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in the public interest

# Merseyside Police's approach to tackling domestic abuse

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## Introduction

The extent and nature of domestic abuse remains shocking. A core part of the policing mission is to prevent crime and disorder. Domestic abuse causes both serious harm and constitutes a considerable proportion of overall crime. It costs society an estimated £15.7 billion a year.<sup>1</sup> 77 women were killed by their partners or ex-partners in 2012/13.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, one in four young people aged 10 to 24 reported that they experienced domestic violence and abuse during their childhood.<sup>3</sup> Forces told us that crime relating to domestic abuse constitutes some 8 percent of all recorded crime in their area, and one third of their recorded assaults with injury. On average the police receive an emergency call relating to domestic abuse every 30 seconds.

People may experience domestic abuse regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class, age or disability. Domestic abuse may also occur in a range of different relationships including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender, as well as within families.

While both men and women can be victims of domestic abuse, women are much more likely to be victims than men.

The cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse is:

*“any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:<sup>4</sup>*

- *psychological*
- *physical*
- *sexual*
- *financial*
- *emotional”.*

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<sup>1</sup> Walby, S. (2009). *The cost of domestic violence*. Retrieved from: [www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/doc.../Cost\\_of\\_domestic\\_violence\\_update.doc](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/doc.../Cost_of_domestic_violence_update.doc)

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics (2013). *Focus on violent crime and sexual offences 2012/13 – Chapter 4: Intimate Personal Violence and Partner Abuse*. Retrieved from: [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_352362.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_352362.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Radford L, Corral S, Bradley C et al (2011) *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. London: NSPCC.

<sup>4</sup> All definitions are taken from [www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse](http://www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse)

*Controlling behaviour* is defined as a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

*Coercive behaviour* is defined as: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. This definition includes so-called honour-based violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Tackling domestic abuse and keeping its victims safe is both vitally important, and incredibly complicated. The police service needs to have the right tools, resources, training and partnerships in place to help it identify victims and keep them safe. It also needs to investigate and bring to justice offenders, when no two domestic abuse environments are the same, and some victims have suffered in silence for years or even decades.

In September 2013, the Home Secretary commissioned HMIC to conduct an inspection.<sup>5</sup> We were asked to consider:

- the effectiveness of the police approach to domestic violence and abuse, focusing on the outcomes for victims;
- whether risks to victims of domestic violence and abuse are adequately managed;
- identifying lessons learnt from how the police approach domestic violence and abuse; and
- making any necessary recommendations in relation to these findings when considered alongside current practice.

To answer these questions, HMIC collected data and reviewed files from the 43 Home Office funded forces. We spoke to 70 victims of domestic abuse in focus groups throughout England and Wales and surveyed over 100 victims online. We also surveyed 200 professionals working with victims of domestic abuse.

We inspected all police forces in England and Wales, interviewing senior and operational leads in forces, holding focus groups with frontline staff and partners, and carrying out visits to police stations (which were unannounced) to test the reality of each force's approach with frontline officers. Our inspection teams were supplemented by expert peers, which included public protection

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<sup>5</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/news/major-review-of-police-response-to-domestic-violence](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-review-of-police-response-to-domestic-violence)

experts from over 15 forces and those working with victims of domestic abuse in voluntary and community sector organisations.

This report details what HMIC found in Merseyside Police and at the end of the report we set out some recommendations. These recommendations should be considered in conjunction with the recommendations for all forces made in the national report.<sup>6</sup> A glossary of frequently used terms also appears at the end of the report.

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<sup>6</sup> There is a requirement under section 55(5) and section 55(6) of the 1996 Police Act for the police and crime commissioner to publish a copy of their comments on this report and the recommendations for all forces in the national report and forward these to the Home Secretary.

## Domestic abuse in Merseyside<sup>7</sup>

### Calls for assistance



In Merseyside, domestic abuse accounts for 5% of calls to the police for assistance. The force was unable to provide the number of these calls that were from repeat victims.

### Crime

# 5%

Domestic abuse accounts for 5% of all recorded crime

### Assault with intent

# 19%

Merseyside recorded 611 assaults with intent to cause serious harm, of these 119 were domestic abuse related. This is 19% of all assaults with intent to cause serious harm recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

### Assault with injury

# 30%

The force also recorded 6,002 assaults with injury, of these 1,772 were domestic abuse related. This is 30% of all assaults with injury recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

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<sup>7</sup> Data in this section is based upon forces' own definition of calls for assistance and domestic abuse, and forces' use of domestic abuse markers on IT systems.

Source: HMIC data collection. Crime figures are taken from police-recorded crime submitted to the Home Office.

## Harassment

# 57%

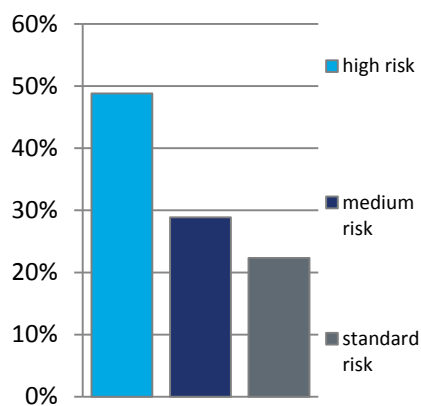
The force recorded 598 harassment offences, of these 341 were domestic abuse related. This is 57% of all harassment offences recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

## Sexual offences

# 10%

The force also recorded 1,356 sexual offences, of these 136 were domestic abuse related. This is 10% of all sexual offences recorded for the 12 months to end of August 2013.

## Risk levels



On 31 August 2013 Merseyside had 2,002 active Domestic Abuse cases, 49% were high risk, 29% were medium risk, and 22% were standard risk.

## Arrests



For every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded there were 86 arrests in Merseyside. For most forces the number is between 45 and 90.

## Outcomes



Merseyside recorded 4,817 domestic abuse related crimes for the 12 months to the end of August 2013. Of these crimes 47% resulted in a charge, 8% resulted in a caution and, 1% had an out of court disposal, for example a fixed penalty notice for disorderly conduct.

