure 26: Whether respondents had a support worker in place or not (%)



N=1,703

Just under half of respondents (45%) wanted a support worker but did not have one and 2% were on a waiting listing for support services. Their police experience was significantly worse than that of survivors who had support (via a police referral or self-referral) or that of survivors who did not have a support worker because they did not want one.

"its taken 5 years for my case to get to court and i was only appointed an ISVA 4 years into the case. Having support from the get go would have been really beneficial to my mental health and also for just keeping me informed [...]" [sic]

For survivors who wanted support but could not get it, a majority (72%) stated that their experience with the police was worse than expected, compared to half (50%) of those who had support from a support worker. In addition, those who did not have support but wanted it consistently reported poorer experiences across the various survey indicators of what police did in their case, how officers made them feel, and how that impacted on them (see Data Appendix).

These findings highlight the value of access to Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs) and other support workers for survivors who want the support. It highlights the importance of police providing information about and referring survivors to such services so that survivors are aware of it and can make their own decisions about whether they wish to access independent support. However, free-text comments suggest that merely 'having' an ISVA or other support worker may not be sufficient; the quality of the support is important, too. Some respondents described how their ISVA was unhelpful, overstretched and rarely available, that their ISVA changed frequently, or that their ISVA was only able to provide minimal support.

"[...] SOLOS [sexual offences liaison officers] and ISVAS are invaluable" [sic]

"The isva that has been involved with myself has been absolutely amazing, and I wish they could get more accreditation for the work that they do, the Care and support has been second to none." [sic]

"[...] ISVA's are available, but they aren't therpaists. They can't listen to details of cases / experiences." [sic]

In my own words: survivors' free-text responses

Introduction

The free-text space at the end of the questionnaire allows respondents to tell us anything further that they would like us to know about their police experience, or to provide feedback on the survey itself. Over one in three respondents (736 respondents) made use of this option. This section gives an overview of these responses, grouped into seven broad themes:

- Theme 1: Lack of knowledge, care, and empathy
- Theme 2: Negative impacts on survivors
- Theme 3: Sympathy and lack of consequences for perpetrators
- Theme 4: Officers as perpetrators and officers as victims
- Theme 5: The power of positive police experiences
- Theme 6: The wider criminal justice system
- Theme 7: The survey as a tool be heard and improve things for others

Free-text responses allow for a deeper understanding of the range of lived experiences of the police, in survivors' own words. Free-text responses are ill suited for quantification, and we have thus largely avoided the use of statistics in this section. An exception is the theme of officer perpetrated or supported rape and sexual assaults (Theme 4) where we added statistics on the number of responses that mentioned personal experiences of police perpetrated sexual offending.

Theme 1: Lack of knowledge, care, and empathy

Rape myths in place of knowledge and understanding

Respondents shared experiences of officers dismissing what had happened to them as 'not rape'. Survivors described how they felt officers had perceived them as not having behaved 'correctly' during the alleged rape for it to be rape. Some examples mentioned included survivors removing their own clothing, being young, not appearing upset enough after the incident, not reporting sooner, or survivors staying in a relationship with the perpetrator with police officers seemingly unaware of how coercive controlling perpetrators trap their partners in the relationship. Some survivors added that officers needed to have more training, more knowledge, and more understanding of sexual offending and how it impacts on victims to respond to their cases appropriately.

"[...] I was told that "it wasn't really rape" and I was asked why I stayed with abusive partner and didn't just leave." [sic]

Survivor accounts show a pattern of survivors feeling undermined by officers' comments such as: *"we get a lot of girls like you saying they've been raped"; "girls who cry rape"; "are you sure you weren't just drunk and regretted it"; "girls of your age lie"; "you're making serious allegations here"; "are you sure, he doesn't seem the type"; "it's your word against his"; and "it's not really rape".*

A male survivor was told by the officer *"You have to put up with it as your a man" [sic]*, reflecting the myths that men cannot be raped. This chimes with many other free-text responses by male survivors who felt officers did not believe them because they are male or because they disclosed that they are gay. Some respondents remarked that officers did not understand LGBTQ experiences and that they were not believed or taken seriously as a result.

