

PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (Vulnerability)

An inspection of West Midlands Police



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Vulnerability in numbers



Calls for assistance

Calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

West Midlands
Police

847

England and Wales

350

Domestic abuse calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

West Midlands
Police

13.0

England and Wales

15.8



Crime

Crimes recorded per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

West Midlands
Police

62.8

England and Wales

61.6

Change in recorded crimes (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

West Midlands
Police

+1%

England and Wales

+2.2%

Percentage of total crimes recorded (excluding fraud) as having a vulnerable victim 12 months to 31 March 2015*

West Midlands
Police

—

England and Wales

10.7%

Percentage of total crimes recorded as domestic abuse 12 months to 31 March 2015

West Midlands
Police

10.0%

England and Wales

10.0%

Change in domestic abuse recorded crime 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

West Midlands
Police

+18%

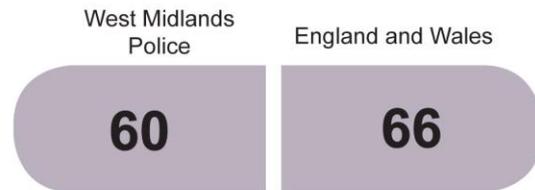
England and Wales

+20.8%



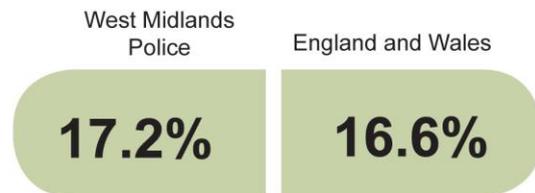
Domestic abuse arrest rate

Number of domestic abuse arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015

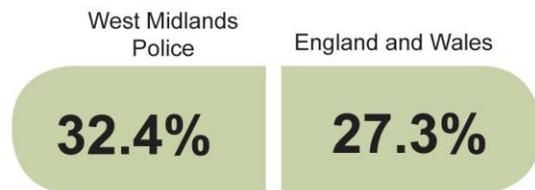


Charge rate

Charge rate as a percentage of all crimes recorded (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015

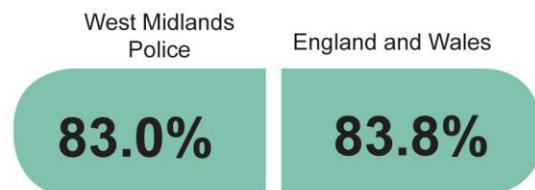


Domestic abuse charge rate as a percentage of all domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015



Victim satisfaction rate

Victim satisfaction rate 12 months to 31 March 2015



*** West Midlands Police was not able to provide data for percentage of total crimes recorded having a vulnerable victim.**

Data: for full details on the data used in this graphic see annex A in the vulnerability national report.

Introduction

The public expects their local police force to support victims of crime by responding to calls for help, putting in place the right support and keeping them informed. It is particularly important that vulnerable people, whether or not they have been a victim of crime, are identified early and receive the support they need.

As part of its annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMIC's effectiveness programme assessed how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. Within this programme, HMIC's vulnerability inspection examined the overall question, 'How effective are forces at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?' We have considered in depth how forces respond to and support missing and absent children and victims of domestic abuse, and assessed how well prepared forces are to respond to and safeguard children at risk of sexual exploitation.

We have looked at four areas:

- How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?
- How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?
- How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?
- How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent children & victims of domestic abuse); and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

At the heart of this inspection is the protection of people who are vulnerable. A force may therefore be judged as requiring improvement by HMIC where it exhibits shortcomings in one of these areas, even if its performance in other areas is strong, and even if there are many elements of its service that HMIC considers to be good.

This inspection follows up our 2014 domestic abuse inspection and reviews forces' progress on implementation of their action plans following that inspection. A national domestic abuse report summarising the findings across 43 forces is being published at the same time as this report.

