



Article

Improving the ‘victim journey’ when reporting domestic abuse cyberstalking to the police – A pilot project evaluation

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Abstract

Criminal justice responses to stalking in England and Wales have come under increased scrutiny following the Joint Criminal Justice Inspectorate report in 2017. In response, police forces throughout England and Wales attempted to improve their handling of stalking. In one UK police force, a project was developed to improve the identification, investigation and victim journey for domestic abuse cyberstalking offences. The project included a specialist investigation team along with a dedicated and co-located Independent Domestic Violence Advisor. This article draws on research conducted during the evaluation of the project and will evidence high levels of victim engagement, positive reports from victims and a 100% success rate in obtaining restraining orders. These findings highlight the valuable role of specialist teams with integrated, independent support for victims and suggest that the victim journey can be improved through collaborative projects between the police and specialist organisations.

Keywords

Cyberstalking, domestic abuse, Independent Domestic Violence Advisors, policing

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Introduction

Domestic abuse cyberstalking

The crime of stalking has evolved in recent years, assisted by developments in technology that make it easier for stalkers to monitor, track and terrify their victims. As with stalking, there is no universally agreed definition of cyberstalking, but Maple et al. (2011) suggest it can be defined as ‘the repeated pursuit of an individual utilizing electronic means to induce fear or distress’. Short et al. (2014) identified a range of direct and indirect communication methods used by cyberstalkers. Direct methods included sending threats via email, distributing intimate images online, hacking the victim’s email, sending viruses and making false accusations about the victim. Indirect methods included encouraging others to threaten or harass the victim, impersonating the victim online and seeking and compiling information on the victim (Short et al., 2014).

In England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020) estimate that 9.6% of men and 19.9% of women have experienced stalking since the age of 16. It is further estimated that 977,000 women and 526,000 men experienced stalking in the last year, and of these, 30% were stalked by a partner/ex-partner or family member (ONS, 2020). Most stalkers will use both online and offline methods to stalk their victims (Messing et al., 2020; Quinn-Evans et al., 2021), yet the ONS does not gather data on the frequency of cyberstalking, meaning it is difficult to determine its true prevalence in the United Kingdom. Recent research by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (SLT, 2021) suggests that online stalking behaviours have increased considerably, with 100% of calls to the National Stalking Helpline now involving an online element. Similarly, Bracewell et al. (2020) reported an increase in online stalking behaviours during the first UK Covid-19 lockdown. Police data in this area are limited, but in 2018, records indicated that 15% of harassment and stalking offences in England and Wales had an online element (ONS, 2019). This is likely to be an underestimate as it is not thought that police recording of online abuse is reliable (ONS, 2019). Indeed, legislation in England and Wales does not distinguish between online and offline stalking; there is no specific criminal offence of cyberstalking, and concerns have been raised as to whether the existing legislation has been able to keep pace with developments in technology (Bliss, 2019; Messing et al., 2020). Importantly, however, recent amendments to the Online Safety Bill (2022) in England and Wales, which is currently going through the legislative process, propose to create a new offence to capture communications sent to cause harm without a reasonable excuse. It is hoped that such an offence will improve the ease with which offenders of domestic abuse can be prosecuted for sending communications which ‘may not seem obviously harmful but when looked at in light of a pattern of abuse could cause serious distress’ (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2022). Returning to existing legislation in England and Wales, it is important to note that police officers have two offences to consider when presented with online or offline pursuit behaviours – harassment or stalking. There is considerable ambiguity regarding where the line is drawn between the two offences, resulting in stalking being incorrectly categorised as harassment (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI), 2017; HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2019). For the purpose of this article, the terms stalking and cyberstalking will be used

throughout as opposed to harassment, with the justification being that by its very nature, stalking is a crime of persistence that results in alarm or distress of the victim and in the context of an abusive relationship, both of these elements will be present (Messing et al., 2020).

Despite gaps in understanding the true extent of cyberstalking in the United Kingdom, there is plenty of evidence which demonstrates the links between stalking, cyberstalking and domestic abuse. It is well recognised that stalking perpetrated by ex-partners is the most dangerous form, with victims more likely to suffer violence (Finn and Atkinson, 2009; Sheridan and Roberts, 2011). More worryingly, however, research also shows a link between stalking and domestic homicide, with Spencer et al. (2019) suggesting that stalking led to a threefold increase in the risk of domestic homicide of women by men. In exploring the role of technology in this context, research suggests that domestic abuse perpetrators use technology to maintain control (Woodlock, 2017), with recent studies highlighting the misuse of devices such as home security systems to monitor victims (Lopez-Neira et al., 2019). In the United Kingdom, Todd et al. (2021) analysed 41 Domestic Homicide Reviews and found that technology played a facilitating role in domestic homicide. In addition to increased risk of violence and ultimately death when cyberstalking is perpetrated in the context of domestic abuse, research also points to a range of severe consequences for victims, including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (Kuehner et al., 2007; Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Purcell et al., 2005). Importantly, research suggests the impact of cyberstalking may be exacerbated by unhelpful responses from police officers and people close to the victim (Worsley et al., 2017); it is therefore important to consider the response of the criminal justice system to these crimes.