This is in addition to language that holds survivors responsible for their assaults, including: being *"too attractive";* being a lesbian; *"asking for it";* letting the perpetrator into their home; not leaving; and in some instances, accusing the survivor of having enjoyed it.

"[They said] it couldn't be rape because I was drunk."

Survivors further reported being made to feel like they had made up their assault, that they were making a fuss about nothing, or that they were reporting an assault for revenge. Survivors reported being made to feel they were to blame or were wasting police time.

The nature of the relationship of the survivor to their perpetrator was at times heavily highlighted and discredited by officers, including having a child with the rapist; being married to them; having had a relationship with them previously; or having consented to other sexual activity with the rapist previously.

"The officer said that we needed to put this silliness aside because its not rape if its your husband." [sic]

Some survivors felt like they had been treated as a criminal from their interactions with the police. In some cases, survivors had been criminalised for being drunk, or for driving offences when attempting to flee an assault, whilst the perpetrator had been let go.

"[...] felt like I was treated like the criminal throughout the entire case."

"The police made it clear they didn't believe me. They asked me about my whole life, and why I asked why, was told they liked their victims to be

'squeaky clean'. I was interrogated as though I had done something wrong and was made to feel unwelcome." [sic]

Lack of empathy, kindness and trauma-informed approaches

Respondents spoke of an absence of trauma-informed responses from the police. Respondents wrote about police responses which were lacking in empathy and at times speaking in a manner that survivors described as rude or disrespectful. Additionally, it was reported that the police did not understand trauma responses displayed by survivors (both the trauma resulting from the assault(s) and from current or previous treatment by the police).

"After that interview, I was more traumatised than after the rape and was given no support."

"Over 17 years on [...] feel that I am worth nothing & I don't matter. This has had a significant effect on me & my trust in anyone has been broken."

Some survivors felt that the officer did not seem to wish to engage with their cases due to the stigmas surrounding mental health. They felt that them having mental health conditions rendered their rape report not credible in the eyes of the officer.

"Conditions which result from rape such as PTSD [Post-traumatic stress disorder] and CPTSD [Complex post-traumatic stress disorder] should not be held against you and instead use against the perpetrators as a trauma definitely occurred." [sic]

"The police used my mental health history (anxiety and depression) against me and said that I'd made a false allegation because of this."

"victims with mental health conditions are discriminated against [...]" [sic]

(Mis)understanding the repeated nature of rape

Some survivors felt that previous sexual abuse victimisation was held against them. This is despite the fact that the nature of rape and abuse is that it is likely to reoccur.³²

"I don't feel that I was taken seriously, as my previous relationship [...] was also abusive - I feel that I was pre judged and not believed" [sic]

Some respondents implored that it is vital for officers to grasp that officer behaviours towards them impact how survivors will respond in cases of a further rape, for example by not reporting again because of a traumatic previous police experience.

"Or, worse yet, why did I not report it at the time? It seems that not reporting it at the time was a MAJOR issue in believing me when the reality is that my previous experience was SO bad and I'm now petrified of police officers."
[sic]

Protected characteristics and marginalised groups

Respondents highlighted a lack of police training in, and understanding of, marginalised groups and protected characteristics. Autistic survivors shared how they were met with disbelief due to their perceived 'lack' of autism and not confirming to stereotypes surrounding autism, and it was even suggested that their 'no's' may not have been clear enough due to them being autistic. This was experienced in tandem with officers often being unable to make reasonable adjustments for survivors with disabilities, including learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and autism, among others.

"There was no support worker offered [...]"

Other groups that described experiencing a lack of support and understanding included: children in care, survivors of honour violence, religious communities, survivors of child sexual abuse, and LGBTQ survivors. Men also reported that they felt that they were not taken seriously as survivors.