## Executive summary

The public in Merseyside can have confidence that, generally, the police provide a good service to victims of domestic abuse and help keep them safe. Tackling domestic abuse is a priority for the force. Staff demonstrated a high level of commitment and awareness; they exercised appropriate discretion and worked well with partners. However, this report outlines a number of areas where the force could further strengthen its response.

### Identifying victims

The majority of all domestic abuse incidents are reported by telephone into the force control room. HMIC found that the control room staff were well-trained and skilled in dealing with domestic abuse. The force has good systems within the control room to identify repeat callers by address, and to highlight previous incidents reported on the same telephone number. However, we found that the call handlers find it less easy to identify if a victim is vulnerable, even where this has been previously identified. Not all operators have access to the full range of police databases, so they are not able to carry out a full search of all available information about the victim or the perpetrator or any children who may be present. This means that attending officers may not have a full picture of the risk of harm to a victim or their children.

We found that resources are managed well in the control room, domestic abuse calls receive either an immediate or a priority response and there are good levels of supervision of this first point of contact.

### Keeping victims safe

Domestic abuse is regarded as important for the force. There is a clear policy to guide staff in dealing with domestic abuse, and there is a clear awareness among staff that they have an important role in tackling domestic abuse. However HMIC found some risks in the initial attendance at incidents and there are weaknesses in the process for undertaking a risk assessment and subsequent safety planning for victims.

Attending officers do not themselves undertake the formal risk assessment at the scene. They gather the relevant details and pass them to the specialist domestic abuse team, who will assess the risk and develop appropriate safety plans for victims at a later stage. While officers at the scene understand the need to take positive and immediate action to safeguard the victim, this tends to be limited to arresting the perpetrator where this is possible, and we found that they had a limited awareness of other forms of safeguarding measures. The specialist team who carry out the risk assessments do not work at evening or



weekends and therefore there can be a delay in putting in place the necessary safety plans which can place victims at greater risk.

All domestic abuse cases are assessed using the Merseyside Risk Identification Tool (MeRIT), by dedicated risk assessors. However there are sometimes delays of several days before this occurs.

## **Management of risk**

HMIC found that there is a good and comprehensive service to high risk victims of domestic abuse who are managed by the specialist domestic abuse officers, who work well in partnership with other agencies to provide safeguarding and support to victims. The service received by medium and standard risk victims is less defined. There is a lack of clarity amongst some frontline officers as to where the responsibility lies for victim contact and ongoing safety planning. As a result, some victims may not get the safeguarding support they need from the police because officers think it is someone else's responsibility.

There is a strong focus on carrying out high quality investigations and this has led to a significant increase in the proportion that result in successful prosecutions. However, we found that the focus on dealing with the crime and the offender comes at the cost of a reduced focus on safeguarding and supporting the victim.

The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) process is working well and there are good relationships with partners, which means that information is exchanged promptly, risk assessed and safety plans put in place to reduce the risk and provide support to victims. However, there is sometimes a delay between the risk assessment and MARAC where appropriate victim support is not offered.

## **Organisational effectiveness for keeping victims safe**

HMIC is concerned that, as a result of the length of time taken to complete the formal risk assessment process, there is the potential for a perpetrator to be arrested and released on bail before the formal risk assessment has been completed. This means that there is a risk that the victim may be placed at greater risk of harm because appropriate safety measures may not have been put in place.

The force has recognised the need to do more to manage high risk domestic abuse offenders and has set up an initiative known as Operation Highpoint. It identifies the highest risk perpetrators of domestic abuse and together with partners and support agencies seeks to break the cycle of repeat offending and decrease risk to victims in the future.

HMIC found that the force is taking clear steps to learn lessons from domestic homicide reviews and has good processes in place through internal force meetings and a domestic abuse action plan, to ensure that it can improve its own processes in line with recommendations.

## Findings

### **How does the force identify victims of domestic abuse, and in particular repeat and vulnerable victims?**

The majority of all domestic abuse incidents are reported by telephone into the force control room. HMIC found that the control room staff were well-trained and skilled in dealing with domestic abuse. The force has good systems within the control room to identify repeat callers by address, and to highlight previous incidents reported on the same telephone number. However, we found that the call handlers find it less easy to identify if a victim is vulnerable, even where this has been previously identified. Not all operators have access to the full range of police databases, so they are not able to carry out a full search of all available information about the victim or the perpetrator or any children who may be present. This means that attending officers may not have a full picture of the risk of harm to a victim or their children.

We found that resources are managed well in the control room, domestic abuse calls receive either an immediate or a priority response and there are good levels of supervision of this first point of contact.

Victims of domestic abuse are identified by the force when a call is made to the police, by a member of the public, via the force command and control room; when a victim attends a police station; and when they are referred from other agencies, such as the health service or social care; or at a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC). Staff working in the force control room are trained to ask questions of callers to identify whether they are at immediate risk and if they have experienced domestic abuse before. The force's system provides a series of questions from a drop-down menu to ask the caller. These ensure that the operator gains the maximum amount of information to better understand the risk, decide on the speed of the police response, and to inform attending officers. If there have been any previous domestic abuse incidents assessed as high risk, this is highlighted automatically by the command and control system on screen, when the operator enters the call details.

The safety of the caller and any children present is paramount, and the call taker may give advice and reassurance to them until an officer arrives. HMIC found that operators were skilled and effective at dealing with calls, using appropriate questions to establish whether the caller or any other person, was at immediate risk of harm. In some cases where a perpetrator was still present, there was evidence that the caller was kept on the line talking to the operator until police officers had arrived, but this was not always the case.

In addition to information from the caller, the operators also carry out some checks on the police databases to get as full a picture as possible of any previous police involvement. This helps the call taker and officers who attend the incident to establish the levels of risk the caller faces. The systems hold information such as previous calls to the address, information about the caller and alleged perpetrator, information held relating to children in the house who may be at risk and whether anyone at the address holds a firearm. This information is passed to attending officers. However we found that operators do not routinely have access to systems which specifically contain previous domestic abuse information and not all operators have access to intelligence systems. This could mean that officers may not have the most complete information available when they attend an incident.

