



Qualitative research into victims' experiences of reporting stalking to the police and subsequent police actions

**An annexed report to the super-
complaint investigation into the
police response to stalking**

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Contents

Executive summary	4
Background	5
Methodology	6
Research interviews	6
Analysis	7
Summary of themes	8
Police understanding of stalking	9
Taking stalking seriously.....	9
Initial reporting	9
Experience after initial report	10
Links to officer experience and understanding	11
Importance of feeling like the police take stalking seriously.....	11
Misunderstanding/misidentification of stalking	11
Officer training, experience and knowledge	14
Communication with victims	16
Lack of contact and engagement from police	16
Difficulties for victims obtaining relevant information about their case	17
Lack of a consistent point of contact for the case	18
Importance of listening to and empathising with the victim	19
Experiences of initial contact with the police.....	20
Lack of advice and signposting to support from police	21
Lack of accurate advice about stalking and how to stay safe	21
Lack of signposting to support	22
Victims' experience of the investigation process	23
Experience of evidence gathering and evidential needs.....	23
Quality of investigative actions taken.....	24
Timescales	25
Police resources	26
Victims' experience of protective orders imposed on perpetrators	27
Obtaining orders	27
Police responses to breaches of orders.....	28

Officer understanding and perceptions of cyber stalking.....	29
Officer understanding of cyber stalking.....	30
Officer perceptions of cyber stalking.....	31
Officer perceptions of victims and victims' personal characteristics	31
Influence of victim characteristics	32
Victim blaming	33
Need for the victim to be proactive	35
Using victim resources.....	36
Cross-force working	37
Recommendations from victims	38
Take action to investigate and help victims to be safe.....	38
Take victims seriously and listen to them	38
Have a named officer or single point of contact that victims can contact.....	39
Keep the victim informed	39
Do not make promises you cannot keep and do what you have said you will when you said you would do it	39
Consider sending female officers to female victims	39
Take steps to keep victims safe.....	40
Provide more support to victims	40

Executive summary

In November 2022, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust submitted a police [super-complaint about the police response to stalking](#) on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), College of Policing and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) jointly investigated the super-complaint and [published a report](#) setting out our conclusions and recommendations.

The IOPC conducted research with victims of stalking using qualitative interviews as part of the super-complaint investigation. The research informs our understanding of victims' experiences of reporting stalking to the police and the service they receive. This annex sets out the findings.

Nine victims for the sample were recruited through stalking victim support services contacted through the National Stalking Consortium.

The interviews identified several themes in relation to victims' experiences of the police response to stalking. These included:

- police understanding of stalking
- communication with victims
- lack of advice and signposting to support from police
- victims' experience of the investigation process
- victims' experience of protective orders and notices imposed on perpetrators
- officer understanding and perceptions of cyber stalking
- officer perceptions of victims and victims' personal characteristics

Participants also gave a variety of suggestions to improve the police response to stalking based on their experience. Some recommendations were provided after asking victims what the police could do differently to support them; others were suggested unprompted by participants when talking about their experiences. These recommendations concerned:

- police taking action in stalking cases
- police taking victims seriously
- provision of a named officer or point of contact for victims
- keeping victims informed
- keeping promises to victims
- considering sending female officers to incidents involving female victims
- taking steps to keep victims safe
- providing more support to victims

The findings of the research provide evidence of areas where the police's response to stalking may be improved and identifies some examples of positive experience. It also provides information about the impact that good and poor police responses have on victims.

Background

The National Stalking Consortium outlines four features of policing in [the super-complaint](#) which they believe are harming the interests of the public regarding the response to stalking across England and Wales. The four features were:

- misidentification of stalking
- flawed investigations and no further action (NFA) decisions
- failure to offer or refusal to apply for a stalking protection order on behalf of a victim in cases of stalking
- lack of response by police following breaches of protective orders

The National Stalking Consortium also identified further issues of concern, including a lack of referrals to specialist services by the police leaving the victim at risk; dangerous or unhelpful advice given to victims; evidence for a section 2A charge not being collected within the six month timeframe and thus being dropped; and the lack of stalking intervention programmes across England and Wales.

Several lines of enquiry were established to investigate the super-complaint. One was to gather evidence from people who have been victims of stalking about their experiences of reporting stalking to the police, the police's investigation of stalking, and the impact of the police response on them.

Evidence from victims was collected through qualitative research methods. The details of this are set out in the methodology section.

This report is a thematic research report that summarises the experiences that victims of stalking have had with the police, based on the evidence collected through qualitative research. The College of Policing produced a review of other research which covers stalking victims' journeys as part of the super-complaint investigation. This can be considered alongside this report.

Methodology

Research interviews

The information in this report is drawn from nine qualitative interviews that took place in October and November 2023 with victims of stalking. The interviews were carried out by members of the IOPC's research team. They conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals over Microsoft Teams or by telephone. Interviews lasted between approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

A discussion guide was produced to provide a framework for conducting the interviews. The discussion guide covered the key areas of concern raised in the super-complaint that relate to the service received by victims of stalking. It focused on the police response to stalking and not on details about the stalking the participant had experienced or details about the perpetrator.

The research aimed to take a trauma-informed approach. The researchers were led by the participants in terms of what topics people were comfortable covering, and how much information they felt able to share about their experiences. Some areas of the discussion guide were also more or less relevant for different participants – for example, experiences related to cyber stalking.

Each interview ended by giving victims an opportunity to ask any questions or to request support from a stalking victim service provider. The researcher also confirmed that the participant would be sent information about support that was available; this information was emailed to each participant after the interview. The researcher also engaged the participant in conversation on a neutral topic before ending the interview.

Sampling and sample limitations

Participants were recruited by contacting support services for victims of stalking through the National Stalking Consortium. Potential participants were sent a screening survey to make sure that they had experience of reporting stalking to the police, and there were no ongoing proceedings that could be impacted by being involved in a research interview. All eligible participants were invited to take part in an interview.

The sampling method used means that we cannot make any claims as to how representative the sample was of stalking victims. A small number of participants within the sample were involved in incidents that were linked to one perpetrator. While this does not negate the individual experience that the person had with the police, it does mean that certain types of incidents, force areas, or even police personnel may feature more heavily in the sample. This was taken into account

when deriving themes to make sure that these reflected a range of different experiences and forces.

Five of the nine participants had been in a relationship with their stalker and four had not. Seven of the nine participants' stalkers had received criminal convictions relating to stalking. Two had not, although one of these had a stalking protection order (SPO) in place. It should be noted that the proportion of victims whose stalkers had received a criminal conviction and / or a SPO is not representative of the majority of stalking victims.

The length of time that victims had contact with the police about the stalking they had experienced ranged from a few months to ten years (however, contact with the police was not necessarily continuous within this time). The majority of participants first had contact with the police in 2019, with experiences concentrated within the years 2019 to 2021. However, the earliest contact started in 2010 and the latest contact reported was in 2023.

Most of the participants had a mix of positive and negative experiences with the police; only one participant shared an account that was wholly negative and which did not mention any positives. There were no participants that had a wholly positive experience of the police response to the stalking that they had experienced.

Eight of the interviewees were women and one was a man. All participants were White and aged between 35 and 64. The participants' experience involved five different forces, although these were geographically towards the South (particularly the South East) of England. The lack of demographic diversity within the sample means that we have not been able to consider the potential impact that the demographics of the victim may have had when analysing the data (although gender of the victim does feature within the themes). We are also mindful that this is an additional limitation of the sample with regards to representativeness of all stalking victims.

Analysis

The research interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word by word. The interview transcripts were analysed by thematic analysis based on the six-step approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were generated based on the participants' telling of their experience only to try and avoid any biased interpretations of the data. However, it will not have been possible to negate the structure of the interview guide. The IOPC research team who interviewed the participants would also have their own levels of knowledge and experience on the subject matter. It is not possible to completely separate this from the data analysis.