"I think male victims of Domestic Violence, coercive control get a rough deal [...]" [sic]

"There is very little LGBTQ help and specialism meaning nuances are lost as well"

Being pressured to drop the complaint

Some survivors experienced pressure from officers to drop the case. This ranged from being told that there was not point pursuing a case due to a lack of evidence (despite the survivor saying that there was evidence), to being pressured into dropping a complaint to protect the perpetrator.

"I was told by the police there was no point continuing as there wouldn't be enough evidence to secure a conviction"

"I was a 16 year old girl and I Was pressured by the officers to drop the charges [...]" [sic]

“Nothing was done”

Some respondents said they police never followed up on their report. For example, the survivor had made the 999 call or completed an online reporting form and simply never heard anything after doing this: *“nothing ever happened”, “nothing was done”,* that the police *“did not log it [their case]”,* or that they *“literally know nothing”* as to whether police ever did anything about their report.

Denial of validation

Many respondents detailed how officers dismissing their complaint, doing little to investigate it, or showing little care for or interest in their case deeply affected them and made it difficult for them to move forward after the sexual violence. These responses surface the importance of receiving acknowledgement and validation from officers: that officers take their report seriously and affirm that what is disclosed by them is a crime in the eyes of the law. Several respondents whose case did not result in a suspect being charged or convicted described their hurt when they later learned that their perpetrator was subsequently charged with, or convicted of, another sexual offence against a different victim – but not theirs. This felt like the police and criminal justice system was invalidating their experience and their worth.

“I finally built up the courage to report and my words were not good enough. I was not good enough.”

“of all the abuse and terror i suffered by his hands, not being taken seriously, not being believed has left the deepest scars.” [sic]

Poor information provision and communication with survivors

Survivors shared numerous examples of officers not providing them with enough or any information about what to expect from the police and criminal justice process. Countless respondents also mentioned in the free-text that this survey was the first time they heard of the Victims’ Right to Review and that officers had not made them aware of their Victim Rights. A recurring theme was of survivors not receiving updates in their cases from officers, having to chase for updates, officers in their case frequently changing and seemingly not knowing the details of their cases, and a lack of consistency in the information received about the progress of their case. Many commented on the negative impact such poor and inconsistent communication had on their mental health.

Inconsistency between officers and police force areas

Respondents with experiences of more than one police force often highlighted how different these were. The procedure of the investigation differed between forces, from: different (or no) dedicated interviewing suites; the presence or absence of

officers when visiting Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs); and some forces providing help that allowed them to escape the perpetrator whilst others did not. Where cases were passed from one police force to another there were problems of communication between the forces, and a lack of continuity of support. Some survivors described having a series of different officers in their case and how their experiences were very mixed, with them praising some officers and having poor experiences with others.

"The way they handle things are totally different to each other, therefore one would tell me one thing and the other force would tell me another."

"I had to speak to 30 different people in the space of 2 weeks after the incident and had to keep reliving the event over and over and over."

Theme 2: Negative impacts on survivors

The dominating theme of the free-text responses is the negative impact(s) the police experience had on the survivor.

"I was more traumatised by the way the police dealt with me than what actually happened and would never go to them for help again."

"I am more afraid of the police than being raped again"

Lack of protection from ongoing sexual and domestic abuse

Some respondents made it clear that the police had not been conducting proper risk assessments or understood the potential harm they could have been causing during the investigation. There were experiences among the respondents that showed a lack of training or knowledge of the dynamics of coercive controlling or violent relationships. For example, perpetrators were able to force their victims to withdraw their complaints; police action left women and children at greater risk from the perpetrator; police action 'returned' survivors from the hospital to perpetrators; and some survivors had to tell their partners that they loved them to prevent further attacks.