The criminal justice response

There is widespread agreement that the criminal justice response to stalking is problematic. In 2017, HMICFRS and HMCPSI published the first-ever review of the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) response to stalking and harassment offences in England and Wales. The review concluded that stalking offences were being missed by police officers who were unclear how to differentiate between stalking and harassment (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2017). Furthermore, research conducted as part of the inspection found that victims described poor responses from the police, most notably, not being taken seriously, victim-blaming attitudes and being told that what they were experiencing was not 'serious enough'. In respect of cyberstalking, victims described even poorer responses from police officers, with the majority being told to stop using social media (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2017).

Worsley et al. (2017) explored victims' experiences of reporting cyberstalking to the police and concluded that most victims did not feel they were taken seriously and did not feel supported, contributing to an increased negative impact on the victim. Various studies suggest police officers are ill-equipped to identify cyberstalking offences due to inadequate training and limited access to the technology required to investigate them (Koziański and Lee, 2020). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that police officers fail to prioritise cyberstalking as they do not see it as presenting a real-life threat to victims

(Taylor-Dunn et al., 2017; Worsley et al., 2017). In more recent research, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2021) found that of those who reported to the police, 59% described their experience as unsatisfactory or somewhat unsatisfactory, with only 20% feeling satisfied with the police response (p. 9). Key reasons for dissatisfaction related to officers failing to identify patterns of behaviour and not understanding the nature of stalking (SLT, 2021).

It is important to highlight that victims reporting stalking, in particular domestic abuse cyberstalking, are more likely to be faced with an insensitive, disbelieving response from police officers; yet a supportive victim is the most important factor in the decision to arrest (Brady et al., 2020). This raises the question as to how the experience of victims who report domestic abuse cyberstalking can be improved in order to increase the chances of engagement with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) so that victims can be afforded the protection and justice they deserve.

Co-located partnerships with Independent Domestic Violence Advisors

One possible answer to this question is the development of partnerships between the police and specialist domestic abuse services. The focus of this article concerns the evaluation of such a partnership approach and so it is helpful to briefly explore previous literature regarding similar projects.

Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) were first introduced in the United Kingdom by the Labour Government in their 2005 National Action Plan (Home Office, 2005). IDVAs were essentially an extension of community-based support that specialist domestic abuse services had been providing since the 1990s. For the last 15 years, the IDVA role has become a central aspect of efforts to support victims who are deemed to be at high risk of harm in the context of domestic abuse. Various evaluations of IDVA services point to their impact on improving the safety and well-being of victim/survivors (Coy and Kelly, 2010; Howarth et al., 2009; Robinson, 2009; Taylor-Dunn, 2016), with success being attributed to the independence of the IDVA, effective multi-agency working and frequency and intensity of support (Howarth and Robinson, 2016; Taylor-Dunn, 2016).

Due to the positive impact of IDVAs on victim safety and well-being, there have been a number of partnership projects established between statutory services and specialist domestic abuse services in which the majority of IDVAs are based. It is important to distinguish here between IDVAs who are managed by specialist domestic abuse services and work with partners through Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), those who are directly employed by statutory services and those who work in a co-located partnership with statutory services; this is because the vast majority of research to date has focussed on the first, whereas this study explores the third type of IDVA service. SafeLives (2019), the organisation that runs a nationally accredited training course for IDVAs and who hosts a national database for IDVA services, reported that in 2018–2019, 60% of IDVAs in England and Wales were based in specialist domestic abuse services, with the remainder based in agencies such as the police, courts, health and housing associations. However, there was no data available on the third group of IDVAs; those working in a co-located partnership.

There are a small number of studies that have explored co-located partnership working between IDVAs and statutory services (Day and Gill, 2020; Dheensa et al., 2020)

which have identified a range of benefits, albeit with some challenges. In terms of benefits, one of the first and most persuasive advantages is the speed with which victim/survivors can access specialist support. This has been identified in projects based in police stations and hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments (Coy and Kelly, 2010; Day and Gill, 2020; Dheensa et al., 2020). A further advantage is the network of support that IDVAs can access for victim/survivors that statutory services alone may not have links with, in particular, housing (Day and Gill, 2020; Dheensa et al., 2020). Dheensa et al.'s (2020) study explored the value of a hospital-based IDVA and found that it was seen as an efficient response to victim/survivors that saved time and was therefore economically beneficial. In police-based projects, research suggests that co-location leads to speedy and coordinated risk assessment as a result of improved communication (Coy and Kelly, 2010; Day and Gill, 2020). A further benefit is the impact of co-location on the statutory service and their understanding of domestic abuse. In the hospital-based project, this was facilitated through training provided by the IDVA service to hospital employees (Dheensa et al., 2020), whereas in the police projects, this was seen as more of an organic process as a result of IDVAs appropriately challenging police officers' decision-making (Coy and Kelly, 2010; Day and Gill, 2020).

Despite a range of benefits to co-location, research has also identified a number of challenges. The first relates to the physical space available to IDVAs. In both Coy and Kelly (2010) and Dheensa et al.'s (2020) research, IDVAs struggled at first to have a private space in which they could see victims/survivors. Moreover, in Coy and Kelly (2010) and Day and Gill's (2020) research, there were concerns that being based in a police station could be a barrier to some women accessing the service. This was addressed in both projects by making the independence of the IDVA explicit to victim/survivors, yet there was an acknowledgement that for some, this will have remained a barrier. The final challenge relates to the potential for the independence of IDVAs to be compromised when working alongside the police. This was one of the first concerns to be articulated in the evaluation of IDVA services and the recommended solution was for IDVAs to continue to be managed by domestic abuse services to maintain their autonomy (Robinson, 2009).