Despite the limitations of the sample, the themes generated through analysis of the interviews were shared by the majority (if not all) of our participants. This suggested that within our (relatively similar) sample we had reached, or were close to reaching,

the point where an increase in the sample size alone would not have necessarily generated any new themes.

Interviews were carried out by two different researchers to provide quality assurance. The coding of data for themes was led by one researcher, but codes and themes were subject to discussion throughout the analysis process. The data was subject to multiple layers of coding in order to refine the themes and ensure their accuracy. Finally, the analysis and write-up of the themes in this report was reviewed by the second researcher before the report was finalised.

Summary of themes

Analysis of the interview data generated eight themes:

- police understanding of stalking
- communication with victims
- lack of advice and signposting to support from police
- victims' experience of the investigation process
- victims' experience of orders and notices imposed on perpetrators
- officer understanding and perceptions of cyber stalking
- officer perceptions of victims and victims' personal characteristics

Further sub-themes emerged within the main themes. These are discussed in detail below.

Within the themes, all victims gave examples of when they felt that they had received a poor quality of service from the police about their report of stalking.

Not reflected as a theme, but which may be of interest, is the experience of participants whose cases spanned two different forces. The composition of the sample means that caution should be taken when generalising the experience of these participants, so it would not be fair to reflect this within the main list of themes. However, this is covered at the end of the report in a section titled 'cross-force working'.

The narrative of the report is based on the collective experience of the victims we interviewed. Quotes from participants are used throughout the report to illustrate the points made - this does not mean that this was an issue or an experience reported by that single participant alone unless specified within the text. Many participants shared similar experiences and it would not be possible to include all relevant quotes within one report.

Police understanding of stalking

This theme captured participants' experiences about how the police officers and staff that they interacted with understood stalking and their report of stalking behaviours. Participants discussed possible reasons for any misunderstanding of stalking and the impact that this had on the service they received from the police.

The sub-themes contained within this section are:

- taking stalking seriously
- misunderstanding/misidentification of stalking
- officer training, experience and knowledge

Taking stalking seriously

All of the participants interviewed spoke about interactions they had that made them feel as if the police were not taking the stalking that they had reported and were experiencing seriously. Different stages of the investigations process were prominent within this feedback, as were links to other themes and sub-themes.

Initial reporting

Participants had mixed experiences of initially reporting stalking to the police. For some people, the fact that an officer responded to their call and visited to take a statement was an indication (at least at that stage) that the matter was being taken seriously. As one participant described:

“I think it was 101 that I rang and the, thinking that they would just go ‘oh don’t be silly, this is nothing to report’. But actually, they were pretty on top of it. Anyway, I felt like I was taken seriously and, we were pointed to a particular online form, I think that we had to fill in and then an officer came out to see me.”

The quality and professionalism of that initial contact helped victims feel like their initial report of stalking was taken seriously. The same participant as above reflected that:

“...I thought he was taking it seriously because he turned up and he was asking me questions. You know, he was listening and asking me questions,...So he, yeah, he treated the situation seriously, I guess.”

Victims felt that the stalking they had experienced was not taken seriously when care was not taken over the initial contact following reporting.

“I was upset by him, his manner and the fact that there was no care, in that person coming to talk to me and there wasn't a woman there. He came on his own. He didn't really take it seriously.”

Other participants struggled to make a report of stalking to the police. This indicated to them that the stalking they were experiencing was not being taken seriously:

“They asked me to come in and do a statement and [the receptionist in the police station] said “you need an appointment, you're not being stalked. No, we're not going to do a statement.” And I was like, but I spoke to your police. So basically, she refused to do a statement and gave me a really hard time and denied that anything was happening.”

Experience after initial report

However seriously the victims we interviewed felt that their initial report of stalking had been taken, many believed the police's actions after their initial report showed that the police were not taking the situation seriously.

For several people, the perceived inaction that followed the report suggested their experiences were not considered serious enough, or that they would have to experience something extreme to be taken seriously:

“I felt I was treated like... a sort of experiment like ‘let's just see how far this goes, let's just see how far this, what this person does’.”

“Are they thinking, ‘oh it's all low level’? I mean, you know, ‘she didn't get beaten up, she didn't get raped’. You know, nobody died. There's no actual physical violence on people...”

“I literally, I don't know what would have to happen for the police to care. Maybe murder, get murdered.”

Some participants who felt that their report of stalking was taken more seriously (whether soon after the point of initial reporting or at a later stage) felt that this was because there had been a number of people reporting stalking against the same perpetrator:

“I think once it became clear that more women were reporting this, like numbers, really made a difference in terms of, the kind of... the way I was spoken to”.

“And so, I just, I became just another voice in that story that was instantly believed because this is now the third person...”

For one participant, when the stalking behaviours they reported were not taken seriously and acted upon, they stopped reporting the actions they experienced as stalking:

“In the end, we decided rather than reporting this as stalking, we actually started reporting it as hate crime.”

Links to officer experience and understanding

Perceptions of how seriously the police took victims' reports of stalking also linked to perceptions of the levels of officers' experience and understanding of stalking.

When the officers appointed to a person's case were viewed by the victims to be inexperienced, or not specialists within the area of stalking, this implied to them that the situation was not being taken seriously by police:

"...They gave me some junior officers not well versed in this sort of thing. This requires specialist senior officers, right? This isn't just my wallet got pickpocketed at a Costa, you know, this kid didn't know. He was polite and everything, but for me, again, that spoke volumes in terms of how serious the police were taking this."

"I didn't feel that my case was being taken seriously. I felt like it was being passed to junior trainees, within the police who were sort of given the opportunity to look after a case."

In contrast, being appointed an officer who was perceived as being experienced and who recognised and acknowledged stalking behaviours made victims feel like their case was being taken seriously:

"And at no point really, in terms of contact with the police, was that taken seriously. I think until the, kind of that final investigating officer came on board. He also kind of reinforced the sense of it being, that it was stalking behaviour and not only was it stalking behaviour in certain instances, it was kind of really extreme stalking behaviour."

Importance of feeling like the police take stalking seriously

For all victims, the impact of feeling like the police were taking their reports of stalking seriously was clear. It was important in validating their experiences, as well as reassuring them that action was going to be taken to stop the incidents they were experiencing. As one participant explained:

"I think it was the officer taking it seriously... in that very first instance and coming out and doing a report was really positive in terms of me realising, 'oh, this is serious, I'm not making this up, this is serious'."

Misunderstanding/misidentification of stalking

The majority of victims interviewed provided details of experiences they had where the police did not recognise the behaviours they had experienced as stalking – sometimes misidentifying it as other crimes.

For some participants, the police's failure to identify their experiences as stalking appeared to be linked to the fact that their stalker was either not someone who they had been in a romantic or intimate relationship with and/or that the victim was not subject to typically recognised stalking behaviours, such as being physically followed. Sometimes this meant that the overall situation was misunderstood. One victim, who was stalked by someone while at work, explained that:

"I had an email first and then a phone call from an officer, who really didn't understand the situation, because they suggested and they sent me a sheet, saying that I should get in touch with the local domestic abuse charity. Well, this wasn't domestic abuse... And they'd failed really to kind of understand the whole situation."

Another victim, who was stalked by a neighbour, stated that:

"The police will not even acknowledge that it's stalking at the end of the day because he's not following me from work or home."

However, some of the people that *had* been in a relationship with their stalker also had experience of the police misidentifying the stalking they had experienced as other crimes:

"So I went to the police, I reported some of the stuff that had been happening and I felt more and more stupid and smaller and smaller because as I sat there and they were saying, "well, that's harassment", which I know they were mislabelling stalking as harassment - that's a massive error – "that's harassment, that's common assault, that's this." And they went through a whole list. "That's coercive control".

The positive impact that recognising victims' experiences as stalking had, was articulated by participants. Victims felt reassured once stalking was identified by the police and actions taken in accordance with that:

"It should have immediately been recognised as a potential stalking case. It took too long to get to that point and when it got to that point I felt reassured, I felt taken seriously and I felt more confident in the police. But it took too long to get there".