"The police were too slow When they said they would arrest the perpetrator for witness intimidation it didn't happen which meant he got back to me and it was too late for me to get away" [sic]

"[...] the police actively encouraged me to contact him regarding his belongings [...]"

"If the police had done something the abuse wouldn't have carried on. I only just escaped last month 19 years later."

Several survivors told us that since the police became aware of their situation, they have been further harmed by their perpetrators including having their home broken into, having their property damaged, being stalked, harassed, threatened, assaulted, raped, physically and emotionally abused, violently attacked, and almost killed.

Loss of trust and loss of access to police

Many survivors said mistreatment has led them to regret ever reporting to police, and a total loss of trust in the police. For many this meant a de-facto loss of access to the criminal justice system or police intervention because they will not contact police again. Some have said that they would prefer to endure harm again rather than to turn to the police, and some disclosed harm they were currently enduring, including sexual abuse and domestic abuse of which they will not report to police.

"I have been left with a deep seated distrust of the police as Result of how they treated me." [sic]

"the police experiences devastated me and seeing a police car gives me a panic attack, I would never call them again not for any crime against me or my property. Never again."

Some respondents disclosed that they themselves are serving police officers. For some, the way the force responded to their report of rape or sexual assault left them no choice but to leave the force. Some survivors said the poor police experience meant that they gave up on their dream of becoming an officer in future. Some respondents who disclosed their officer status said that their past experience of sexual violence has motivated them to become an officer so they could help others. Some of the same respondents also disclosed that the force environment is not built for the disclosure of past sexual abuse due to the fear of judgement, and described it as an environment that has allowed sexual assault to occur within the police force.

Psychological and emotional harm

Over and over again free-text comments detailed the negative impacts on survivors' mental health. Respondents wrote how they felt *"really let down"* by the police. Respondents said they felt discredited, not believed, accused of lying, not supported, and frustrated by a lack of justice. Some mentioned suicidal thoughts and feelings, and past suicide attempts related to their police experience. Officers had returned survivors to, or had left them in situations of great danger, for example

where the perpetrator is their partner/spouse or a family member. This included continuing to be repeatedly raped by the same person, or experiencing subsequent rapes which remain unreported as they did not wish to put themselves through the trauma of reporting.

Suicide is preventable. Help is available from the [Samaritans](#) and other support services.

Respondents gave numerous examples of officers' inappropriate behaviour and the traumatic impact it had on them. One survivor said they were asked to re-enact the assault with a senior male detective in public. Other traumatic experiences included officers not affording victims dignity and privacy, or not being mindful of how vulnerable and unsafe they felt in the presence of male officers. Numerous respondents said they were shocked to find their request for a female officer denied, instead having to be interviewed by a male officer and being questioned by a male officer about the details of the sexual assault.

"Whilst I may now understand why I was not allowed to put clothes on at the time I felt incredibly vulnerable (whilst also still physically hurt) being on the bathroom floor naked in front of so many police officers, some male, after what had just happened to me."

Others spoke of the destruction of and damage to their property/belongings; and many reported that there was a lack of clarity given by the police in relation to investigative procedure.

"I was assured I would get my clothes back, I particularly wanted my shoes back. Months later I found out they had been destroyed [...]"

Theme 3: Sympathy and lack of consequences for perpetrators

The feeling of not getting justice for survivors is painful for some and evokes a feeling of the perpetrator "getting away with it".

"I have a life sentence, he walks free."

"[...] rapists can get away with everything."

Sympathy for perpetrators

Many respondents drew a clear link between officer lack of knowledge, care and empathy (Theme 1) and a lack of safeguarding and support. Some survivors who experienced victim blaming attitudes from officers went on to contrast this with the sympathetic treatment that perpetrators received. Respondents reported that the police had referred to interviewing the suspect as "having a friendly chat"; seemed

to show more concern for how the police process would affect the perpetrator than the impact of the sexual violence on the survivor; told the survivor they thought that the perpetrator did not seem “the type”; appeared to side with the perpetrator in other ways; and suggested that the perpetrator’s word of consent was given more weight than the survivor’s word or evidence.