Additional checks are carried out should the officers request further information. Officers are sent either immediately, where there is believed to be a risk to life or safety, or, when the victim is thought to be safe, officers will visit them within an hour. The decision on how quickly resources have to attend is based on the assessment of harm, threat and risk faced by the victim.

HMIC found that control room staff have a good understanding of domestic abuse and carry out their role effectively. They receive training as part of their initial course when they start working for the police. An element of this is specifically about domestic abuse. Guidance has been given about stalking and harassment, coercive control and so-called honour-based violence. We found staff to be confident and empathetic when dealing with callers who were experiencing domestic abuse.

Staff in the control room understand that a victim who has previously been subject to incidents of domestic abuse will be at greater risk. The force has a precise definition for repeat victimisation. However, we found that there were variations in staff member's knowledge of the precise definition across the force. It was clear that there was a good understanding of the importance of identifying repeat victims and dealing with them appropriately at the first point of contact and the initial attendance. However, later on in the process, we found that the different interpretations of what constitutes a repeat victim, within different MARACs, means that the level of support may vary between areas.

Repeat victims are automatically identified in the control room by the computer system, when the details of the new incident are entered, if they call from the same address or telephone number. This means that when a call is received the operator can look at the information on previous calls and gain a better understanding of the risk that may be present.

Victims who are in some way particularly vulnerable also face greater risk, for example, if they suffer from mental health problems or are frail and elderly. It is important that vulnerability is identified at the first point of contact so that the victim can be given an appropriate service. HMIC found that the systems for identifying vulnerability were not as comprehensive. There is no automatic alert to an operator that a victim has been previously identified as vulnerable, unless they were assessed as at high risk previously. In addition, not all operators can access the intelligence systems. Therefore, the identification relies on questioning the caller, which means that the force cannot be confident that it is consistently identifying vulnerability, even where it may be previously known to them.

There is good management and robust supervision in the control room. Supervisors and managers working in the control room review all domestic abuse incidents, although their scrutiny focuses on action taken by control room staff rather than actions taken by attending officers. Supervisors will not allow the closure of domestic abuse incidents unless a vulnerable personal referral form has been submitted by the attending officer. Supervisors in the control room regularly listen to a sample of their team's calls and evaluate them to ensure that they are asking the right questions to establish that risk is being accurately assessed.

## **How does the force respond to victims of domestic abuse? This includes initial action, including risk assessment**

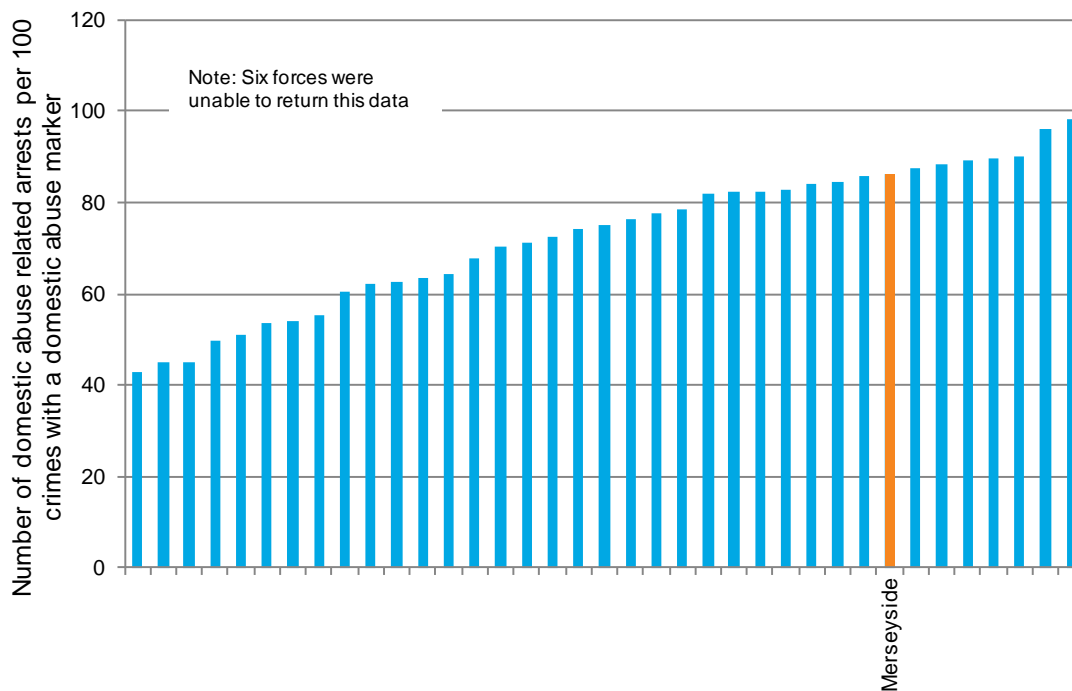
Domestic abuse is regarded as important for the force. There is a clear policy to guide staff in dealing with domestic abuse, and there is a clear awareness among staff that they have an important role in tackling domestic abuse. However HMIC found some risks in the initial attendance at incidents and there are weaknesses in the process for undertaking a risk assessment and subsequent safety planning for victims.

Attending officers do not themselves undertake the formal risk assessment at the scene. They gather the relevant details and pass them to the specialist domestic abuse team, who will assess the risk and develop appropriate safety plans for victims at a later stage. While officers at the scene understand the need to take positive and immediate action to safeguard the victim, this tends to be limited to arresting the perpetrator where this is possible, and we found that they had a limited awareness of other forms of safeguarding measures. The specialist team who carry out the risk assessments do not work at evening or weekends and therefore there can be a delay in putting in place the necessary safety plans which can place victims at greater risk.

All domestic abuse cases are assessed using the Merseyside Risk Identification Tool (MeRIT), by dedicated risk assessors. However there are sometimes delays of several days before this occurs.

For every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded there were 86 arrests in Merseyside. For most forces the number is between 45 and 90.