However, as reflected above, some participants felt it took too long for the police to name the behaviour as stalking and felt it would have been helpful for their experiences to have had this label sooner:

"So, I think the things that I wished the police had done was to kind of, call it stalking up front. To recognise that because that would have given a name for me to give, to signpost to organisations."

Two of the participants, who were stalked by people they did not have a relationship with, never received an acknowledgement from police that their experiences involved stalking. One victim explained:

“I got in touch with Protection Against Stalking... They totally agreed it was stalking. They tried, they did try their best with the police, but the police would not acknowledge it was stalking.”

The other victim rationalised that:

“I think again, it's perhaps they have one specific view of what stalking is, and haven't seen it kind of in a wider context”

Missing patterns and escalation of behaviour

Victims spoke about the police missing patterns of behaviour in their cases, or not acting on what they felt were obvious patterns. One victim summed up:

“There was a pattern of behaviour, but they didn't do anything about it.”

For some victims, this pattern was not just in relation to their case but included a history of previous, similar, behaviour that was known to police.

“So, [the perpetrator] left prison... moved 250 yards from me, has a long history, not just with my [other victim] or me, but others, and other criminal offences. They didn't connect the dots. They didn't even tell me this. They told one of my witnesses.”

Another victim described the delay they experienced waiting for linked cases to be joined up and dealt with as a whole:

“...that's something that the police should be acknowledging in a way and understanding and being able to bring, to connect these two cases rather than seeing them as kind of totally isolated cases, which is how they were being dealt with at the time. Even though we kept referring to each other in our statements and things like that. And it just felt like no one was joining it up... it's like, pieces were missing in a way”.

One victim felt that the patterns of behaviour were missed because they were treated as separate incidents.

“And every time I had to phone up, I had to retell the story to them. Because you know, their computer system or however they log it, just didn't kind of flag up that things were happening at the same post code and with the same person”

Other victims described how they presented police with a timeline of the stalking that they had experienced, but that this was not acted on.

“Because [victim's stalking support worker] amazingly did this timeline for me and it just goes on and on and on and on. All these different offences and you could not get the police to take an interest.”

Victims also gave examples of repeated, escalating behaviours for which there was no response. One victim explained:

“And I had evidence, and [the perpetrator] had a history and it just was like, if you'd written it in the sky, you know, it wouldn't have been more obvious. And they did nothing. They did nothing.”

Another victim described that:

“I've been telling the police for months and months it's getting worse and all I got told was, “well, he hasn't actually done anything yet. We can't actually do anything about him”

Officer training, experience and knowledge

Participants appreciated that not all officers can be specialists in stalking. However, they expected a general level of training, experience and knowledge among the officers that they came into contact with. They often felt this was lacking.

“So, I can understand training, and not everybody can be an expert on identifying this sort of crime, but at least have an appreciation to say something's not right here.”

“I think from when someone makes a 111 call and there's any hint of stalking or harassment, the first responder who goes to see that person, takes a statement, needs to be someone that understands stalking and harassment. Whether or not it goes any further than that, that person who goes round needs to have an understanding, be empathetic, be able to give proper advice, be trained up on stalking and harassment and be working alongside the Suzy Lamplugh Trust from day one. Rather than, you know, just sending your average sort of bobby on the beat who's like, oh god you know, another domestic, because that's what it felt like.”

Victims also described limited stalking knowledge and awareness among officers resulting in contact from police that sometimes added to their distress:

“I expected the police to understand that I, as someone that had been harassed and stalked, that receiving a number of a phone call on my phone that was from an unknown number would have been alarming to me and I wouldn't pick it up.”

“I get a visit from two police officers unannounced turned up nine-thirty one evening which in itself is all pretty bloody triggering. Don't tell me their names, don't give their collar numbers.”

When victims had contact with officers that they felt were sufficiently trained about stalking, this was highlighted as a positive aspect of their experiences with the police:

“[Officer name] was just - was really- he was quiet, he was smart, he was properly trained and trying to have empathy and concentration.”

“I think what went well was when senior detectives and officers were assigned to look at my case, who clearly had been trained in and specialists in stalking and harassment. Because immediately I felt, I remember getting a phone call saying, ‘don't worry, like we're looking after you now, like you're in safe hands’. And I really felt like that.”

However, even in cases where victims reported positive experiences, there was a perception that it was difficult to get to the stage where an appropriately trained officer would be assigned to the case.

“And when you do get a senior officer who is trained, you know, and does understand what stalking is, they're great, but it's a needle in a haystack”

“It took a long time before the right people were assigned to my case. It felt like, the case was being passed from different people within the police service, until someone recognised that this was a stalking case. At that point things changed for the better, because I was allocated someone in the safeguarding unit, someone who was a specialist in stalking who took my case on and dealt with it properly.”

There was also a feeling among those who had positive experiences that they would not have received the outcome they did if they had not been allocated the specific officer that was eventually assigned to their case with the right knowledge and experience. One participant explained:

“But I think, yeah, I think without this particular officer, I don't think anything would have happened ... And I'm just really really thankful that he, in the end he took over the case.”

Victims also talked about the overall level of policing experience and seniority of the officers that they had contact with. Many victims described experiences where officers who were perceived by victims to be more junior had taken on tasks which they felt had led to a lack of understanding and/or failings in their case.

“The officer who'd interviewed [the perpetrator], was junior and inexperienced and had handled it completely badly and completely wrongly. And [the perpetrator] basically got the upper hand and the interview was messed up and it was all their fault. So they admitted responsibility and liability, didn't change the outcome and they handled it really badly. I felt really let down by the police then, much more so than the initial stalking.”

“Anyway, next thing I know I'm getting phoned up by this...policeman with no life experience whatsoever. He's one of these people who [the perpetrator], who he's manipulated and he puts on the charm and people fall for it.”

Communication with victims

The communication that victims had with the police was a feature throughout the interviews we conducted. There were several sub-themes relating to victims' experience of communications that came out strongly from all, or the majority, of participants. These are:

- lack of contact and engagement from police
- difficulties for victims obtaining relevant information
- lack of a consistent point of contact for the case
- importance of listening to and empathising with the victim
- experiences of initial contact with the police

Lack of contact and engagement from police

The majority of victims spoke about difficulties they had in contacting the police or receiving contact from them.

Some victims described how officers rarely answered their calls or emails, during what was quite often a distressing time. As one participant described:

“I felt that it was really difficult to get hold of people in the police. If I needed to speak to someone or e-mail them. I wasn't getting responses back, and on a day-to-day basis I felt more and more that I was, I was scared for my life.”

For a number of participants, lack of contact fed into a feeling of actions promised by police but not delivered:

“I worked with one person, PC [female officer], who you know, was very nice to speak to and that was sympathetic. But you know, using her mobile, I could hardly ever raise her on the mobile. She wasn't very good at responding sadly to emails and there was a sense in, which I suppose, it felt like she was promising things to happen, but then those things just fell away and they never came to anything.”

In addition to difficulties getting officers to respond to their contact, victims also described instances where they expected contact from officers and this did not happen. Sometimes this was discussed in a general sense, as summarised by one participant:

“There was lots of communication that should have happened. Didn't happen.”

For others, updates on specific aspects of their cases were expected. However, they did not receive contact in relation to this. As one victim described:

“Now, if you're arrested, if a perpetrator is arrested for whatever crime against you, the rule is that the police phoning up, they [let you] know that he's been released. I was told once. Once, I was told when he was released. On one occasion I was only

aware he was being released, because he was standing outside my [place of work] waving a stick and shouting.”

Victims also described having to ‘chase’ for contact or updates themselves:

“I think I only got told because I asked that that was generally the way.”

“But even while all this was going on... it just felt like everything was languishing in the background and it was very clear that [stalker]’s activity was getting more and more extreme. And we were constantly reporting this back to the police and saying can you add this to the file? Can you, you know add this we’re just... you know it was kind of almost, it was phone calls every day...”