“But overall, I felt like it was my word against his, and to the police, his word was better than mine.”

Empowerment of perpetrators

Survivors also reported the feeling that perpetrators were empowered by the legal system which enabled them to make malicious allegations, laugh at their victims, and degrade them. Respondents relayed their feelings around perpetrators walking free, with no consequences for their actions, even when they had admitted guilt or when there was substantial evidence. A strong narrative from the respondents was that perpetrators are free to rape as they wish because there are no consequences in doing so, and that this is the way “the system is set up”.

“My ex partner mocked me when nfa [No Further Action] was the result of him being questioned.” [sic]

“[Force name] officers supported my ex and empowered him [...]”

Free to offend against others

Several respondents expressed concern about others being at risk due to police inaction, especially regarding perpetrators’ access to vulnerable people, working with children, in healthcare, as well among the public in general. Other survivors told us how police (in-) action had left them at risk, with perpetrators living in proximity or with them in the same home, free to stalk or harass them. These respondents continue to live in fear of both their own lives as well as the lives and wellbeing of others; some said they had to move elsewhere to stay alive. Other respondents reported to us that they knew their perpetrator(s) had offended again, victimising other people.

“[...] the perpetrators, who are currently around young children, are free to continue to harm those most vulnerable and in need of protection.”

“[...] if they had taken my case serious he might have been stopped.” [sic]

“It saddens me that someone else went through it because the police dismissed mine so quickly.”

Theme 4: Officers as perpetrators and officers as victims

In the free-text 27 respondents disclosed that the perpetrator was a police officer and in three cases the perpetrator later became a police officer, being allowed to join the force despite the rape/sexual assault having been reported to the force. Five respondents detailed how police had used their position as an officer to prey on, sexually pursue, rape, or sexually assault them while on duty. One survivor said she went to the police to report a rape and the officer in her case went on to rape her. In a further 11 respondents it was not clear from the text whether what was shared was personal lived experience of police perpetrated sexual violence or something the survivor has heard about from others.

Respondents went on to describe how the police protected the perpetrator, harassed them because they made the report, made them unsafe by passing on survivors' details to the perpetrator, or that the officer investigating the rape case was later found to have committed sexual offences themselves. Some respondents shared that they knew the perpetrators had close relationships with serving police officers and felt certain this was the reason their case was dropped by police.

"The man that raped me is now a serving police officer [...] He has kept his job as a serving police officer."

Some respondents said that their perpetrator was part of a predatory group of officers within the force. Some survivors said they fear for their lives as a result of reporting the officer, or have reported serious consequences they experienced at the hands of police perpetrators. Several of the respondents were police officers themselves and were offended against by a colleague. Survivors both inside and outside the police force talked about the police "closing ranks", concealing evidence, and covering up for perpetrators.

"My rapist is a serving (and armed) [force name] police officer, he was never arrested or suspended [...]"

Police perpetrated sexual abuse not only impacts those who have been targeted by officers, but also other survivors. Many respondents linked their own poor experience (where there is no suggestion of police perpetrated sexual violence in their case) by placing them in the wider context of well-known police perpetrated sexual violence or misogyny. Overwhelmingly, mentions of police perpetrated sexual violence was followed by the survivor saying they had lost all trust in the police and would never report to police again.

Theme 5: The power of positive police experiences

Some survivors have had incredibly positive experiences of the police and described how this has made a big difference to their life. Officers were described as “amazing”, “incredible”, “fantastic”, “brilliant”, “exemplary”, “faultless”, “wonderful” and “exceptional”.

It was noticeable that where respondents provided details as to what made the officer “exceptional” or “amazing” it was very rarely about whether the perpetrator was convicted, but about how the officer treated them. Many said that although the perpetrator never got charged or did not get convicted, the exceptional treatment by caring police officers had a deeply positive impact.