During our inspection we collected data and plans from forces, conducted a review of case files and observed multi-agency meetings. We heard from victims of domestic abuse through a number of focus groups across England and Wales and conducted an online survey with practitioners, including Independent Domestic Violence Advocates, outreach and refuge workers, to gauge views on what has changed since the 2014 inspection and inform local practitioner focus groups.

During the in-force inspection, we interviewed chief officers in each force and held focus groups with officers, staff and partners, and made unannounced visits to police stations, force control rooms and specialist teams. We also worked with the force missing person coordinator (or equivalent) to review cases of missing and absent children, including children considered to be 'repeat absent' and 'repeat missing' and children shown to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

All forces are subject to significant cost reductions and these issues have been reflected in our efficiency reports published in October 2015. The judgments we are making in this vulnerability report are made understanding the financial challenges forces are facing.

This report sets out the findings from this wide-ranging inspection of West Midlands Police.

How effective is the force at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?

Summary



Requires improvement

West Midlands Police generally provides a good service to vulnerable victims. The force identifies vulnerable people at the earliest opportunity and responds well to them. However, there are some areas where improvement is needed to ensure the service is consistent and vulnerable people, particularly children, are kept safe. Given the scale of the challenge in this area and risk that is posed to some of the most vulnerable people overall HMIC judges that the force requires improvement.

HMIC acknowledges that the force has shown a clear commitment to protecting vulnerable people. The force has increased considerably the number of officers and staff in the public protection teams and has widened their responsibility to provide a better service for victims.

Officers and staff believe that safeguarding¹ vulnerable people and pursuing those who commit crimes against them is part of everyone's day-to-day work in the force. However there are some areas of activity that undermine their good work, which the force needs to address.

West Midlands Police effectively identifies repeat and vulnerable victims and responds to them well. Most victims receive a good service. However the force has some gaps in the way it assesses risk. HMIC found some officers do not follow force policy and the method of assessing risk to the victim was unclear. In some domestic abuse cases officers are not locating and dealing with suspects as quickly as they should. As a result, we are not confident that the force is providing all domestic abuse victims with the appropriate service and support.

HMIC found that having the additional staff working in public protection meant that the force could assign the people with the right skills to make good progress with the cases. Victims are kept updated throughout the course of the investigation and are able to choose how they receive these updates. The supervision of investigations and safeguarding is generally to a good standard.

¹ The term safeguarding means providing protection and support to ensure the safety of the vulnerable person and prevent further harm.

HMIC found that the assessment of risk for children who go missing from home was inappropriate in some cases. We found some instances where children were classed as absent when they should have been recorded as missing, and risk levels for missing children were sometimes incorrectly assessed at a lower grade than they should have been. Errors of this sort could expose children to greater risks of grooming for child sexual abuse.

A person is classified as 'absent' if they are not where they are expected to be but they are not considered to be at risk. Whereas, if they are 'missing' the police are obliged to take steps to locate them, as the level of perceived risk is higher.

The force has made an impressive start in its preparedness for tackling child sexual exploitation. Staff have been re-deployed into a force-wide team to investigate complex and organised child sexual exploitation. Local officers have been appointed to help tackle the problem at a local level and there is good analysis of the victims, offenders and locations which are linked to child sexual exploitation activity.

The force is working well with partner agencies to support vulnerable children and we found a good level of understanding in the force of child sexual exploitation. This inspection only considered how well prepared the force is to tackle child sexual exploitation. The force was also subject to a re-inspection in respect of its child protection services. The more detailed findings from that re-inspection, published in December 2015, should be read in conjunction with this inspection report.

How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?

West Midlands Police has worked hard to promote a culture which focuses on the needs of victims. The force uses a risk-based approach to decide how best to respond with police resources. It is commissioning problem profiles² as threats emerge and is then targeting its resources on the basis of threat, harm and risk.

Identifying those who are vulnerable

HMIC found that the nature of a victim's vulnerability is usually identified by the force at the first point of contact. Staff demonstrated an approach which was centred on victims, and were empathetic and considerate of the needs of the victim.