**Figure 1 : Number of domestic abuse related arrests per 100 crimes with a domestic abuse marker for the 12 months to 31 August 2013<sup>8</sup>**



Source: HMIC data collection

Tackling domestic abuse is a clear priority for both the police and crime commissioner (PCC) and the force; we found this to be reflected in the understanding of the workforce. The PCC has made tackling domestic abuse a priority within the police and crime plan. Officers responding to domestic abuse incidents understand the importance of their role in making victims safe. The force works well with partner agencies such as the health service and social care, at both a strategic and operational level, to deal with domestic abuse. However, we found that there are variations across the force area in the approach to risk assessment and victim safety planning, which are dependent upon services provided through different local partnerships. There is a need for police and partners to work together to agree a consistent force-wide approach to ensure equality of victim care across Merseyside.

HMIC found some inconsistencies in training to frontline staff. Those officers attending domestic abuse incidents have received some training or completed learning packages which gives them an understanding of domestic abuse,

<sup>8</sup> Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and use of a domestic abuse marker on IT systems.

stalking and harassment. However, this training has not reached all staff. For example, we found that the force has produced a helpful checklist to be completed during offences of stalking, however, during the inspection neither frontline or specialist staff had seen the form.

The force policy on domestic abuse requires officers to complete the Merseyside Risk Identification Tool (MeRIT) form for every incident of domestic abuse – to *“identify any risk factors at that time in order to inform the risk assessment process”*. Attending officers gather the relevant information from the victim at the scene. The formal risk assessment takes place later, at the police station, by dedicated staff on receipt of the form. HMIC is concerned that this can mean that the officers are focussed more on recording the information, rather than completing a thorough risk assessment at the time. In addition, victims’ safety planning does not occur until later in the process. Those attending incidents have a good understanding of the need to take prompt action to reduce the immediate threat to potential victims and children. However, we found officers did not demonstrate a wider understanding of safeguarding measures.

Supervisors review all officers’ completed risk assessment forms for completeness and accuracy, but they do not undertake any risk assessment. Supervisory officers will attend incidents of domestic abuse if requested by officers or if the incident is high risk or serious criminal offences have occurred. The force domestic abuse policy requires attending officers to be aware of the need for positive action at every domestic abuse incident. This may be by arresting the perpetrator if appropriate, or other action to make victims safer: for example, arranging extra patrols; or taking victims to stay with relatives. The referral form which officers complete contains a tear-off section with telephone numbers of agencies who could assist victims. However, officers do not always complete these forms at the time. This means that the tear-off section containing advice is not always given to the victim.

Officers are expected to make an arrest where an offence has been committed and take action to ensure the safety of those present. The completion of the referral form should take place at the scene. However, HMIC found evidence that this is often not the case. The management of the risk present is the responsibility of the attending officer until it is risk assessed and passed to the specialist team. In reality, officers feel that once they have submitted the form it is no longer their responsibility. Unfortunately, the risk assessors work limited hours, between 8am and 4pm, Monday to Friday. This means that at night, during weekends and Bank Holidays risk may not be as well managed or overseen, as the risk assessment may not take place for several days.



During the inspection, HMIC tracked ten domestic abuse incidents which occurred on a Saturday evening. We found that by the following Wednesday, only five had been uploaded onto the domestic violence register and risk assessed. By the following Thursday, nine had been uploaded and risk assessed. This shows a considerable delay in uploading information and carrying out risk assessments. This could put the victims at greater risk than if a risk assessment had been carried out at the time, and the information uploaded shortly afterwards. The force is aware of this issue and is due to move the domestic violence register onto its intelligence database in summer 2014. This should enable the attending officers to upload the information before they go off-duty.

If there are suspects outstanding who need to be arrested but have not yet been found, these names are added to a domestic abuse fugitive list and attempts are made to arrest them by each oncoming team. This is monitored and overseen by the divisional management team at the daily management meeting. After an arrest has been made, the case may be dealt with by the investigating officer, CID or family crime investigation unit (FCIU). This depends on the type of crime committed and whether the incident is risk assessed as high risk. Responsibility for the investigation varies across the different force areas and where responsibility stays with the investigating officer, the victim may not get access to all safeguarding options that are available.

## **How are victims of domestic abuse made safer as a result of the police response and subsequent action?**

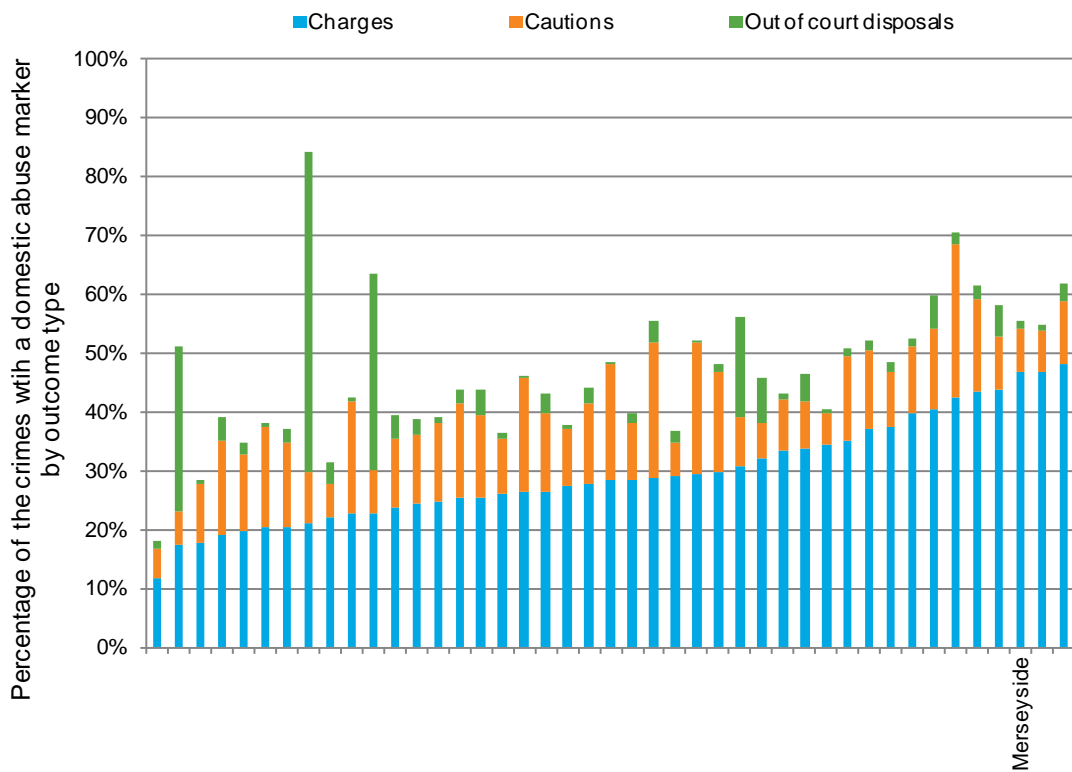
HMIC found that there is a good and comprehensive service to high risk victims of domestic abuse who are managed by the specialist domestic abuse officers, who work well in partnership with other agencies to provide safeguarding and support to victims. The service received by medium and standard risk victims is less defined. There is a lack of clarity amongst some frontline officers as to where the responsibility lies for victim contact and ongoing safety planning. As a result, some victims may not get the safeguarding support they need from the police because officers think it is someone else's responsibility.