Four respondents said that the way in which they were treated by the police had saved their lives.

“I wish I knew this officers name or badge number because she was incredible and honestly saved my life.” [sic]

Kind, understanding and empathetic approach

The dominant explanation of what made their police experience positive was officers showing kindness and compassion, and being reassuring or understanding of what the survivor had been through. This finding suggests that police forces should not underestimate the power that basic acts of humanity can have on survivors after harrowing experiences of sexual violence.

“[...] I felt safe with her, she really tried to understand what things are now like for me.”

“[...] I have nothing for admiration for the way they sensitively dealt with my case.”

“[...] I know the police were committed to my case, they fought and fought for it to go to trial. My officer was extremely professional and empathetic, and her liaison with my support worker was a massive support.”

“Action, communication, tenacity and a sense I was believed and that she was fighting my corner.”

Officers who made survivors feel safe, were trauma-informed, were sensitive in their approach, and who understood the difficulties involved in talking about sexual victimisation were greatly valued. Officers that made survivors feel believed, heard, and listened to were described as having left a tremendous positive impact.

Survivors also spoke positively about instances where officers took their time with them so that they did not feel rushed.

“One of the officers I met was amazing. At no time did I feel rushed, she offered to meet with me as many times as needed before meeting to discuss what happens so we had a rapport to make it easier. She stopped when I needed her to stop, she reassured me, I felt safe with her, she really tried to understand what things are now like for me. She reduced some of the blame I felt and I never felt rushed.”

In some cases, survivors described terrible experiences, but spoke positively about instances where the police force acknowledged the mistake and took steps to remedy the situation. Respondents said it made them feel validated and like their concerns were being taken seriously. This highlights how police admission of errors and mistakes followed by them taking actions to address these failings has a real potential to reduce the negative impact on survivors.

Dedicated officers who go above and beyond

To survivors, going above and beyond meant the officers were available to them when they needed support, liaised with support workers, knew the ins-and-outs of their case and the survivor’s experiences, and made survivors feel like someone cared about them. In particular, survivors described the immense positive impacts of having a dedicated and passionate officer who *“really wanted justice for me”* or who was *“fighting my corner”*. There was a deep and lasting gratitude when officers went above and beyond, pulling out all the stops.

“I am so grateful to [force name] police. I have had the same officer throughout and her manner, communication, professionalism, friendliness, humanness, motivation means everything to me right now [...] I will never be able to thank her enough, and her force. If a conviction doesn't come from this, I am still so grateful to them for all they have done so far in helping me and sensitively and methodically gathering evidence, thank you so much”
[sic]

Having an officer who stays with the survivor’s case was deemed helpful to a positive police experience. In instances where it was not feasible for an officer to remain the officer in charge due to changes in roles or during periods of leave, survivors spoke positively about cases where they still felt like the officer was trying to ensure continuity of care for them by ensuring they remain supported and that their case was progressed by the new officer assigned to the case.

Consistent and clear communication

Consistent and clear communication featured repeatedly in descriptions of positive police experience. Survivors appreciated when officers explained the process and next steps to them and kept them updated about progress (or lack thereof). The manner of the communication was important too: survivors noted that good communication from officers was clear, honest, objective and open.

"There was clear communication the whole time that adhered to what made me most comfortable. Everything was explained to me. In general they were great, the outcome [unsuccessful conviction] is not their fault."

Theme 6: The wider criminal justice system

Although the focus of the survey was on police experiences, the survivor free-text entries showed how police experience interlinks with survivors' experience with the wider criminal justice system.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and courts

About 100 free-text entries referred to CPS or court experiences. Responses highlighted how a bad experience in court had meant they will not report to police again, even if their police experience had been good.

Responses referring to court experiences were overwhelmingly described in very negative terms, using words such as "harrowing", "dehumanising", "degrading", and "humiliating" to name a few. Many emphasised how the long wait for their case to go to court, last-minute changes and further delays to court dates, and case adjournments on the day took a heavy toll on their mental health.