² A problem profile is intended to provide the force with greater understanding of established and emerging crime or incident series, priority locations or other identified high-risk issues. It should be based on the research and analysis of a wide range of information sources, including information from partner organisations. It should contain recommendations for making decisions and options for action.

Forces define vulnerability in different ways. The majority of forces use either the definition from the government's Code of Practice for Victims of Crime³ or that referred to in ACPO guidance.⁴ Nine forces use their own definition or a combination of these definitions.

West Midlands uses the definition from the ACPO guidance and defines a vulnerable adult as:

“Any person aged 18 years or over who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental, physical, or learning disability, age or illness AND is or may be unable to take care of him or herself or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.”

The proportion of crime recorded which involves a vulnerable victim varies considerably between forces, from 0.03 percent to 34.3 percent. There is no standard way in which forces are required to record on crime recording systems whether a victim is vulnerable, and forces do this differently. West Midlands Police was one of eight forces that were unable to quantify the number of recorded crimes that had a vulnerable victim for the time period of the data collection. The force uses a number of markers to identify vulnerable victims in its crime recording system. However, the force could not extract accurate data easily for the time period of the data collection.

Staff taking non-emergency calls (101) have received eight days of intensive training in how to identify and deal with vulnerable people. Staff taking emergency calls (999) have received less training. The disparity in training was evident when HMIC listened to a small sample of calls from the public. We found inconsistency in both departments, but the public received a better service dealing with their specific vulnerability when calling the 101 service.

The front desk staff in stations have received extensive vulnerability training, which is reflected in the good service that they provide.

³ *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*, Ministry of Justice, 2013. Available from www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf

⁴ The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is now the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). *ACPO Guidance on Safeguarding and Investigating the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*, NPIA, 2012. Available from www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/

Assessing levels of risk and need

When establishing the nature of the caller's vulnerability staff use the national decision model (NDM),⁵ underpinned by professional judgment. To find information to help them reach a conclusion they access the force's IT systems. However, the force's command and control IT system is over 20 years old and is not integrated with other IT systems. Staff need to access several different databases to ensure all available information has been read to send the right response. Calls identified from repeat addresses or telephones are identified on different systems from the system that identifies repeat victims, which can adversely affect judgements made about the level of risk. The command and control IT system is to be replaced by the force in the medium term, as part of a continuing IT modernisation programme.

Intelligence researchers support staff in the control room and officers on the ground. They scan previous incidents and search the systems to find information about the victim, offender and location. However in periods of high demand these staff are not always available to perform this role when it is needed. This means that information which would help assess the nature of the vulnerability of the caller or victim can be missed.

We found that supervisors regularly assure the quality of the operators' work by conducting dip samples of calls. They identify whether the nature of vulnerability of the caller was assessed correctly and the call was dealt with appropriately.

Understanding the risk to victims and ensuring they are protected and supported

HMIC found that in West Midlands the requirements of some vulnerable groups are better understood than others. The force makes it compulsory that an officer will attend all reports of domestic abuse. We found that staff showed a high level of professional commitment to providing the right response to meet the nature of the caller's vulnerability or identified risk. However, in the case of responding to missing persons, the assessment and response is not always the right one. In some cases the force makes a lower-than-appropriate risk level assessment, and records missing people, including children, as absent rather than missing.

The higher the level of risk is judged to be, the more prompt the response required and the greater the level of resourcing needed. The risk assessments and grades are determined by the duty response inspector who supervises the response officers.

⁵ National decision model (NDM) is specific to policing. It provides a consistent framework in which decisions can be examined and challenged, both at the time and afterwards. It is composed of six main elements: the police code of ethics being central to the decision; gather information; assess threat and risk; consider powers and force policy; identify options; and, take action and review what happened.

Some staff with whom we spoke felt that this may unwittingly influence the inspector to match the risk with the officers available to respond, not with the risk posed to the victims. The force records 58 percent of all cases reported to it as 'absent' rather than 'missing'.