There is a strong focus on carrying out high quality investigations and this has led to a significant increase in the proportion that result in successful prosecutions. However, we found that the focus on dealing with the crime and the offender comes at the cost of a reduced focus on safeguarding and supporting the victim.

The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) process is working well and there are good relationships with partners, which means that information is exchanged promptly, risk assessed and safety plans put in place to reduce the risk and provide support to victims. However, there is sometimes a delay between the risk assessment and MARAC where appropriate victim support is not offered.

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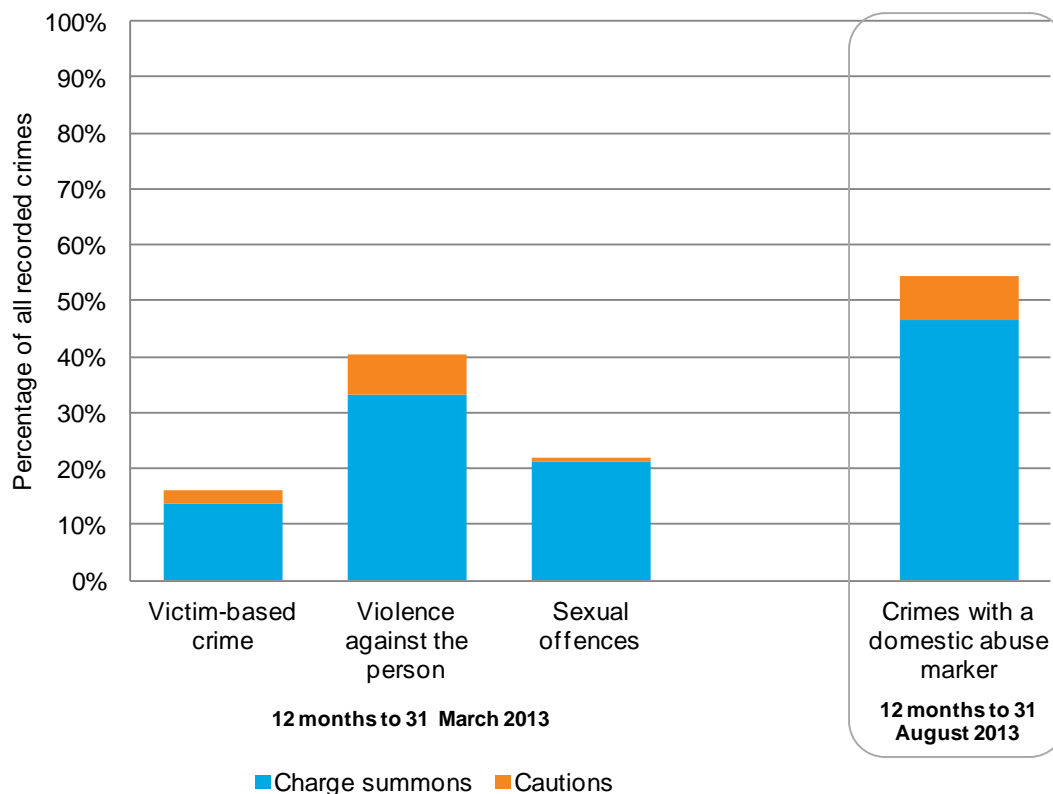
**Figure 2: Percentage of different outcome types used for crimes with a domestic abuse marker for the 12 months to 31 August 2013<sup>9</sup>**



Merseyside Police charge a higher proportion of crimes with a domestic abuse marker than recorded victim-based crime. This may indicate that the force has a different approach to domestic abuse outcomes than other crimes.

<sup>9</sup> Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and use of a domestic abuse marker on IT systems.

**Figure 3: Percentage of charge summons and cautions used for victim-based crime, violence against the person, sexual offences and all crimes with a domestic abuse marker <sup>10</sup>**



Source: Sources: HMIC data collection, Home Office Crimes detected in England and Wales, ONS Crime in England and Wales

The force employs a team of specialist risk assessors within the Family Crime Investigation Unit (FCIU) who use the information submitted on the MeRIT form to risk assess all domestic abuse incidents. All risk assessors attended a risk assessment training course in July 2013 have received specialist domestic abuse training.

Specialist domestic abuse staff from the FCIU take on the management of all cases graded as high risk and some that are medium risk. They use additional information held on their domestic abuse system (PROTECT) to help them develop a more complete picture of the risk a victim may be facing. This means that a victim facing higher levels of risk should receive a comprehensive service from specialist staff.

<sup>10</sup> Based on forces' own definition of domestic abuse and use of a domestic abuse marker on IT systems.

They will provide appropriate support and actions to reduce risk, for example, help to have locks changed or supply a mobile phone to contact the police in an emergency. Domestic abuse cases that are graded as 'standard' are usually the responsibility of response officers with less knowledge of safety planning and supporting agencies, meaning that lower risk cases may not have access to the same support as those graded higher risk.

Specialist officers have received training on domestic abuse as part of their accreditation as investigators. Risk assessors may not come from an investigation background but they have received risk assessment training in July 2013. The FCIU are also available to provide support and advice to officers dealing with lower level cases. They help to make victims feel safer through safety planning and partnership working. Victims are updated in a timely manner, however, we found that on some occasions, although victim contact was achieved, it was not consistently followed up; for example, victim support services referrals, such as those for alcohol abuse did not take place.