However, participants noted the difficulties in knowing who to contact and how:

“It felt like the systems, the kind of communication channel through which, after that initial reporting was not very open and was not very easy to use, really.”

“There’s no way to speak to them apart from anything else.”

Participants described how lack of communication from the police contributed to the sense that the police were not taking stalking seriously. This was highlighted in the theme above, and is illustrated by this participant:

“It felt like it had got, it had been just lost in the ether of administration because it wasn’t important enough.”

Conversely, when officers took time to communicate with the victim and talk them through the process, this was a source of good experience for victims, who then spoke positively about the officer.

“They made the arrest, and he was there talking me through the process, and also was available when I needed to talk to him or e-mail him. So, he was actually pretty good. He picked up his socks, you know, but it took a long time to get there.”

“The officer was also doing I think a very professional job of keeping me updated over the months, years that this took place.”

Difficulties for victims obtaining relevant information about their case

Linked to the lack of contact that victims felt they had with the police were the difficulties victims described in obtaining relevant information about their cases. As seen above, victims felt that there were updates that should have been provided, that they did not receive. This included important updates that impacted on their safety, such as the details of protective orders, changes in court dates and information to say that perpetrators had been released from custody.

Again, victims described only receiving information when they pro-actively contacted the police for an update:

“...In the end I got hold of an officer who said ‘Oh. Yeah. No, sorry. We should have told you. Should have told you he was out’.”

When participants did receive information, this was sometimes only after long delays:

“It then took me another month, to actually get what the terms of the banning order were, because the police hadn't sent that through either. And it really was like trying to, you know, get blood out of the stone really from them.”

Other victims reported never receiving certain information from the police:

“But I, then I felt very much like on my own, like I never received paperwork about the restraining order. Which is weird. I wasn't really given instructions about what to do if I heard from him again. I wasn't told the timeline that he was going to leave the area, I just had to guess from when I didn't see his car anymore.”

Lack of a consistent point of contact for the case

The majority of participants raised difficulties they encountered by not having a consistent point of contact for their case, or not having one until late in the process.

For some, the lack of a consistent point of contact linked to the difficulties outlined above about receiving communication and updates from the police. One participant explained:

“I was given like a crime reference number but I wasn't given any information on like next steps or what I could do or who I would speak to or, what was the officer's name and when would I hear back. Like there was nothing clear given to me in terms of process except, he took his statement, he told me to block him and then said, you know someone, someone will be in touch.”

For others, the lack of a consistent point of contact meant having to re-tell their story multiple times to different officers. Participants described the impact of this:

“So I was having to tell the story which in itself, was you know, really traumatising as it went on.”

Having a consistent point of contact was felt to be beneficial by participants. Those who had a consistent point of contact (or a specific officer in charge that they could contact) appreciated the continuity it gave, while those who did not have a consistent point of contact expressed a desire for this continuity:

“I mean, I don't want an instant response. What I want is an officer who understands the case every time...”

However, even where victims were appointed a consistent point of contact or officer in charge, some found that the officer left soon after; sometimes this happened multiple times within the space of a few months. Others received a consistent point of contact later on and would have appreciated having this point of contact earlier in the process:

“So, like having some kind of direct line or a kind of single officer, that did happen much further down the line, but that's when it was in the system. And actually I think you need that earlier, that that should have been in place with that first report when the police officer first came out. There should have been a way to continue that kind of contact”.

Importance of listening to and empathising with the victim

All participants spoke about the impact of situations where the police officers they interacted with did or did not listen or have empathy with them. For some participants this was spoken about in a general sense. However, for the majority of participants, this was articulated very clearly as being about officers ‘having empathy’.

Victims had mixed experiences with officers; a few mentioned situations where officers did have empathy. This contributed to the perceived professionalism of that officer:

“He was actually very professional, very empathetic through the process.”

“She was, there was a lot of empathy, a lot of care and time and consideration taken over the stuff. It was quite sensitive. It was a bit embarrassing for me, but I never felt exposed by her or like she was you know taking, treating it lightly and anyway, ...that was a good experience.”

However, other victims talked about situations where the police that they interacted with did not have empathy and the impact that had. For some, the lack of empathy linked to a lack of understanding of stalking. One participant explained:

“No, I didn't have confidence that the officer understood the impact this was having on me, and my wellbeing and my day-to-day like state of mind. I didn't feel that he showed empathy or understanding. He didn't mention stalking or harassment at any point.”

When an officer did show empathy, this was linked to a general sense of professionalism, as well as an understanding of stalking:

“[Officer name] was just great. You know, he really was. He had empathy, he completely understood the case.”

Other victims who felt that the police lacked empathy talked about the impact that this had on their overall experience. One person explained:

“But I, what I would have liked to have had, is to have felt that I was taken seriously and had some sense of empathy or something because there was none. There was, it felt like there was no training done by that person to empathise with a person who was feeling frightened. It was a very negative experience, that first one.”

Experiences of initial contact with the police

Most participants had negative experiences of the initial contact that they had with police. Some victims experienced delays or lack of action in relation to their report. For some victims this linked to a refusal to acknowledge that they were being stalked, or that there was any crime to act upon:

“I said when I genuinely needed you after receiving this very threatening letter and you didn't do anything. Anyway, that is literally how it started. And that sets the scene for the whole of my experience with the police. That...this policeman said, what, well what do you want me to do? And I said to him, tell him to stop. What I'm asking for, stop climbing over the fence into my garden.”

In other instances, this perceived lack of action reinforced the concerns they had about reporting the stalking:

“So, I sort of, I was quite reluctant to phone the police because I felt like you know, I had a I guess victim's guilt and thought I don't want to waste their time and they sort of reinforced that feeling because there was no sense of urgency on their side.”

Other participants spoke more generally about the uncomfortable or unpleasant nature of making an initial report to police:

“The experience with the [force] with an issue reporting what was going on wasn't brilliant. And it felt like that was a very uncomfortable stage that we, each of the women, needed to get through...”

A couple of participants did talk about positive experiences of their initial contact. This involved the person they were in contact with taking the report seriously and taking action with the information or signposting the victim to the next steps of the process. However, in both cases there was a lack of action by the police following this. This undermined the positive nature of the earlier contact.

The overall importance of the initial contact that victims of stalking have with police was summed up succinctly by one participant:

“You know, because initial contact's really important as well. It's actually really important that the first time you have a conversation with the police about that, that

you're believed and that you feel some sense of support or something's going to happen.”

Lack of advice and signposting to support from police

This theme focuses on two elements: the advice that the police did (or more often did not) give to victims, and the lack of support that victims felt they received. This includes an absence of signposting to available sources of support such as specialist stalking groups. Victims often spoke about these things together, articulating an overall desire for better support from the police after reporting stalking.

Lack of accurate advice about stalking and how to stay safe

Most participants discussed the advice that they were or were not given during the period that they were in contact with the police.

The majority of participants said that they were not given any advice by the police in relation to the stalking they were experiencing and about their own safety. Victims described looking for sources of advice themselves:

“Nobody told me anything how to deal with stalking, nothing at all. The only thing I've learned about stalking I have learnt by going into the sector myself, making the contacts, I've learnt myself...”

One victim was told that the police were not able to give advice:

“And this officer said I can't advise you, I can't give you advice. I'm not allowed to give you advice.”

Those victims that were given advice by the police in relation to stalking had mixed experiences.

One participant described the advice they had received as focused on capturing evidence - as opposed to keeping safe:

“It was very difficult to know and I don't believe I got any advice about how to stay safe in particular. I feel like the emphasis was all on the behaviour and capturing their behaviour and reporting their behaviour.”

A couple of participants described the advice they had been given as ‘common sense’ rather than useful advice. One participant said:

“Well, if the advice is block him on social media and don't answer the door to him, then yes, but that's common sense. That's not really advice, I don't think”.

However, the advice to block stalking perpetrators goes against [College of Policing advice to police responding to stalking](#). This states that: ‘Officers should be mindful not to advise: Victims to come off social networking sites or block the suspect or any associates.’ Multiple victims gave examples of times when they were given advice or information that was incorrect.