Summary

Despite the prevalence of stalking in England and Wales, and the growth of cyberstalking in recent years, the service that victims receive when contacting the police, particularly in the context of domestic abuse, is problematic. Research has shown that stalking offences are often incorrectly crimed as harassment (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2017), cyberstalking is not viewed as seriously as in-person stalking (Worsley et al., 2017) and police officers are less likely to view behaviour as stalking when committed in the context of domestic abuse (Weller et al., 2013). This is despite the very clear links between stalking and domestic homicide (Sheridan and Roberts, 2011) and a recent escalation in online stalking during the Covid-19 pandemic (SLT, 2021). Unsurprisingly, these issues translate into the experiences of victims who do not feel they have been taken seriously, do not feel supported and who feel worse as a result of police involvement (Korkodeilou, 2017; Taylor-Dunn et al., 2018; Todd et al., 2020). One possible way to address this negative 'victim journey' when reporting to the police is the development of co-located partnership projects between the police and IDVAs. Previous research suggests there are

benefits of co-located projects for victims but there has yet to be research exploring this within the context of domestic abuse cyberstalking. This article addresses this gap by presenting findings from the evaluation of a co-located project designed to work with victims of domestic abuse cyberstalking.

Methodology

The research presented in this article forms part of a wider evaluation of a domestic abuse cyberstalking pilot project in one English police force. The research questions guiding this element of the study were:

1. *What is the impact of a co-located IDVA with a specialist police domestic abuse cyberstalking investigation team on:*
 - (a) *improving the victim journey through the CJS and,*
 - (b) *improving the perceived safety of victims during and after police involvement?*
2. *What was it about the co-located IDVA and specialist team that facilitated outcomes, and in what contexts did this occur?*

Realist evaluation

The methodological approach used in the evaluation of this project was Realist Evaluation (RE) (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). RE is a theory-based approach to evaluation and is less concerned with assessing overall 'success' or 'failure' and more about addressing questions of 'what works for whom, in what circumstances, and in what respects?' In RE, the evaluator assesses which processes may enable a programme to operate, asking questions such as what is it about the specialist team that might improve the investigation of these offences? Or what is it about how the IDVA works and the support they provide that help victim/survivors continue with the prosecution? Mechanisms, therefore, '*describe what it is about programmes and interventions that bring about any effects*' (Pawson and Tilley, 2004: 6). In addition, context is essential to the realist evaluator; if the project is underfunded, then the outcomes of the project may not be achieved. In applying this theoretical framework, an initial programme theory was developed to identify the types of outcomes that may be achieved, a series of hypothesised mechanisms that might explain how they would be achieved and a series of hypothesised contexts that may help or hinder the programme mechanisms. The programme theory was developed following a review of available documentation about the nature and operation of the pilot project and in consultation with the project team. This was then tested using a range of methods. The aspects of the programme mechanism detailed in this article refer to the impact of the pilot project on the outcomes of improving victim journey through the CJS and the perceived safety of victims during and after police involvement, including how these outcomes were achieved (mechanisms) and in what contexts.

The pilot project

The research was commissioned by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner in the study area. The purpose was to evaluate the Domestic Abuse Cyber Stalking and

Harassment pilot project funded by the Home Office Violence Against Women and Girls Service Transformation Fund. The project was to run for 18 months from January 2018 to July 2019, with a three-month extension approved by the Home Office. The evaluation commenced in January 2019, with data collection ending in July 2019.

The pilot project consisted of an experienced domestic abuse investigator (police officer), an experienced cyber investigator (police officer), a detective sergeant with specialist domestic abuse experience, a detective inspector with relevant experience and an external IDVA from the local Women's Aid service. The team took ownership of any reported domestic abuse incident that was wholly or substantially based upon cyberstalking (categorised as being persistent and obsessive in nature). The team also supported other teams and officers to both identify and put in place robust preventive measures against further offences. They offered support and advice to victims of domestic abuse cyberstalking (through the independent IDVA), and they helped to develop and deliver training to frontline officers and stakeholders based on the learning of the team.

Data collection

The data used in this evaluation relate to referrals received by the project during January 2018 to July 2019. There were four types of data collection used for this part of the study. The first comprised an analysis of police data that had been recorded by the project team for each case they investigated ($n=54$ cases). These data were captured on an Excel spreadsheet and contained features of the case, including the nature of the incident, arrest of the offender, initial charge, police bail, victim issues and outcomes regarding charge and conviction. Next, we analysed police investigation files to understand *how* the project team was investigating domestic abuse cyberstalking. In order to understand if the project team's specialism and co-located IDVA influenced their investigations, we decided to compare their files with that of a comparable command area (in terms of size and demographics) in the same police force. Following consultation with the project team, a suitable area was identified and a sample of 10 police investigation files were analysed (5 cases from each area). These files contained detailed information regarding how evidence was collected and analysed and the decision-making of both police officers and the CPS.