HMIC found that there is some lack of clarity about who is dealing with the victims of domestic abuse throughout the investigation and criminal justice process. The role of the FCIU was unclear to many staff, who assumed that they provided victim support in all circumstances. This lack of clarity presents the risk that some victims may not get the safeguarding support they need from the police, because officers think it is someone else's responsibility.

Officers attending incidents with outstanding suspects or that are graded as high risk sometimes put in place a fast action response plan to reduce risk to victims. This might include ensuring that any call to an address is treated as an emergency by marking police systems to show this. Safety plans are reviewed and updated by the FCIU for high and medium risk cases. Any change in circumstances, for example where a perpetrator is released from police custody should be updated by the officer who is dealing with the case. However, where the officer is not on duty, it is not clear whether this responsibility would be passed on to someone else to inform the victim. In such a situation it is also not certain that a safety plan would be reviewed and updated to deal with any changes in risk. This is a concern and needs to be addressed.

There are good working relationships with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). We found that the force has good minimum standards of investigation at domestic abuse incidents. It has trained 1,500 frontline officers and supervisors, which has led to a significant increase in successful prosecutions. Officers are focussed on the collection of evidence during the 'golden hour'. These include gathering all available evidence including photographs of victim's injuries and a first account. However, we found officers were focused on dealing with the crime and the offender, not the care of the victim. They did not have a good

understanding of the agencies available to assist victims, and felt that referral to these agencies was the role of specialists. HMIC reviewed a small number of files and found that levels of investigation were good. However, in the majority of files, there was limited evidence of victim support and other safety measures.

There are good working relationships between partners including health, housing and local authorities. This means the force is able to share information effectively and have a more complete picture around risk levels and offer a better quality, co-ordinated response to victims. The MARAC process in Merseyside is regarded as working well. MARACs provide the opportunity for police and partners to meet together to consider high risk cases of domestic abuse, and jointly assess that risk. They share all available information and agree a co-ordinated set of actions to help to minimise the risk to victims and support them. The meetings are well run and there is good attendance by partners including the voluntary sector, and they work well in reviewing the level of risk allocated and ensuring each organisation takes appropriate responsibility for relevant actions. However, partners felt that the constant turnover of detective inspectors representing the police at the meetings was not conducive to its effectiveness. MARACs in some areas have significantly higher volumes of referrals than others. There was evidence during the inspection that risk assessors did not trust the matrix score from the MeRIT form and would raise the assessment to high risk if in any doubt. This means that MARACs may be dealing with increased workloads, meaning they are less able to provide victim support than would otherwise be the case. Also, in some areas, partners use an additional scoring matrix, the domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH) risk assessment, in addition to the MeRIT matrix, to lower or raise referrals to MARAC. This means that victims are not assessed consistently across the force.

High risk domestic abuse victims are also provided with the support of independent domestic abuse advisors (IDVAs) whose role is to support victims, help them rebuild their lives and assist them through any court proceedings. They are not managed or controlled by the police. They were part funded by government grant but this money is being withdrawn in 2015, and their future funding remains uncertain. The PCC is aware of the low number of IDVAs in some parts of the force. She is working towards a way of improving this and increasing the numbers of IDVAs available to support victims and their families.

All staff throughout Merseyside Police displayed a commitment to reducing threat, harm and risk to victims of domestic abuse. Each understands their role in this although, as mentioned earlier, there is a greater focus on taking positive action at the scene and investigation, rather than ongoing victim support for lower risk victims.

In some areas FCIU identifies specific victims for visits by neighbourhood policing teams to provide victim support and details of supporting agencies, however HMIC found that the use of neighbourhood staff in this way was not common, and that neighbourhood staff were generally not involved with domestic abuse incidents or victims.

## **Does the force have appropriate systems, processes and understanding to manage domestic abuse and risk to victims in the future?**

HMIC is concerned that, as a result of the length of time taken to complete the formal risk assessment process, there is the potential for a perpetrator to be arrested and released on bail before the formal risk assessment has been completed. This means that there is a risk that the victim may be placed at greater risk of harm because appropriate safety measures may not have been put in place.

The force has recognised the need to do more to manage high risk domestic abuse offenders and has set up an initiative known as Operation Highpoint. It identifies the highest risk perpetrators of domestic abuse and together with partners and support agencies seeks to break the cycle of repeat offending and decrease risk to victims in the future.

HMIC found that the force is taking clear steps to learn lessons from domestic homicide reviews and has good processes in place through internal force meetings and a domestic abuse action plan, to ensure that it can improve its own processes in line with recommendations.

While the force works hard to manage victim safety, there are areas which it could strengthen, to better manage future risk. HMIC found a key weakness to be the delay in completing the initial risk assessment process. There is potential for a perpetrator to be arrested and released on bail without a valid risk assessment having been undertaken. This means that the victim may be placed at greater risk of harm because appropriate safety measures may not have been put in place. It is essential that a risk assessment be completed before a perpetrator is released, so that the victim can be effectively safeguarded. Officers who attend incidents are in possession of the MeRIT form and are best placed to complete an initial risk assessment using their professional judgement and the information they have gathered.

HMIC found that there is no routine follow-up with victims who are no longer contacting the police. Where there have been no further calls from victims, who have historically been victims on a number of occasions, there is no mechanism to understand why they have stopped calling.

The force has recognised that it needs to do more to tackle serious and serial domestic abuse offenders to prevent them from reoffending. It is trialling an initiative named Operation Highpoint. This operation identifies the highest risk domestic abuse perpetrators and seeks to manage their reoffending behaviour together with partner agencies. This includes a programme of anger management and access to support services to change behaviours and reduce offending. This work is very much in its early stages, but shows a commitment by the force to not only protect victims and bring offenders to justice, but to reduce the numbers of future domestic abuse incidents.

HMIC found that neighbourhood officers and staff are little used in tackling domestic abuse in their areas. In some areas they are used to provide victim support and advice on preventing further crimes; however the majority are not involved at domestic abuse incidents or in providing ongoing support to victims.