In another example, the victim was initially advised that informally asking their stalker to stop contact was enough. A more formal course of action was not recommended until later in the process:

“Um, I think they did suggest I send a - because he was continuing to get in touch - send a really formal cease and desist. Though that was kind of quite confusing because...the first Police officer, when the police officer came out to take the report, he said he didn't... I sort of asked, you know, he keeps getting in touch, what should I do? And he said, well, you've told him not to, that's enough”.

Another officer advised one victim to engage with their stalker online to encourage a (what the victim presumed to mean virtual) attack:

“First of all, he argued with me and he said he couldn't do anything unless he saw a hard copy of my stalking protection order. Finally I managed to get him to look at it on my phone and he said...he said it's not the police's job to investigate on your behalf. He said, you should engage with your stalker and encourage him to attack you.”

And in another example, one victim was advised that police could not respond to their report until it reached a quite extreme level of severity:

“The police actually said to me on the phone, “sorry, there's a thing. Basically, we can't come round to you unless he's actually, you know, broken your door down and is in your house.” So I'm like, oh great, that would be too late by then.”

One victim reflected that while they were told that the officer could not give advice, the officer did provide an explanation of next steps, which was appreciated. This highlights the importance of good communication with victims throughout the process:

“So that, I thought was really good because, he couldn't tell me what to do. But at least he gave me information to say this is what's going to happen”.

Lack of signposting to support

The majority of participants stated that they were not signposted to sources of victim support at any point during their contact with police. As one participant explained:

“But every time I phoned, no. They didn't kind of say, oh well, you know, there's a stalking protection organisation, oh Victim Support. They didn't mention that at all. It was just really, well, let's dish out the crime report number and almost we've done our job.”

Victims explained that their connection with sources of support happened because of their own research, or through existing networks:

“I really, really wish I had had that information [about support networks] really early on because in the end I, you know, luckily, I have, I've got a friend who works in that area and so I spoke to them and they were able to point me in the right direction. But I think without that ...I wouldn't have found out about those things as quickly as I could”.

Victims who were signposted to support received this by asking the police for help, who then provided names of stalking charities. Victims described how that was the extent of the signposting and that they then searched for further details themselves.

Victims also articulated how helpful it would have been to be signposted to support, and have someone to talk to throughout the process. One participant (who was eventually signposted) said:

“The time that I was left waiting for and not being able to speak to other people about the case once things sort of got to the latter stages was, I would have liked to have someone to speak to, to understand what I was going through.”

Victims' experience of the investigation process

The investigation process is a main element of the service that police provide to victims. As such, it may be expected that the victims interviewed would discuss this process, regardless of experience. However, within the interviews there were four distinct areas relating to the investigation process that victims spoke about and that are therefore highlighted as sub-themes. These areas were:

- experience of evidence gathering and evidential needs
- quality of investigative actions
- timescales
- police resources

Experience of evidence gathering and evidential needs

The majority of victims felt like they were responsible for gathering the evidence in their cases. The following quotation summarises these feelings:

“And still it was all on me. I still had to provide all the evidence. I still had to do my job.”

Another victim went further and described how they felt the outcome they received was largely down to the evidence that they collected:

“I was lucky that I got a conviction and a serious conviction...but I think a lot of that luck was down to my determination, to provide compelling evidence and not wait for the police to take action. But I felt like I became the detective in this case. I almost became obsessive about it, about the evidence I provided, how organised I was, printed things off, labelling them. I felt the eventual outcome was 80% down to me.”

Some victims described how they were asked by police to collect evidence of their stalking. A couple described the impact of being asked to do this:

“They told me keep taking notes of you know what's going on. Which is actually really challenging because when you're being stalked you don't want to, you want it to go away and it doesn't, and you're being asked to concentrate on it.”

Other victims talked about how the police still refused to recognise that any crime had taken place, even though they were asked to collect evidence, or were proactively providing the police with evidence they had collected:

“I was told keep collecting the evidence and then being told as I'm reporting stalking, continued stalking, “well he's not actually done anything wrong yet, he's not actually doing anything.” So, which completely skews and twists how you think about what you're reporting.”

Another victim spoke about a lack of police action that appeared to be related to the fact that “there really wasn't that kind of bar reached for an actual arrest”.

Victims provided examples of other reasons for inaction given by police. These included no action being taken because of a lack of certain evidence - with multiple respondents highlighting reliance on CCTV evidence. One participant explained:

“So I phoned the police...and the police investigated but because, again, there was no CCTV of the incident or that could be made out of it in the town, nothing ever happened to it. So, where I don't know. I don't want to say, kind of, where was kind of, policing before CCTV.”

Another said: “So they say you have to have CCTV and then you give them the CCTV they go ‘oh, sorry, isn't clear enough is it? can't really do anything”.

Quality of investigative actions taken

Several victims commented on the quality and accuracy of police work that had been involved in their case. Experiences were mixed, with participants often citing positives as well as incidents of poor quality.

Officers were described as “professional” and “diligent” in relation to taking statements or the investigative actions that they performed on a case, “going into the details of what things meant”.

However, victims also described times when the work they had experienced was of poor quality. Often, this was in relation to what could be described as basic police work. Victims described examples of poor house searches, note taking, reporting, and interviews. Multiple examples involving statements were mentioned, including forgetting to take statements, struggling with taking them, or having to take a statement again because of the quality of the first statement.

One victim described “[the officer] had to come back three times in order to get statements because he kind of forgotten to do it.”

Another described how when their case was transferred to a different force “they had to go through the whole thing again with me because he didn't take a good enough report. It didn't make sense. It wasn't clear. It was just not fit; it was just very poorly reported on by him.”

In one instance, the perpetrator's house was searched but the search failed to find an illegal weapon. This weapon was not discovered until a further search took place:

“So you know the police have searched a house but not searched it in any way. If you're not gonna find a sawn off [shotgun] in that airing cupboard, you know, there's massive issues there”

Victims described the personal impact that experiencing low-quality or inaccurate work had on themselves and others, as well as meaning actions had to be repeated.

One participant described being present when another victim of the same stalker became “very angry and upset” when they reported their stalking. This was because of the quality of the notes that were being taken by police. Another victim stated that the person who took their witness statement was given the task as they “needed to learn how to” do it. They struggled, leading to them feeling like “I'm not being respected here. So, you know, I didn't feel I was treated with respect. The issue wasn't taken seriously”.

Timescales

Most of the participants talked about their experiences of long timescales within the investigative process.

The overall timeframes that victims' cases and victimisation spanned varied from a few months to, at the most extreme end, 10 years. This long time period in this case was attributed to police failing to act following the initial stalking incident which allowed it to continue and escalate:

“There was a kind of an early, so it spans a course of about 10 years. And uh, yeah... it went on probably 9 years longer than it needed to be because of police failure.”

Victims mostly spoke about timescales in relation to individual parts of the investigative process. Both the timescales involved, and the stages, varied. One victim talked about an arrest that took two weeks to action, one described interviews that took three or four months to take place. One example was of a protective order that took eight months to obtain, and another victim explained how there had been a period of two years from their stalker being arrested to being charged. The feeling was that action took too long, regardless of the variety of timescales involved. One victim summarised their experience of the process:

“It was just so inordinately slow and cumbersome”.

Perceptions of timescales was also linked to the sense that victims did not have contact from the police about what was happening on their case, so they felt generally unclear about what was going on. Communication about actions and timescales may have been helpful, as one victim expressed:

“I think it could have been dealt with much quicker. I felt let down by the time it took and the way in which I wasn't kept... I wasn't... I didn't feel I got clear, reliable advice about the time frame that this case would take.”

Police resources

Four of the nine interviewees gave examples of times (sometimes multiple instances) when they were told by police that action could not be taken because of a lack of policing resource.