The third element of data collection involved telephone interviews with the five staff involved in delivering the project (including the IDVA). These interviews followed a semi-structured guide (Cachia and Millward, 2011) and explored what it was about the project that led to particular outcomes and identified the contexts that helped or hindered the project. Questions covered issues such as the difference between stalking and harassment, approaches and barriers to investigation, prosecution and safeguarding, the role of the IDVA (and her co-location), 'success stories' and what the team felt had contributed to them and the role of the CPS and wider CJS. The final element of data collection involved semi-structured telephone interviews with four victim/survivors to understand their experiences of reporting to the police (taking them through each stage of the justice process, including the trigger for contacting the police) and the support received from the IDVA, including what victim/survivors found helpful or unhelpful and what they would have liked to see improved or changed, based on their experience. The researchers

worked with the IDVA to recruit participants who had been referred to her as part of the pilot project. For some of the participants, their cases had concluded, while others were still being investigated. While it would have been beneficial to hear the experiences of more victim/survivors, both the researchers and the IDVA recognised the challenging and dangerous situation faced by potential participants that took precedent over engaging with research (Bender, 2017). All four participants had been supported by the project IDVA but only two had their cases investigated by the specialist team; this is because the IDVA had capacity to support more victims than cases investigated by the project team, so she also supported survivors whose cases were being investigated by response officers in the project area.

Data analysis

For the purposes of this article, the data were analysed according to the impact of the pilot project on the victim journey through the CJS and the perceived safety of victims during and after police involvement. The data recorded by the project team ($n=54$) on each case they worked with were used to identify outcomes in terms of victim engagement, case progression and restraining orders. The case files ($n=10$) were analysed according to key points within the investigative process, including interviews with victims & perpetrators, investigative tools used, request for restraining orders, and communication with CPS. There were nine interview transcripts (five with project staff and four victim/survivors), ranging from 40 to 90 minutes in length. They were coded by the lead researcher using Thematic Analysis (Braun et al., 2015) in Nvivo software. The initial analysis involved a combination of inductive and deductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with the deductive coding being based on the programme mechanism devised at the start of the project (to help explore key mechanisms and contexts). A co-investigator reviewed a sample of the initial coding to help with consistency and following agreement, the codes were clustered into themes relevant to the outcomes, mechanisms and contexts. A total of 21 codes were generated from the victim/survivor interviews and 43 from the project staff interviews.

Ethics

This research was approved by the College of Business, Psychology and Sport Research Ethics Committee at the University of Worcester and adhered to the British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics. There were particular ethical issues associated with this project. First, it was important that all potential participants in this research understood that their participation was entirely voluntary. Interview participants were assured that their decision to take part (or not) would not be shared with anyone else and that they could withdraw their data up to 7 days following interview. Interview participants were asked to sign a consent form and were then assigned a reference number that would be used instead of their name – this reference number could then be used to withdraw their data by contacting the research team. Electronically signed consent forms (for telephone interviews) were stored on a password-protected PC located on the University of Worcester server and were destroyed on submission of the final report. Within the

transcribed interviews, all reference to individuals and specific organisations was masked using pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Electronic audio files were stored on a password-protected computer file located on the University of Worcester server, and a back-up of these files was held on an encrypted USB device stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office accessible only by the project team. A secure upload portal was used in order to transfer the files to the external transcription agency, and the returned transcripts were password protected in order to guarantee security.

In addition to the abovementioned data, we were provided with non-anonymised information regarding cases investigated by the project team as well as 10 non-anonymised investigation case files. In order to view this data, the team was vetted by the relevant police force area. The investigation files were delivered by secure post on an encrypted USB and were only viewed on the USB (which was kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office). The USB was securely destroyed when the project was complete. The project spreadsheet data was stored on an encrypted USB and the secure University of Worcester server and only anonymised information was kept at the end of the project.

The final issue is the most important, that participants must come to no harm as a result of the research. As we were asking victims/survivors about their experience of engaging with the pilot project, we needed to ensure, first, that we could contact people safely, and second, that if any issues arose for them as a result of taking part we could signpost to support. We, therefore, proposed that only those victim/survivors who were still engaged with support should be contacted (Baird and Mitchell, 2013). This was managed through the IDVA which identified victims/survivors who were still in receipt of support. Furthermore, in recognition that domestic abuse can affect anyone at any time in their life, the researchers prepared contact details for local and national support services for all participants (including project staff).

Results

The below discussion explores what impact the pilot project (consisting of a co-located IDVA with a specialist police investigation team) had on improving the victim journey through the CJS, including the perceived safety of victims during and after police involvement.

Outcomes

Victim engagement. There were 54 cases investigated by the project team, with a total of 57 victims (some crimes recorded more than one victim, e.g. a child or family member of the primary victim). While the majority of victims were recorded as female (54, 94.7%), all perpetrators were recorded as male (54, 100%). The nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator was recorded as ex-girlfriend/boyfriend (44, 77.2%), ex-spouse (7, 12.3%) and other (6, 10.5%).