The force has had eight domestic homicide reviews (DHRs) in the last 18 months. We found established systems and processes to ensure that any recommendations and learning are identified and fed out throughout the force, so that any necessary improvements in practices and processes can be planned and implemented. An example of this is a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) planned for 2014, which was a recommendation from a recent domestic homicide review. The MASH will see police and partners co-located, sharing information in a more timely, efficient and effective way than currently happens under MARAC. The MASH will not replace MARAC but should streamline the process.

The PCC has highlighted tackling domestic abuse as a priority for the force, and domestic abuse is embedded as part of the performance process. This includes daily discussion of levels of domestic abuse incidents; to referral forms submitted; and outstanding fugitives. The force has sought to understand its levels of domestic abuse incidents which are subsequently recorded by the police as criminal incidents. We found that there are a high number of non-crime arrests made by officers in relation to domestic abuse, specifically for breach of the peace, and the force may wish to assure itself that the power of arrest is being used correctly and that a criminal arrest is not appropriate in more cases.



## Recommendations

As a result of this inspection HMIC has developed recommendations which are designed to tackle any risks identified in the service to victims of domestic abuse. These force-specific recommendations should be considered in conjunction with recommendations to all forces set out in HMIC's national report on domestic abuse.

1. To review the ability of call takers and dispatchers to access appropriate systems to inform attending officers of key information relevant to the incident.
2. To review the training currently provided to staff to ensure all staff understand coercive control, stalking, harassment and so-called honour-based violence.
3. To review the risk assessment process and ensure that it is taking place at the most appropriate opportunity, and that it is being used consistently across the force, with appropriate cases being referred to MARAC.
4. To educate frontline officers on access to support available to victims and what their responsibilities are in relation to ongoing victim care.
5. To review the contact officers and staff have with victims throughout their involvement and ensure that appropriate levels of support and safeguarding are given at all three levels of risk.
6. To dip sample domestic abuse incidents to confirm whether the referral form was completed at the scene; when the risk assessment took place; whether the correct opening and closing code was used; and whether the incident was dealt with as a crime, if it was appropriate to do so.
7. To work with the PCC and partner agencies to increase the numbers of IDVAs available to work with victims in the county.
8. To review the use of neighbourhood teams to provide victim support and assistance in a more consistent way.

# Glossary

## **Bail conditions**

A court can remand a defendant in custody or grant bail, with or without conditions attached. Before the first court hearing, the police can also retain a defendant in custody or grant bail, with or without conditions attached, but their powers to do so are more limited than the court's. Conditions can only be imposed to ensure that the defendant attends the next court hearing, commits no new offences in the meantime, and does not interfere with any witnesses or obstruct the course of justice.

## **Body worn camera**

A video camera, worn on the helmet or upper body of an officer, which records visual and audio footage of an incident.

## **CAADA (Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse)**

CAADA is a national charity supporting a strong multi-agency response to domestic abuse. Its work focuses on saving lives and public money.

CAADA provides practical help to support professionals and organisations working with domestic abuse victims. The aim is to protect the highest risk victims and their children – those at risk of murder or serious harm.

## **CCTV**

Evidence from Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) can be used to support police investigations. It is primarily used for corroborating what is already known in investigating incidents and to trigger further opportunities to carry out investigation, such as the identification of witnesses and suspects.

## **Clare's Law**

Clare's Law – the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme – is designed to provide victims with information that may protect them from an abusive situation before it ends in tragedy. The scheme allows the police to disclose information about a partner's previous history of domestic violence or violent acts. The

Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme is named after Clare Wood who was brutally murdered in 2009 by her former partner George Appleton, who had a record of violence against women.

### **Code of Practice for Victims of Crime**

The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code) places a statutory obligation on criminal justice agencies to provide a standard of service to victims of crime or, where the victim died as a result of the criminal conduct, their relatives. The obligations the Victims' Code places on the agencies concerned include that:

- They provide victims, or their relatives, with information about the crime, including about arrests, prosecutions and court decisions;
- They provide information about eligibility for compensation under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme;
- Victims be told about Victim Support and either be referred on to them or offered their service;
- Bereaved relatives be assigned a family liaison police officer; and
- Victims of an offender who receives a sentence of 12 months or more after being convicted of a sexual or violent offence have the opportunity to make representations about what licence conditions or supervision requirements the offender should be subject to on release from prison.

There are enhanced entitlements for victims of the most serious crime which includes domestic violence.

### **Coercive control**

This is term and concept developed by Evan Stark which seeks to explain the range of tactics used by perpetrators and the impact of those on victims. It highlights the on-going nature of the behaviour and the extent to which the actions of the perpetrator control the victim through isolation, intimidation, degradation and micro-regulation of everyday life. Crucially it sets out such abuse can be psychological as well as physical. Coercive control is explicitly covered by the definition of domestic abuse.

## **Control room**

A police control or communications room manages emergency (999) and non-emergency (101) calls, and sending police officers to these calls.

## **Counter-allegation**

Where someone initially identified as the perpetrator makes an allegation against the victim. If counter-allegations are not identified and resolved agencies may be providing services to the perpetrator and inadvertently helping them isolate and control the victim. The victim may not get access to the services they need because they are labelled 'the perpetrator'.

## **Crime Scene Investigator**

Police staff who work alongside uniformed and plain clothed police officers during the investigation of a crime to locate, record and recover evidence from crime scenes.

## **DASH – domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH 2009)**

DASH is a risk identification, assessment and management model adopted by UK police forces and partner agencies in 2009. The aim of the DASH assessment is to help front-line practitioners identify high risk cases of domestic abuse, stalking and so-called honour-based violence.

## **Domestic Homicide Review**

Local areas are expected to undertake a multi-agency review following a domestic homicide. The process aims to assist all those involved, to identify the lessons that can be learned from homicides where a person is killed as a result of domestic violence, with a view to preventing future homicides and violence.

## **Domestic Violence Prevention Notices (DVPN)**

A DVPN is the initial notice issued by the police to provide emergency protection to an individual believed to be the victim of domestic violence.