Examples included decisions not to undertake certain investigative actions:

“Just the reams and reams and reams and reams of these messages... So we say look, here's the evidence and [officer] looked at and he went, I haven't got time to go through all that.”

Another example related to decisions not to act on reports that the perpetrator of the stalking was breaching bail conditions:

“I knew very clearly at one point that [the perpetrator] was breaching his bail conditions and was living at home when he shouldn't have been. And I don't feel that police took enough action, to rearrest him because they said, look, you know, there's nothing we can do except patrol day and night. We don't have the people to do that.”

Reference to limited resources was also given as a reason for not meeting victims:

“And I can see now in like the trail of emails where he's just blatantly avoiding meeting with me and I'm getting the- I mean the most unprofessional emails. ‘There's only three officers on in, three officers on duty in the entire district...”

Another victim said the lack of an available police car was given as an explanation for not responding to a breach of a stalking protection order:

“So this man who's literally just been released from police custody, is waiting on my way home from work in the dark, in an area where he's not meant to be because he's broken [the] stalking protection order and there's no car.”

Victims' experience of protective orders imposed on perpetrators

Victims' experience of protective orders can be grouped into two distinct areas: obtaining protective orders and notices, and experiences of police actions when these orders were breached.

Obtaining orders

The majority of victims had experience of obtaining or trying to obtain various protective orders and notices against the perpetrators of their stalking. These included stalking protection orders (SPO) and restraining orders.

Participants had mixed experiences of SPOs. Two people had stalking cases where an SPO was obtained. One person described how they were given an SPO “*pretty rapidly*”. They believed this was because the police and their stalking support person worked together. The other person detailed how the SPO had taken eight months to issue. They reflected that:

“The government brought in these stalking protection orders to actually make them slick and fast, but actually, the whole thing seems to have been slowed up and almost feels as if you know, it's really a last resort sort of activity.”

This view of long timeframes was shared by another participant. They reflected that they understood that they probably would not be able to obtain an SPO because of demand:

“I probably won't get one because they're in such demand and there's a queue.”

The reasons why other participants did not have SPOs in place were different. Some were not sure why an SPO had not been issued and explained that the police did not talk to them about SPOs. In at least one case, the person's experience of stalking was before SPOs were available.

Another victim initially thought that an SPO would be put in place but was told that “they weren’t going to go with it because [the perpetrator] hadn’t reoffended”. Another victim talked about how they felt that police could have applied for an SPO in their case but they would not because they did not acknowledge the actions that had taken place as stalking. Instead, they were told to pursue a civil order themselves:

“No, they wouldn’t do that, you would have to do a civil thing. I don’t have thousands of pounds to spend on that, you know.”

Both of the participants that had an SPO in place reflected that although they were given one, they “didn’t have any say over it” in terms of its content. This experience was not unique to SPOs. Another victim who had a restraining order in place also described how they had not had input into the restraining order – it was only once they received a letter with the details of it that they realised it had been issued.

Other participants who had experiences of restraining orders being obtained for their stalkers described difficulties in getting details of the contents of the order, or an explanation of how the order worked. As one victim described:

“Like, how do I manage this? What do I do? It’s all back on me again. Like, how does this thing work? How does the restraining order work? I got very little guidance on that and it kind of was left to- I actually ended up speaking to my solicitor about it rather than the police or the prosecutor.”

Police responses to breaches of orders

The majority of participants talked about breaches of orders that they had in place. The discussion guide included prompts about whether actions of police made the victims feel safer. This was the focus of many of the reflections about the police response to breaches of orders.

One victim described how having an SPO in place did make them feel safer. However, other victims with SPOs and restraining orders gave various reasons why having these in place did not make them feel any safer.

For one victim, their overall experience meant that they lacked the trust and confidence that any breach of the restraining order would be taken seriously. They stated that “even if I was to report a breach of the restraining order... I don’t feel like I would get the response or the support that I would expect”. Another victim stated that they did not necessarily feel safe because “reporting that will just be a really long process. Like now, I don’t know. I have no idea who I would contact. You know the case is closed.”

Difficulties in contacting the police about a breach were shared by another victim who had gone through this process. They explained:

“But when I phoned about it, I kind of expected having phoned them to kind of know about the stalking protection, and to kind of have either the perpetrators name flagged up and all the stalking protection order. But I just kind of got through to [force’s] I guess switchboard, explained what had happened and then I just had to relive the whole events of the last 18 months as to why this stalking protection order had been issued in the first place and who I was and what was going on and now kind of, I wanted to report what I considered... to be a breach of it.”

Other victims who had experienced a breach of their orders described a lack of appropriate action that diminished their perceptions of the usefulness of their order. One victim detailed how they experienced multiple breaches of an SPO but had been told that no crime had been committed:

“You get bored of some new officer coming along and telling you that no crimes being committed, because they don't understand the SPO, they can't take a statement. I mean, you say, oh, what's the point?”

Another victim explained how they had reported a breach of a restraining order, but that the breach was dealt with incorrectly. They described the impact this had:

“Yes, he was arrested again, but then nothing happened because the police didn't deal with it correctly. So to me, the restraining order counts for nothing. So it completely sort of diminished the importance of it and I felt the police completely let me down on that. Almost more so than the stalking offence.”

However, negative experiences or perceptions were not universal. One participant described a positive interaction with police after they encountered the subject of their restraining order:

“But I contacted the police straight away when I bumped into him and they came round that day, that evening, and there were two of them and they were completely on board and took it very seriously, but, you know, probably because he's been in jail. So..., yeah, they were good”.

Officer understanding and perceptions of cyber stalking

Several participants experienced stalking that involved elements of online offending or cyber stalking. Two main sub-themes emerged from discussions about their interactions with police about cyber stalking:

- officer understanding of cyber stalking
- officer perceptions of cyber stalking

Officer understanding of cyber stalking

Several victims who had been cyber stalked talked about experiences which they felt showed a lack of understanding by officers of cyber stalking. For many, this centred on the advice that they had received about online safety. This ranged from suggestions about removing content posted on social media which “weren’t that helpful” due to practical limitations with different platforms, to advice that was incorrect. One participant described one officer’s advice about cyber stalking, which was in direct contrast with advice they received afterwards from a stalking charity:

““Oh, well, if this man’s a nuisance to you, just block him and ignore him. Or we could send a letter to him and tell him to stop if you want.” And I said, “no I don’t really want you to do that right now”, which was the right thing to do, that I found out later. I also found out later that these, two pieces of advice that police gave me were... wrong on many levels.”

Another participant described advice given where police encouraged the victim to engage with their stalker online to prompt an “attack”:

“I mean as I say, that officer said to me and encouraged me to engage with him, in order to encourage him to attack me. And we’ve been talking about a Facebook post, so I presume he meant online, because he said not physically. So yeah, I think he was actually advising me to engage with him online.”

Other experiences more generally indicated that victims felt that officers lacked understanding around cyber stalking. One victim described how their stalker had made a death threat on Facebook, and the reaction to this from an officer:

“They were really quite annoyed about it because if we would ‘just stop looking’, one officer said to me, ‘it doesn’t count’. He made a death threat. Very young officer from [the police] unit and I said, ‘he’s made this death threat’ and he goes, ‘yeah, but he hasn’t got any followers’.”

Other victims spoke about how they had to proactively collect and provide evidence of cyber stalking for the police. One victim described how they felt it was up to them to have the foresight to retain evidence of cyber stalking that later featured in their court case:

“...I had the foresight to just, in the end all of that material was submitted as part of the court case. But if I hadn’t have had the foresight to keep hold of that information, all of that evidence would, you know, if I’d have deleted - because, you know, a lot of me just wanted to delete everything because it kind of, you know, it was horrible.”

Officer perceptions of cyber stalking

Closely linked to officer understanding of cyber stalking, were reflections on officers' perceptions of cyber stalking and how seriously they took these types of stalking behaviours.

Participants spoke about officers not taking incidents of cyber stalking seriously. As one victim explained:

"...Phone calls were taken seriously, so, you know, when he rang me, it was taken seriously. But other things [social media communications] were, yeah, weren't given the same sort of value or significance."