Research suggests the response victims of Domestic Abuse (DA) receive when reporting stalking and cyberstalking to the police has been shown to be insensitive, inconsistent and contributes to worse outcomes for victims (Ngo, 2020; Taylor-Dunn et al., 2018). It is perhaps not surprising then that victim engagement with the CJS is often cited as a

key barrier in prosecuting domestic abuse offences (Hester, 2006; Sleath and Smith, 2017). In the year ending March 2018, 49% of domestic abuse cases investigated by the police in England and Wales were recorded as having evidential difficulties due to victims not supporting the prosecution (ONS, 2018). In contrast, the data collected during this research suggests that of the 54 cases they investigated (at the time of the evaluation), there were only eight (14.5%) where the primary victim refused to make a statement, withdrew their statement or were unwilling to attend court. This means the project secured victim engagement in over 85% of cases where the IDVA was involved. This rate of victim engagement supports previous research which suggests that victims are more likely to support a prosecution when they have access to specialist, independent support (Coy and Kelly, 2010; Taylor-Dunn, 2016).

Restraining orders. A key aim of the project was for victims to feel safer, both during and after police involvement. Previous research suggests that despite contacting the police for help, some victims do not feel safer (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2017). The use of restraining orders can be an effective way of offering victims protection following a court case. A restraining order is issued under section 5 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and can be issued as part of a sentence upon conviction or acquittal. The CPS will make request to the court, following a recommendation from the police. From the project data we analysed, we identified that of the 21 cases successfully prosecuted, 100% had a restraining order imposed. Importantly, of these, five (24%) were indefinite orders and seven (33%) were for 5 years or more. In contrast, data published by SafeLives (2020) regarding IDVA services in England and Wales suggests that in 2020/2021, only 27% of convicted domestic abuse perpetrators were issued with a restraining order, and of these, 7% were for 5 years or more, with 4% being indefinite orders. Similarly, data published by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust suggests that of those who reported stalking to the police, only 20% were issued with a restraining order (SLT, 2021). Moreover, when comparing the investigation case-files from the project and comparison area, we found that in the project area, all five cases had a restraining order imposed at court, the shortest term being 18 months, with two orders being granted indefinitely. In contrast, in the comparison area, only three of the five cases had a restraining order imposed, the shortest being 12 months and the longest 2 years. The data for this project suggest the project team was effective in applying for restraining orders as a way to safeguard victims beyond the investigation (albeit, a restraining order is no guarantee of future safety).

Victims' experiences. This evaluation included interviews with four victims/survivors who were supported by the IDVA working on the project. Of the four participants, two of their cases had been investigated by the project team, while the other two were investigated by response officers. This is because the IDVA had the capacity to work with more victims than the 54 cases investigated by the project team, and so she accepted referrals from other officers in the study area whose cases involved domestic abuse cyberstalking. The below discussion explores the experiences of the four participants, exploring their views of police involvement, including feelings of safety and whether they felt they were taken seriously. As will be seen, there were clear differences in satisfaction with the police for those whose cases were investigated by the project team compared to those investigated by the response officers.

Nature of stalking and harassment. Of the four interview participants, all were women who were being stalked and harassed by their male ex-partners and three of the participants had children with the offender. In all four cases, the offenders were using a combination of in-person and cyber methods of contact. Three of the women were contacted via text message, three women were followed, two described the offender attending their home address, two women received threats to harm them, two offenders threatened to kill themselves, one woman was receiving abusive messages online from various fake accounts and one woman had her Instagram account hacked and an intimate video shared without her consent.

Police response. In terms of the action taken by police, the offender was arrested in three of the four cases; however, in all four cases, the victim/survivor described the offender as initially being ‘warned’ by officers prior to arrest. Of those arrested, one was charged with malicious communications and revenge pornography, one was arrested for common assault and harassment and one was arrested and charged with stalking. In terms of victims’ experiences of the police response, there were varying levels of satisfaction. While three of the four women described at least one positive experience when they first reported the abuse, all four women later described a range of negative experiences with response officers who were dealing with their case; officers who were not part of the specialist team. These negative experiences ranged from officers not caring, being dismissive, not being supportive, not keeping the victim/survivor informed and failing to take positive action, as the below quotes describe:

But some of the police, one particular police officer, I just felt like he didn’t care about what was happening. (Jay)

I really felt like nobody was taking us kind of seriously and you feel like you’re making a mountain out of a molehill. (Sara)

In contrast to their experiences with response officers, for the two women whose cases were eventually taken on by the project team, they described their involvement very differently. For Jay, whose ex-partner had hacked her Instagram account and shared an intimate video without her consent, she spoke positively of the speed with which the project team dealt with the case and that they kept her informed:

I keep in contact with a policeman, he’s from the cyber team, and he’ll email me if there’s been a development.

Similarly, Sam spoke about the knowledge and understanding of the project team and the impact this had on her:

They made me feel so much more at ease. I didn’t feel quite as worried and as uptight because they had the knowledge and they knew how I felt.