When cases did reach the court, the court process was described as "disempowering", with survivors stating that they felt it was a weapon used to harm them and put them on trial, with mentions of inappropriate lines of questioning. At the same time, the process was perceived to be empowering for the perpetrator, giving them access to the vulnerability of the survivor, with several mentions of the perpetrator laughing at the survivors in court. In some instances, the trauma and destruction caused by the court experience was described by the survivors as having been worse than the rape itself.

"Fortunately my case did go to trial, and that is a whole other monstrosity - I genuinely believe the court case caused the most trauma and damage - even more so than the actual rape which is unbelievable to even think/feel/say."

The police and CPS relationship

For some survivors there was a sense of disorganisation of the police-CPS interface, and that the CPS and police did not communicate effectively about their case. Some survivors said there was a mismatch between what the police led them to believe in terms of the 'strength' of their case and the subsequent CPS and/or court outcomes. Several respondents said they would have liked the police to have painted a more accurate picture of what to expect from the CPS, or that they needed more information about the CPS and court processes and procedures.

"[...] I was under the impression it was a strong case to present to CPS This makes me think the police & CPS need to communicate & work better together to alleviate false hope for victims" [sic]

On the other hand, we also saw the frustration of survivors who felt that police anticipation of likely CPS actions meant they were not willing to properly investigate their case because they did not believe that it would result in a charge by the CPS.

Operating in an environment of underfunding

Some survivors made sense of their poor police experience by putting it into the context police forces are operating in, specifically chronic underfunding of the criminal justice system, a shortage of police officers and high workloads, but also how the law and the courts made prosecuting rape difficult. Some respondents attributed all their negative experience to these wider issues faced by police forces.

"It's not always the 'fault' of the police as these external factors have to be taken into account."

Many respondents expressed how their personal experience with the police made them acutely aware of the underfunding of the police service. They felt this underfunding was a main cause of a lack of officer training, a lack of resources, and understaffing. These conditions result in existing staff being overstretched and overwhelmed, which then negatively impacts both on the quality of service that they can provide (from being able to provide a female officer, being able to conduct ABEs effectively, building rapport, etc.) and on the speed at which they can progress survivors' cases, which currently face extensive delays. Where survivors said they felt a shortage of officers and resources was the reason for their poor experience, this knowledge and understanding did nothing to lessen the negative impact it had on them.

"There was no female FME [forensic medical examiner] available that night so I was given the option of accepting a male one or not reporting."

"I wish more was done to protect other future victims, and I wish that the police had more time, resources, staff and money so that they could investigate more thoroughly and get the results that I and others like me deserve"

Survivors noted that the situation within which the police operate resulted in the prolonging of their stress and contributed negatively to their mental health. Constant and ongoing resourcing pressures also meant that some types of cases were de-prioritised by the police. This was particularly noted by survivors of 'historic' child sexual abuse, that is, where the survivor is now an adult and the sexual abuse happened many years ago. This added further detrimental effects on the survivors whose cases were not deemed 'critical'.

"I feel that the service is stretched to its limit and more than once I was told that because it was historical, there were more current and critical cases that would be dealt with first. That was not at all good for my mental health."

Theme 7: The survey as a tool to be heard and improve things for others

Numerous respondents thanked us for the survey in the free-text comments and remarked on how grateful they were that it exists. Respondents said they felt heard and listened to, which is especially important when criminal justice experiences leave survivors feeling like their word does not count.

"I am grateful to this survey as I do want to be heard on this."

Others wondered what the point of the survey was. They felt police forces did not care and that nothing would change.

Some respondents saw the survey as a tool for helping them feel less alone and for these hidden traumas to be brought into the view of those with the power to enable change. Some waived their anonymity, provided contact details and offered to support the research in other ways if the opportunity were to arise. There was a feeling of wanting to speak up so that no-one else would have to ever endure what they went through.