Victims appeared to face specific challenges around incidents where perpetrators used social media to post things about them. One victim described how:

"No, they weren't interested in that at all. If anything they would just downplay it. ... he's not directly messaging you, is not using your name, how can you prove this is you?"

Another victim described how their cyber stalking was only taken seriously once they provided the evidence in physical format:

"Only when I went into the police station to give my evidence and my statements and gave them print offs of all of them, so they could physically see the reams of paper and the conversations and see in black and white, all the things that were being said. I think when I spoke over the phone about it, no. But I think because I was so determined to provide compelling evidence and I proactively printed everything off and took stacks and stacks of paper, yes. Some people might not be so you know, determined, and therefore might not have had that taken as seriously".

However, one participant did describe how the police in their case took the cyber stalking seriously:

"I mean, the guy in charge of the whole case definitely took it very, very seriously. He probably took it more seriously than me".

Officer perceptions of victims and victims' personal characteristics

Victims felt that their experiences were influenced by officers' perceptions of their personal characteristics and circumstances – whether gender, any previous links or connections with their stalker, the extent to which they fit the idea of what victims described within the interviews as a 'good' or 'perfect' victim, or how proactive they were in dealings with the police. There are three sub-themes within this theme:

- influence of victim characteristics
- victim blaming
- need for the victim to be proactive

Influence of victim characteristics

Victims perceived that their own characteristics had an influence on the response that they received from police. There were three main areas that participants raised: gender, previous links or connections they had with their stalker (or lack of), and the need to be a 'good' victim. These led to a sense that the characteristics of the victim may play a part in the service received from police.

Gender

Three participants raised concerns about the extent to which they felt their gender had influenced their experiences. All three related to stereotyping.

The male participant questioned whether the police response was related to stereotypes about the gender of stalking victims. He stated:

“They certainly needed their fact sheet updated and even you know, again, gender awareness really. You know, one does wonder whether or not because I'm a male, you know, things don't happen quite so quickly.”

Whereas the female participants felt that they had been seen by police as a stereotypical “crazy” or “hysterical” woman. One victim explained:

“It's really hard, particularly being a woman of a certain age, because they just think you're being hysterical. And even when you show them the stalking protection order, they're like well yeah, but you know, it's not that bad, is it?”

Nature of the victim's previous links or connections to their stalker

The sample of victims interviewed for this research included a variety of different relationships to their stalker. Some had been involved in an intimate relationship, other stalkers had been encountered through the course of their work, where they lived, or through their romantic relationship with another person. As such, 'relationship' here means the broader way of talking about how someone knows someone else, as opposed to any particular familiarity or intimacy. None of the participants we interviewed were stalked by a complete stranger.

This crosses over with the 'misunderstanding/misidentification' of stalking sub-theme under 'police understanding of stalking'. It is not possible to separate one from the other. As such, the information contained in that section may be useful to refer to when considering this section.

In addition to the experiences highlighted there, a couple of victims raised more specific examples where they felt that not having had an intimate relationship with their stalker affected the response to their reports of stalking.

“Unfortunately, in a way, I wasn't in the highest risk because he's not an ex-partner, because there was no sexual relationship between, that automatically downgrades it, because male violence against women is much worse when there is a sexual element.”

In another example, the victim was being stalked by a neighbour whose actions included entering the garden of her house:

“It's just, why can't you just do a thing about him not being on my property? Nope sorry, it's not- And then they say because it's that kind of thing is for like domestic violence and obviously he's not, it's not like we're, intimate partner violence.”

Being a 'good' victim

The final area highlighted by victims in relation to their personal characteristics was the need to be a 'good' victim.

Two victims described how they felt that their overall experience and the outcomes they received may have been influenced by not fitting into the mould of a 'good' victim. One stated that “... I might be the wrong kind of victim, I'm not victim enough...”. Another victim described how they felt that the police they interacted with wanted them to be the “perfect victim”. They explained “I think they want me to be all little meek and mild and crying and all that kind of stuff. And I'm not going to be that person”. There is an apparent overlap with the stereotypes about gender, although not explicitly articulated here.

Another participant reflected how they felt a need to “play the game”: “I followed their rules and yet they refused.” This implies that although there was felt to be a need to be the 'good' or 'right kind of' victim to receive a satisfactory police response to stalking, that this may not itself be enough.

Victim blaming

Five of the nine participants shared experiences where they felt that they were partly blamed by the police for their experiences of stalking.

One victim specifically referred to feeling victim blamed by the police. Another referred to “victim shaming”, describing that “this whole time I felt victim shamed. I felt mocked, I felt toyed with, more so than actually the stalker.”

Another victim described a situation where they were told that nothing had happened to them. This reflects the experiences of other victims in situations where police misidentified their stalking or did not take it seriously. It also highlights how this can

feed into a sense of the victim feeling at fault for the impact that the stalking has had on them:

“And he was saying things like, ‘well, he didn't actually do anything to you, did he’? So he was kind of, I felt put off by him. I felt like I was being kind of denigrated a bit.”

Other victims highlighted experiences where the police implied that they were – or actively treated them as – a potential perpetrator themselves. One victim described a situation where they reported that their stalker was in breach of their bail conditions:

“So I was telling the police this, like he’s breaching his bail conditions, he’s living at home and they just sort of said ‘look, just because his car is there doesn't mean we can prove he’s actually living at home’. And you know, kind of ‘what do you want us to do, we can't start breaking into his house and be careful [victim], because you're going to become the stalker if, you know, if you're not careful’.”

Another victim was brought in for questioning by the police after their stalker made accusations against them:

“So I need to go in for questioning. And I'm like, “pardon and he's like, ‘no, I need you to come in because he's saying that, you know, you harassed him’ and I'm like, ‘but he was in my garden and I've got videos which I've already sent you, by the way’.”

Several victims spoke about encounters they had with officers where negative attitudes were displayed towards them and/or the situation they were reporting.

One victim detailed a very negative encounter they had with a group of officers who were “confrontational” and “shouting” at them as they cried. This was in response to a report of a breach of a SPO, where social media was used to breach the order. This also included communication with the victim that was victim blaming in nature:

“So I show them a stalking protection order and I show them the post. And one of them said, ‘I'm not being funny, but if I want somebody out my life, I just block them’. And the other one said, ‘yeah you might not like it, but it's just free speech’... They were actually laughing because they walked past my [neighbours' residence] and they were laughing as they went.”

Another victim described how they felt uncomfortable when making their initial report because the officer focused on the intimate details of the victim’s relationship with the stalking perpetrator, despite its irrelevance to the report:

“[I]t was all quite salubrious with him, he just wanted to know. It felt to me like he just wanted... juice [gossip].”

Another victim described an experience where an officer they communicated with came across as “judgy” about the victim’s personal circumstances:

“I think she was trying to empathise, but sometimes I felt that, you know, she would say things like, “oh, it must be really hard being a single woman and I can't imagine what it's like to have to do Internet dating”. And it just, that just felt really inappropriate. And actually, in a weird sort of way, a little bit judgy.”

Overall, the impact of this was that victims did not feel like they were being taken seriously.

Some victims also contrasted the perceived attitudes towards them with the way that the perpetrators of their stalking were perceived. One victim explained that:

“Our interviews were heard. What we were saying was heard, but I don't feel it was taken as if we were very serious, very seriously. The officer who interviewed it didn't sort of laugh it off, but it was a bit like sort of shrugging their shoulders, “they're a bit strange. They're not very well.”

Another victim described the comments made by police about their stalker and how it made them feel:

“The police at times made me feel like, I that, like [the perpetrator] was the victim and not me. So they were making comments after he was brought in for questioning, one of the detectives said to me, oh you know he's very well spoken isn't he? And he's a very intelligent man, almost showing sympathy and empathy towards him, which I didn't feel was appropriate and if anything should have been directed at me.”