All participants were asked whether they felt they had been taken seriously, both by the IDVA and the police. Participants unanimously agreed that they had been taken seriously by the IDVA:

I think probably the overarching thing with (IDVA) was probably the opposite to what I got from the police. So I got the confidence from (IDVA), I got the, you're not wasting anybody's time, this is really important, it's not right. (Sara)

She actually understands. And when they aren't listening to me, they listen to her, and it's nice to know that I've got somebody there who's actually interesting in my case to be fair. (Sam)

However, when asked the same question about the police, responses were more mixed. Of the two women who had involvement with the project team, one felt that overall, she had been taken seriously, while the other felt this only happened when the project team became involved:

I think they listened to what I had to say, what I was reporting. And every incident that I've reported they've listened to what I've said and obviously took it all on-board. (Jay)

So I had two very different experiences. But if they could, if the local police and the specialist unit could meet somewhere in the middle and have a more balanced service, you know, it was just so different from one to the other. (Ana)

Whereas the two women who were only dealt with by response officers felt they had not been taken seriously:

Not serious at all. They said that I'm apparently high risk and that they have my number, they know who it is as soon as I ring. But if I'm high risk, I'd hate to see the people who actually really are high risk, because they've done absolutely nothing for me. (Sam)

We asked victim/survivors whether they felt any safer as a result of reporting to the police. Encouragingly, three of the four women said they felt at least partially safer:

Yes, yes I do. I do now. I think had the specialist unit not got involved I don't know where it would have led to be honest. I think because of their knowledge and the way that they dealt with it, it was kind of, it was nipped in the bud as soon as they got involved. They didn't let it escalate any further. But they were brilliant, they really were. (Ana)

Unfortunately, however, Ana still did not feel safe, despite a restraining order being in place as it was only for 6 months:

No, I mean the only good thing is the fact of restraining orders and things but to be fair it's (IDVA) who has pushed to have them done, I think . . . The police have only put one in place, which is the one that runs out in October, and they refused to give me one that lasts for longer than six months.

It must be noted that the decision to grant a restraining order rests with the court hearing the case, as opposed to the police, yet the difference between the investigation files in the project and comparison area, in terms of the success and length of orders, suggests that case preparation and the views of the victim may have been communicated more effectively by the project team and therefore the prosecutor at court.

Summary. The above discussion suggests that the specialist team with a co-located IDVA led to positive results in terms of victim engagement, victim safety and victim satisfaction. This has been evidenced through very low levels of victim withdrawal (14.5%), a 100% success rate in securing restraining orders for cases prosecuted and positive qualitative accounts from four victims/survivors. The focus of this article now turns to how the project achieved these outcomes; what was it about the specialist team and co-located IDVA that facilitated a positive victim journey?

Mechanisms

Integrated, independent support. The first mechanism identified during interviews with project staff and victims/survivors refers to the integrated, independent support offered by the co-located IDVA. First, it is helpful to consider the role of the IDVA. IDVAs are trained support workers whose main priority is the safety of victims/survivors (Safe-Lives, 2014). In order to address their safety, IDVAs work within a multi-agency context to address practical needs such as housing, refuge accommodation, non-molestation orders, access to benefits, support through the CJS and child contact issues. They also offer emotional support to victims/survivors to help them come to terms with the abuse they have experienced. In the case of this project, the full-time IDVA was employed by the local domestic abuse service and was co-located with the team for at least half the week.

The IDVA described her role as:

Safety, safety, to make sure that a woman feels safe and to move her on from, you know, the crime and the fear that she has to actually leading an independent life with some safety in place.

Officers within the team commented on the range of support offered by the IDVA:

So we offer that extra support for vulnerable victims who do sometimes obviously need enhanced support around not just the criminal investigation but also the sort of keep them updated, safeguarding, use of civil remedies to basically assist and protect them there as well, such as non-molestation orders. (IDVA) also provides a good support when victims go to court. (Officer A)

The holistic nature of support provided by the IDVA is crucial. It has been recognised in previous research that when IDVAs support victims with the myriad of issues facing them, including housing, child contact issues, civil orders and finances, they are more likely to remain engaged with the CJS (Taylor-Dunn, 2016).

One of the key aspects of dedicated IDVA support, both for the IDVA and for police officers, was the exchange of information and the benefit of this to both victim/survivors and the police. As the IDVA explained when discussing a woman who contacted her for an update:

She's rang me, I think she doesn't feel comfortable ringing him (police officer) because she doesn't know him very well so I'm the bridge again, you know, which is fine. It's working well.

Similarly, as Officer A suggested,

She's (the IDVA) able to maintain a lot more contact with the victim and be that go between for us if they do feel that contact directly with the police would be bothering us or they've got reservations of any sort.

When asked about co-location, it was clear that everyone involved saw the value of having the IDVA located with the team, if only on a part-time basis. From the perspective of the IDVA, co-location made it much easier to obtain updates for victim/survivors:

So it works really well and it means that I've got sort of people to be able to check things for us as well really quickly.

However, she also referred to the importance of having a separate base due to the fact she needed to meet women away from the police station:

Obviously I can't have appointments in police stations because that wouldn't be appropriate at all. That would be a massive barrier so I have them in my office in the city centre, which is only five minutes from the station.

From the perspective of officers, co-location was invaluable and essential:

Well I think it's been invaluable because what we do on a daily basis when we check logs you'll sometimes come across an incident where it will say the victim doesn't wish to prosecute or didn't want to go ahead. So we've been able to use the IDVA to make contact with the victims and just offer support and say, you know, these are the avenues that you can go down. (Officer A)

Interestingly, it was recognised by officers in the team that the 'independence' of the IDVA was fundamental to her success:

And often we don't have the trust for how it affects people in their day to day life, because of the uniforms that we wear, because of the positions that we hold, whereas that added bit of separation into the support services can be very reassuring, and there's certain people that we don't have access to that can support them. (Officer A)

Officers also discussed the impact of independent but integrated support for victim/survivors, recognising that victim/survivors were more likely to support the prosecution with support from the IDVA:

You'll sometimes come across an incident where it will say the victim doesn't wish to prosecute or didn't want to go ahead. So we've been able to use the IDVA to make contact with the victims and just offer support . . . And nine times out of ten what we've found is initially when the victims spoken to a frontline officer and indicated they didn't want to go ahead, when the IDVA's spoken to them, it's a case of yes I want to give a statement and I want to go ahead with the prosecution. So from my point of view it's an absolute asset to have an IDVA on the team. (Officer C)

The issue of 'independence' has been cited in previous research regarding the role of IDVAs (Robinson, 2009; Taylor-Dunn, 2016). It is the distance from the police and other statutory services that allows victims to build trust with an IDVA, which in turn impacts on the likelihood of them remaining engaged with the criminal justice process. It is encouraging that police officers in this research similarly recognised the importance of independence and the value of the IDVA role.

Summary. The above analysis suggests that the role of IDVA was a fundamental element of the project. The co-location of the IDVA was viewed as important, not only to assist with offering swift support to victims but also to facilitate the exchange of information between the police and the victim. The 'independence' of the IDVA was seen as critical to her success as it allowed for a depth of relationship unachievable by police officers who are required to act on any disclosures as dictated by 'positive action' policies (College of Policing, 2015).

Supportive approach to safety. It became clear when interviewing staff from the project team that they shared a clear purpose; to make victim/survivors safer. As the IDVA explained,

So I think the ultimate aim is to try and keep women safe, raise their awareness about domestic abuse, raise their awareness about cyber stuff as well to try and keep them safe online, because that's really important, but equally to sort of safeguard them longer-term, so supporting them with police investigation, court and the ultimately restraining orders. (IDVA)

This was also echoed by the police officers in the team:

So really it's ensuring that whether we get the case to court or not, the victim has been protected and is aware of all the things available to them, whether they want to go ahead with the prosecution or whether they don't. (Officer C)

Interview responses suggested that both the IDVA and officers took a supportive approach to working with victims/survivors, describing the importance of treating them as individuals, letting them know they were being taken seriously and not judging them:

But ultimately it's just about what needs does she have, what risks and addressing them and that's individual for every woman. (IDVA)

We want them to feel that they're being taken seriously. Because we know that it's highly impactful. (Officer A)

The team described the potential barriers to victim/survivors supporting the prosecution and were mindful of the need to address their concerns. For example, Officer A spoke of the need to address myths around how indecent images can be used in court:

And we've also got to be mindful of their attitude towards firstly the police and secondly the prosecution down the line because those are often things that people don't want to have brought out into the open. We may have to bust some myths on how they get presented. Such as intimate

images that have been taken as part of the relationship, been abused and then disclosed at a later time, those aren't actually shown unedited within a court. So they're not going to be splashed everywhere. And it's trying to have that state of reassurance for them as well.

Similarly, the officers acknowledged the need to protect victims/survivors during the investigation:

We would be looking to assure them that we're doing everything that we can to be safeguarding them including when they have the phones downloaded we maybe give them an alternative phone, like a burner phone to make sure they're not without a means to call the police. We're not going to be taking any action that's going to put them into danger. (Officer A)

This shared goal of safety, underpinned by a supportive, non-judgemental approach to victims/survivors was described as being important by the staff involved. However, this approach also translated to victims/survivors, as reflected in their descriptions of IDVA support:

So I got the confidence from (IDVA), I got the, you're not wasting anybody's time, this is really important, it's not right. So she made me, (IDVA) made me feel probably like I wasn't stupid, do you know what I mean? (Sara)

Even if you just need somebody to speak to, and just say look this is going on again, she's always there to talk to. And she understands. (Sam)

Similarly, for Sam whose case was investigated by the project team, she commented on their supportive approach:

They were very knowledgeable, they were very supportive. They made me feel so much more at ease.

Summary. The above analysis suggests that the way the team approached working with victims/survivors, with the aim of keeping them safe, but doing so in a supportive, non-judgemental way was a key mechanism in achieving high levels of victim engagement and victim satisfaction. The way the team described their role of prioritising safety and taking victim/survivors seriously and the way victim/survivors described their interaction with the IDVA and specialist team is in stark contrast to the experiences of victims in previous research who felt they were being blamed, were not taken seriously and did not feel safer as a result of police involvement (Korkodeilou, 2017; Taylor-Dunn et al., 2018).

Enabling contexts

An important feature of RE is the role of context and how this can help or hinder particular mechanisms from achieving the aims of a project or intervention. During the analysis of interviews with project staff, we identified two key contextual factors that facilitated the above mechanisms of 'integrated, independent support' and 'supportive approach to safety'.

Supportive environment. It was clear when interviewing the project team that there was mutual respect and an appreciation of the IDVA role within the investigation team. As the IDVA commented,

I've been made to feel really welcome and they're a lovely team . . . Everybody made us feel really welcome. They're really nice and kind and they're good people and they just want, they want what I want, you know, they're very much police officers who just want to get the bad people and make women safeguarded, which is great.

Similarly, police officers in the team commented on the value of the IDVA:

From my point of view it's an absolute asset to have an IDVA on the team. (Officer A)

The fact that both the IDVA and police officers described a positive working relationship, where the value of the IDVA was clearly acknowledged, potentially facilitated the help available to victim/survivors. For example, in the previous section, it was noted that the IDVA acted as a 'bridge' between the victim and the police – this may not have been possible if the working relationships within the team were not effective. This supportive and collegiate environment is therefore likely to have facilitated the support provided to victims/survivors.