"However painful, I can't change the past, just hope this survey will help change the present."

Survey: next steps

The survey is still ongoing and currently planned to remain open until the 30 June 2024. A follow-up survey report will be published in September 2024. If you are a survivor of rape or sexual assault whose case is known to the police and are considering taking part in the survey, you can find out more information about taking part here:

https://cityunilondon.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4GikU2bi38jO0MS

An easy-read version of the survey questionnaire and a British Sign Language video about the survey are in preparation and are expected to become available later this year (2023).

If you are a police force or victim support organisation and wish to help us promote the survey, please contact Sarah.Molisso@city.ac.uk who will provide you with more information.

To be added to the mailing list for updates from the survey and to be invited to webinars on the survey findings please also contact Sarah.Molisso@city.ac.uk.

For all other enquiries about the survey please contact Katrin.Hohl@city.ac.uk.

Concluding remarks

This report makes for difficult reading.

It is thanks to the bravery and generosity of survivors who were able to complete the survey that these findings are now here to read and to be acted upon.

For most of our survey respondents the police experience was unsatisfactory or harmful. Yet, the survey findings also evidence what is possible when officers get it right – and show that across England and Wales, there are officers who are already getting it right for survivors.

In their survey responses survivors have given clear, actionable pointers as to what policing can do now to consistently provide good policing to all survivors of sexual violence. The [National Operating Model](#) for Rape and Serious Sexual Offences provides concrete tools and guidance to support police forces in making improvements in response to the survey findings.

[The survey remains open](#) to allⁱⁱⁱ rape and sexual assault survivors who want to tell us about their experience of the police in England and Wales until 30 June 2024. A follow up survey report is due to be published in September 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ You must be aged 18 or over to complete the questionnaire because of research ethics constraints.

Help if you have been affected by this report:

24/7 Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Line

247sexualabusesupport.org.uk

☎ Call free on 0808 500 2222

Victim Support

victimsupport.org.uk

☎ Call free on 0808 1689 111

The Survivors Trust

thesurvivorstrust.org

☎ Call free on 0808 80 10818

Survivors UK (for men)

survivorsuk.org

💬 Chat via SMS on 020 3322 1860

Galop (for LGBTQIA+)

galop.org.uk

☎ Call free on 0800 999 5428

Imkaan (signposts to local by and for organisations that specialise in supporting Black and Minoritised women and girls)

imkaan.org.uk

Refuge (domestic abuse – including the National Domestic Abuse Helpline)

refuge.org.uk

☎ Call free on 0808 2000 247

Samaritans (24-hour crisis helpline)

samaritans.org

☎ Call free on 116 123

A longer list including local organisations can be found in English [here](#), and in Welsh [here](#).

Endnotes

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- ⁴ The National Operating Model for Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Pillar 3 resources include guidance to forces on effective partnership working with Independent Sexual Violence Advocates. See: College of Policing (CoP). (2023) *National Operating Model for the Investigation of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences*. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://www.college.police.uk/national-operating-model-rasso>
- ⁵ The National Operating Model for Rape and Serious Sexual offences provides resources for engaging with survivors such a victim communication toolkit with an information booklet, victim communication plan template, guidance on how to interact with survivors (Pillar 3). See: College of Policing (CoP). (2023) *National Operating Model for the Investigation of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences*. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://www.college.police.uk/national-operating-model-rasso>
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- ⁸ Hohl, K., Johnson, K., & Molisso, S. (2022). A Procedural Justice Theory Approach to Police Engagement with Victim-Survivors of Rape and Sexual Assault: Initial Findings of

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And APPENDIX 9: Pillar Three- Embedding Procedural Justice and Engaging Victims, in Stanko, B. (2023, December 15). *Operation Soteria Bluestone Year One Report 2021-2022*. London: Home Office, 123 – 139.

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