One victim described attitudes towards victims as being the fundamental issue with regards to treatment of victims of stalking:

“They don't put the victim at the centre, they put themselves at the centre. And the systemic, you know, widespread cultural issues and the police, I think are the biggest barrier. You can teach and inform. That's easy. It's the attitudes and the beliefs and how they treat victims, I think is the fundamental issue here”.

Need for the victim to be proactive

The themes on communication with the police and police understanding of stalking have highlighted some examples of victims feeling they were required to take action to progress their cases. The feeling of victims needing to be proactive to push the police into taking action was a feature in all of the interviews we conducted. As one victim summarised: “From a police point of view, I had to be proactive with everything”. This contributed to the sense from victims that their personal characteristics affected the service and the outcomes they received, given that they were able and willing to be proactive in the manner they felt was required.

Collection of evidence was one area where all victims had experience of needing to be proactive. This is discussed under the ‘victims’ experience of the investigation process theme under the sub-theme ‘experience of evidence gathering and

evidential needs'. It also feeds into a wider sense of victims having to be proactive. There was a strong feeling that it was up to the victim to collect and provide evidence to support their reports of stalking, as opposed to police initiating their own investigations to collect this evidence. Victims shared the feeling that it was this work that led to any positive outcome that was achieved on their case. One victim said:

“Again, I had to, you know, collect the evidence really, to make the whole thing stand up”.

In a related vein, other victims described situations where they felt that they had to carry out investigative actions. One victim described how they had to analyse the bundle of evidence they had previously provided to the police:

“So I had to go through all of this with highlighter pens, so that the police would look at it.”

Another victim described doing their own “detective work” to look for other victims:

“Anyway, I started doing my own detective work because I thought police are not doing anything here. He's not, I am not his only victim”.

Other victims spoke about being proactive in taking the lead on actions – pushing for things like updates, communication, advice, support, and progress on various stages of the process. Victims felt that the outcomes they received were largely down to them doing this – and being the kind of person to pursue things in this manner:

“I think if I hadn't been so pushy and asked them to help, you know, if I was a different type of person, I wouldn't have had the right outcome”.

Overall, the sense from victims was that the responsibility for their case and the burden for any action that could be taken, was on them:

“Almost a year later, I identified who the perpetrator was...I called the police, and they said what do you want us to do about it? I said, “well the [notice] is still valid, I've got the evidence” and they said, “so what?” And they said, “what do you want us to do, arrest her?” And I said, “well, I don't know, you tell me. I'm not an expert.” So, the burden was back on me”.

Using victim resources

Related to the need for the victim to be proactive was the need for some victims to use their own personal resources to progress their case. Three victims described situations where they had to spend money or use existing personal resources such as personal or professional connections (which would have otherwise required them to spend money), on things such as legal advice, therapeutic support, and phone calls to the police.

Victims described spending money, sometimes “thousands of pounds” on legal advice, to try and initiate action on their case, or to help better navigate the situation they were in.

Victims that had used their own resources to try and drive progress on their cases recognised that they were in a “privileged position” to be able to do this. As one victim questioned:

“You know, I had money. I live in an affluent area. What if I didn't have that? And how were they treating other victims?”

Cross-force working

Some participants were involved in cases that involved more than one force. There is not enough data to draw any general conclusions on the experience of stalking victims involved in cases that span more than one force, but the information that was provided is included here as it was a feature of some of the cases. A couple of victims described their difficulties with cases being transferred from one force to another, and the time that this took. One victim described how:

“It just took so much time and effort to get that case into the [other force] system and to get [other victim] and mine’s case joined up, in the sense that it involved me literally ringing every day and saying, has it arrived with you yet? Do you know it relates to this other case? These are the case numbers, look this has also happened can you add this to my case notes? And it just, I mean that went on for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks...”

They also explained that in the meantime “nothing could be done” at a stage when “things were really getting worse.”

Another victim’s case took place inside one force area, but their stalker had convictions for a relevant offence in a different, nearby force area. This was only uncovered when a victim support worker contacted the victim after sentencing.

Finally, in a case that involved a large metropolitan force and another force, one victim felt that they had to deal with lots of different organisations. This included two different forces and two separate regions in one of these forces.

Recommendations from victims

We asked victims what went well, what could have been improved in terms of the service they received from the police, and if they had any suggestions around what police should do differently to support victims. Victims made a variety of recommendations. The following was suggested by multiple participants:

- take action to investigate and help victims to be safe
- take victims seriously and listen to them
- have a named officer or single point of contact that victims can contact
- keep the victim informed
- do not make promises you cannot keep/do what you have said you will when you said you would do it
- consider sending female officers to female victims
- take steps to keep victims safe
- provide more support to victims

Take action to investigate and help victims to be safe

All victims wanted action to be taken to try and resolve their situation. Victims recommended that action be taken sooner in dealing with the perpetrator and in contacting them. This reflected the experiences they spoke about regarding the impact of perceived police inaction:

“One was... that action would be taken immediately, that someone would go and have a conversation with him”.

“I think to be honest coming and visiting the victims would help. But I rarely saw a police officer and actually kind of coming and seeing the impact that it makes, and actually following up on these things is... I think would kind of go a long way to helping the situation.”

Action may also include putting in place protective orders, such as stalking protection orders.

Take victims seriously and listen to them

On the whole, victims felt like they were not always taken seriously or listened to. Some victims recommended that more training on stalking may help, or attempts to change culture and attitudes:

“They should have training in dealing with those things and take that person seriously. Even if I was a liar and not telling the truth, that would come out in the end.”

Other victims focused on the patterns of behaviour that they experienced and the police taking those seriously:

“One, taking it seriously. And what I mean by that is, actually connecting the dots and investigating and following the, [the perpetrator] was known to the police, [they] had a history. It was blaringly obvious.”

Linked to this was the importance of police acknowledging that a person had experienced stalking.

Have a named officer or single point of contact that victims can contact

The ‘communications with victims’ theme detailed the impact that not having a named point of contact had on victims. Several victims recommended that this be put in place for victims. This may also entail that named point of contact having what is perceived to be sufficient training on stalking. As one participant described:

“I think what I would like to say is that stalking victims should be...given an OIC [officer in charge]. They should be given one competent, fully trained officer who understands legislation and understands that case, and then they've got a voice within the police. At the moment, victims are entirely voiceless”

Keep the victim informed

Victims articulated a desire for officers to keep them informed about the progress of the investigation and any protective measures. This linked to the issues that victims experienced with receiving updates and communications on their case.

Do not make promises you cannot keep and do what you have said you will when you said you would do it

Victims also discussed incidents where the police said that actions would be taken that then were not. This was described as breaking promises. Victims recommended that officers should consider “not making promises that actually they can't see through”, or keep their promises by ‘doing what you have said you will when you said you'd do it’.

Consider sending female officers to female victims

Some female victims felt that they would have had a more positive experience had a female officer been there when responding to their reports of stalking. As one victim described:

“The officers that came to meet me at my property, as I was by myself, singly [sic], it would be nice to have a female officer there. Not every occasion, the officers that attended were male, sometimes it was two and I was by myself.”

Take steps to keep victims safe

Victims described wanting the police to take action to keep them safe; not just taking action against their perpetrator. They wanted them to provide them with the information and advice that would help to keep them safe.

“I think assuring them with plans to help keep them safe. Follow through, keeping them informed, helping victims understand this sort of crime as well, because I had no idea.”

Provide more support to victims

Victims also described wanting the police to provide them with more proactive support when navigating their stalking, both in terms of active referral to support services (one victim raised the question of whether the police could directly refer someone to a service and get them an appointment), but also through providing practical advice and support themselves. One victim explained:

“And I think actually if we had had support there, and I don't quite know what that would have been. But even if it was just kind of someone saying well you need to, you know this is the language that you need to use when you speak to these platforms. Here's a template letter or something or you need to report it through this method or... But all of that stuff we were having to try and work out whilst being really, really distressed, whilst you know, worrying about what was going to happen next, feeling unsafe...”

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