Multi-agency working. It has been suggested in previous research that in order to effectively support victim/survivors, there need to be effective multi-agency partnerships in place (Taylor-Dunn, 2016), a suggestion confirmed by the IDVA in this research:

We're lucky. We've got housing. We've got police. We're a good multiagency city so I want women to know that and I want women to know that we can all link together to keep them and their children safeguarding.

Moreover, the IDVA described the range of agencies she can liaise with in order to address victim/survivors' needs – starting with a risk assessment known as the Domestic Abuse Stalking and Honour-Based Violence (DASH) and then referring high-risk victims to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC):

The DASH, yeah I can use the DASH. And then I can refer to MARAC . . . I can make any child protection referrals that might need making. I can advocate for her with education or children's services. I can help her with benefits. I can make a referral to housing for her if she wants to move because she feels unsafe . . . ultimately it's just about what needs does she have, what risks and addressing them and that's individual for every woman.

The extent to which working practices between the IDVA service, police and wider multi-agency partners is effective is likely to impact the extent to which the IDVA can address victim/survivors' needs. As such, the fact that the IDVA describes such positive working relationships suggests that this environment may have facilitated the mechanisms of 'supportive approach to safety' and 'integrated, independent support'.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research that are important to consider. First, the case-file analysis, while rich in data, is just a snapshot of cases investigated in the two police areas. Furthermore, the cases were selected by the project Inspector and so there may have been selection bias, but with such a small sample, this was unavoidable. On a related point, it is important to recognise that police files are created by individuals who will record information differently and they cannot be considered a true reflection of all aspects of an investigation (McPhee et al., 2021). Third, due to the short timescales, recruitment of victim/survivors was limited – more victim/survivor voices would have enhanced the research, however, their involvement was important in terms of *understanding* the outcomes, mechanisms and contexts identified, as opposed to being representative of all victims supported by the project. Finally, ideally, an evaluation should begin at the same time as the project – this would have enabled us to explore the victim journey more accurately throughout the criminal justice process.

Conclusion

This article has considered a previously unexplored aspect of the literature in relation to improving the police response to victims of domestic abuse cyberstalking. As has been shown, the creation of a specialist team with a co-located IDVA can improve the victim journey through the CJS; as evidenced through high levels of victim engagement, a 100% success rate regarding restraining orders and positive reports from victims. Importantly, the article has used the framework of RE to help understand what it was about the specialist team and the IDVA that may have contributed to these outcomes. Analysis of interviews with the project team and victim/survivors suggests the mechanisms of ‘integrated, independent support’ and ‘supportive approach to safety’ were key in helping victims to remain engaged and feel they were being taken seriously. Furthermore, the research identified two key contextual factors that may have facilitated the mechanisms – that of a supportive, collegiate environment and the existence of effective multi-agency partnerships in the study area – both of which helped the project team to support victims effectively. This article adds to the limited evidence base regarding the value of co-located IDVAs in statutory settings and suggests many of the advantages cited in previous studies; particularly regarding the speed with which victims can access support and an improved understanding of domestic abuse. This project managed to address one of the key challenges cited in previous studies, relating to the location of the IDVA. Research by Coy and Kelly (2010) and Day and Gill (2020) acknowledged that operating from a police station would be a barrier to some women. The IDVA in this research addressed this by being based with the police for 2 days per week and used her organisation’s offices to see victims in the remaining time.

Yet there are further implications of this research beyond the issue of co-location. First, recent amendments to the Online Safety Bill (2022) in England and Wales propose creating an offence to capture communications sent to cause harm without a reasonable excuse. While this is a promising development, it is important to recognise that both the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and the Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) were

intended to protect people from unwanted communication, but have often failed to do so, particularly in the context of domestic abuse (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2017). It is thought the new legislation will include reference to ‘serious alarm or distress’ of the victim, as do the two aforementioned Acts, but it has been argued that this focus on the emotional impact of the victim is a key barrier to the effective prosecution of stalking as it is so different to most other crimes (save coercive control) and is misunderstood by police officers (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2018). In this study, however, communication between the IDVA and the specialist team led to an enhanced understanding of the impact on victims, as highlighted in interviews with project staff, which also translated into the experiences of victims. The findings of this research therefore imply that a co-located IDVA with a specialist police investigation team may provide a helpful starting point for the effective implementation of new legislation.

Second, stalking in the context of domestic abuse is a gendered crime (Lombard, 2016), with 79% of callers to the National Stalking Helpline identifying as women (SLT, 2021). This is especially important at a time when women’s confidence in the police is at an all-time low following the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2021). The policing of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) offences is currently a priority throughout England and Wales (NPCC and College of Policing, 2021) and yet the majority of victims who contacted the National Stalking Helpline reported feeling dissatisfied with the police response (SLT, 2021). This is in stark contrast to victims in this research whose cases were investigated by the specialist team and were supported by the IDVA. The findings of this research therefore suggest there is potential to address the poor experiences often cited by victims when reporting to the police, and that this can be achieved through establishing specialist teams in collaboration with specialist services, which in turn, may serve to improve women’s confidence in the police.

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