To provide the most appropriate support to vulnerable victims, the force has invested more resource in the parts of its organisation which works to keep them safe. This has led to the very positive step of the force creating additional teams and structures including satellite intelligence units working within local policing units (LPU) along with business improvement teams to identify local crime patterns and trends. The force has a good understanding of the crime profile of the West Midlands area, at both force and local levels.

Within the force's public protection department it has a service improvement team (SIT) dedicated to improving the police response for vulnerable people. The team is responsible for analysing the demand from the public and partner agencies and produces information to improve the service. The SIT also carries out monthly thematic reviews of different aspects of public protection work to make improvements as part of a continuous cycle. The SIT maintains governance of detailed public protection delivery plans. The plans show how the force activity is helping to achieve the objectives in the police and crime plan which include domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation. It also maintains a force missing and absent delivery plan. This records progress on improving the service and work with partner agencies to reduce the incidents and risk to vulnerable people.

How well does the force initially respond to vulnerable victims?⁶

Vulnerable victims receive a good service from West Midlands Police, most of the time. Their vulnerability and risk are generally assessed correctly. However, HMIC is concerned that some victims do not receive the right service because the nature of a person's vulnerability has not been assessed correctly.

We found that staff at all levels know they have a responsibility to safeguard vulnerable people and pursue those who take advantage of them. Staff know this is a priority for the force and have a good understanding of the consequences for victims if positive action is not taken.

⁶ The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the initial police response to vulnerable victims, rather than the overall police response to vulnerable victims.

The force has structured risk assessments with set questions for domestic abuse and missing person cases. Staff are expected to use the NDM and professional judgment to provide the best safeguarding measures for vulnerable people in other cases.

Response officers

An officer is deployed to every report of domestic abuse. In cases of serious and repeat victimisation of domestic abuse, sergeants attend to provide immediate assistance, guidance and support.

HMIC found clear accessible guidance for officers dealing with victims of domestic abuse. Operational officers advise all domestic abuse victims of the support available from the National Centre for Domestic Violence and children associated with domestic abuse relationships are a consideration in every case. Officers use a ten-point checklist as an aide-memoire to identify child sexual exploitation and to provide safeguarding in domestic abuse cases.

The force uses the nationally-recognised domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH)⁷ risk assessment tool when considering the risk of harm to domestic abuse victims. Unlike most other forces, West Midlands Police officers can apply their discretion as to whether to complete an assessment in some cases of domestic abuse. In summary the force policy states that this discretion only applies to non-crime incidents and crime incidents between family members who are not intimate partners. The exceptions to this are so-called honour-based violence and forced marriage cases, where the DASH risk assessment is always mandatory. In any case, the attending officer should always assess the risk to a victim and if they choose not to complete the form, they should record why they have assessed a victim at that level on the online crime management system database.

HMIC found the application of this was inconsistent, though when it was done, most officers did this well. We were pleased to find DASH risk assessments used in some non-crime cases, indicating staff were genuinely assessing risk and vulnerability irrespective of whether a crime had taken place. However in a few incidents there was no record of any assessment having taken place and no recorded rationale to show how the officer decided the victim was a standard risk. Some cases were downgraded inappropriately even when the DASH assessment was used.

⁷ Most forces use the domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH): www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/risk-and-vulnerability/#approaches-to-risk-assessment

Supervision of the response to vulnerable victims

Victims initially assessed as high or medium risk are reviewed further by the domestic abuse safeguarding sergeant, who will adjust the grade if necessary and liaise with other agencies to support the victim. Those victims assessed as standard risk are not however subject to a further routine review by specialist officers.

The force is aware of this risk and the chief officer team is considering how this should be improved. However this was highlighted in HMIC's 2014 domestic abuse inspection report and remains a concern.

HMIC found effective specialist oversight from the domestic abuse teams. The force has shown its commitment to protecting vulnerable people by moving staff into newly formed domestic abuse teams, located in each of the LPUs.