This notice, which must be authorised by a police superintendent, contains prohibitions that effectively bar the suspected perpetrator from returning to the victim's home or otherwise contacting the victim.

A DVPN may be issued to a person aged 18 years and over if the police superintendent has reasonable grounds for believing that:

- the individual has been violent towards, or
- has threatened violence towards an associated person, and
- the DVPN is necessary to protect that person from violence or a threat of violence by the intended recipient of the DVPN

### **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

Female genital mutilation (sometimes referred to as female circumcision) refers to procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The practice is illegal in the UK.

### **Frontline**

These are police officers or police staff who are in everyday contact with the public and who directly intervene to keep people safe and enforce the law. The HMIC publication, *Policing in Austerity: Rising to the Challenge* (2013) sets this out in more detail.

### **Golden hour**

Commonly used to refer to the time after a crime has been committed during which there is maximum potential for recovery of forensic evidence

### **Harassment**

The term harassment is used to cover the 'causing alarm or distress' offences under section 2 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 as amended (PHA), and 'putting people in fear of violence' offences under section 4 of the PHA.

## **House-to- house**

House-to-house enquiries are likely to feature in many investigations to: identify suspects and canvas for witnesses in areas connected to an incident, establish who lives or works in a particular location, and obtain an account of their movements during relevant times.

## **High risk**

Term used when, following a DASH risk assessment, there are identifiable indicators of risk of serious harm. The potential event could happen at any time and the impact would be serious. Risk of serious harm (Home Office 2002 and OASys 2006): 'A risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible'.

## **IDVA – independent domestic violence adviser**

Independent domestic violence advisers or advocates (IDVAs) are trained specialists who provide a service to victims at high risk of harm from intimate partners, ex-partners or family members, with the aim of securing their safety and the safety of their children. Serving as a victim's primary point of contact, IDVAs normally work with their clients from the point of crisis, to assess the level of risk, discuss the range of suitable options and develop safety plans.

## **Incident**

When a member of the public calls for police assistance, or a police officer observes or discovers a crime the police usually create an incident record. This is the first step, the police will then decide whether a crime has been committed and, if it is appropriate, create a crime record.

## **Intimate Partner Violence**

This describes physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy.

## **MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference)**

MARACs are regular local meetings where information about high risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies. By bringing all agencies together at a MARAC, and ensuring that whenever possible the voice of the victim is represented by the IDVA, a risk focused, co-ordinated safety plan can be drawn up to support the victim. There are currently over 270 MARACs operating across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland managing more than 64,000 cases a year.

## **MASH – Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub**

A Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) brings together staff from police and partner agencies who work from the same location, sharing information and ensuring a timely and joined-up response to protect children and vulnerable adults.

## **Medium risk**

Term used when following a DASH risk assessment there are identifiable indicators of risk of serious harm. The offender has the potential to cause serious harm but is unlikely to do so unless there is a change in circumstances, for example, failure to take medication, loss of accommodation, relationship breakdown, drug or alcohol misuse.

## **National Domestic Abuse helpline**

A Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge, is a national service for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

The Helpline can give support, help and information over the telephone, wherever the caller might be in the country. The Helpline is staffed 24 hours a day by fully trained female helpline support workers and volunteers. All calls are completely confidential. Translation facilities for callers whose first language is not English, and a service for callers who are deaf or hard of hearing are available.

## **Partnership**

A term used where collaborative working is established between the police and other public, private or voluntary organisations.

## **Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE)**

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the PACE codes of practice provide the core framework of police powers and safeguards around stop and search, arrest, detention, investigation, identification and interviewing detainees.

[www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-and-criminal-evidence-act-1984-pace-current-versions](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-and-criminal-evidence-act-1984-pace-current-versions)

## **Positive action**

The term refers to the steps and action taken at all stages of the police response to ensure effective protection of victims and children, while allowing the criminal justice system to hold the offender to account. It is often used in the context of arrest policy, police guidance states that “arrest will normally be ‘necessary’ under the terms of PACE to protect a child or vulnerable person, prevent the suspect causing injury and/or to allow for the prompt and effective investigation of the offence”.

## **Problem-solving**

Problem-solving is a term used in policing where forces systematically identify and analyse crime and disorder problems, develop specific responses to individual problems and subsequently assess whether the response has been successful.

## **Refuge**

A refuge is a safe house where women and children who are experiencing domestic violence can stay free from abuse. Refuge addresses (and sometimes telephone numbers) are confidential. According to Women’s Aid on a typical day, **over 7000 women and children** are resident in refuge accommodation in England



## **Risk assessment**

A risk assessment is based on structured professional judgment. It provides structure and informs decisions that are already being made. It is only a guide/checklist and should not be seen as a scientific predictive solution. Its completion is intended to assist officers in the decision-making process on appropriate levels of intervention for victims of domestic violence.

## **Safeguarding**

The term safeguarding is applied when protecting children and other vulnerable people. The UK Government has defined the term 'safeguarding children' as: *"The process of protecting children from abuse or neglect, preventing impairment of their health and development, and ensuring they are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care that enables children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully."*

## **Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)**

SARCs are specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted.

They aim to be a one-stop service, providing the following under one roof: medical care and forensic examination following assault/rape and, in some locations, sexual health services.

## **Standard Risk**

Term used following a DASH risk assessment where current evidence does not indicate likelihood of causing serious harm.

## **Victim Personal Statement**

The Victim Personal Statement (VPS) gives victims an opportunity to describe the wider effects of the crime upon them, express their concerns and indicate whether or not they require any support.

Provisions relating to the making of a VPS and its use in criminal proceedings are included in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims' Code), which was published on 29 October 2013 and came into force on 10 December 2013.

## **Vulnerable**

A term used to describe a person who is in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.

## **What Works Centre for Crime Reduction**

The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction is hosted by the College of Policing. The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction will: review research on practices and interventions to reduce crime, label the evidence base in terms of quality, cost and impact, and provide police and crime commissioners and other crime reduction partners with the knowledge, tools and guidance to help them target their resources more effectively.

It will be led by a core team from the College of Policing, and supported by a "commissioned partnership programme" which has been jointly funded by the College and the Economic and Social Research Council.