Sergeants generally supervise the work of their frontline officers to a good standard. We found they gave direction, support and guidance to staff. However the absence of recording the rationale of risk to a victim on the online crime management system is not being picked up by sergeants; this needs to be addressed by the force.

The domestic abuse safeguarding sergeants ensure all high risk domestic abuse cases are referred to the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC).⁸ The force is engaged properly in the MARAC processes and local public protection detective inspectors chair the meetings.

In the case of reports of missing persons, a series of questions is asked by operators within the force communications centre. These questions are repeated by the attending officer, and the answers along with professional judgment determine whether a person will be assessed as high, medium or low risk, or categorised as absent. The grading is validated by the duty operational inspector.

⁸ MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference) – a local meeting where information about high-risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies.

How well does the force investigate offences involving vulnerable victims and work with partners keep victims safe?⁹

The force has taken encouraging steps to ensure that vulnerable victims are dealt with by those who have the best skills and knowledge. Acknowledging the wide ranging definition of vulnerability, the force has decided that all domestic abuse crimes, with the exception of homicides and serious sexual assaults, will be dealt with by the domestic abuse teams. All crimes involving a child victim are managed within the child abuse teams, with the exception of homicide. This is a wider remit than many other forces and is a clear effort to put the victim at the centre of the investigation and manage those who commit crimes against vulnerable people.

Investigation of crimes involving vulnerable people

HMIC examined a small sample of crime reports across a breadth of offences involving vulnerable victims.¹⁰ We found good standards of investigation, with clear investigation plans, consistent victim contact and investigative updates. HMIC found appropriate use of victim personal statements and consideration of special measures.

The public protection units (PPUs) located in each LPU are made up of four teams of specialist officers dedicated to investigating and safeguarding domestic abuse, child protection, sexual offences and vulnerable adults. The staff have received appropriate training or training is planned to develop these specialist skills. The domestic abuse teams include dedicated officers for investigation, safeguarding victims and offender management.

The number of staff in the PPU has increased since 2014. The force carried out detailed resource modelling and tried to match the resources to demand, prioritising the likely threat, harm and risk to the community. Domestic abuse incidents have increased considerably since then. HMIC found that the overall effectiveness of the investigations is dependent on the geographical area where the officers work. The workload in some areas is greater than others. Some officers find that frequently they have to prioritise cases where the offender is in custody. As a result they do not have time to pursue suspects that have not yet been apprehended.

⁹ The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks “How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?” HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the investigation of offences involving vulnerable victims, rather than the police’s initial response to vulnerable victims.

¹⁰ HMIC reviewed a sample of rape, burglary, offences of serious violence and actual bodily harm cases. In most forces the review consisted of 10 cases from each crime category but in some larger forces the sample was increased to 15. The file review was designed to provide a broad overview of the identification of vulnerability and the effectiveness of the investigation.

At the time of our inspection, the force reported 748 named suspects for domestic abuse crimes who had not been dealt with, and a further 650 outstanding suspects for other public protection type offences. The force had conducted a successful operation to reduce the level of domestic abuse suspects to around 250; however the reduction was not sustained.

The force is aware of the problem with demand for services and is putting plans in place to manage it. HMIC encourages this development and urges the force to re-examine the processes involved to identify a long-term effective solution to manage public protection suspects and safeguard the victims.

Following the initial response to incidents there are systematic processes to review and assess the level of risk to medium or high risk victims. Where an incident is classified as a medium or high-risk domestic abuse crime or non-crime, the dedicated safeguarding detective sergeant will review the arrangements already put in place for the victim and adjust for the medium to long term. Additional referrals to other agencies are made if necessary and a safeguarding plan is put in place.

All domestic abuse crimes are investigated by a dedicated domestic abuse investigator and every medium and high risk victim is allocated to a domestic abuse safeguarding officer. HMIC found safeguarding actions included contacting the victim, referrals to independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs) or other support services. Information markers are placed on victims' addresses and information is available to neighbourhood officers, using 'police watch' which includes regular reassurance visits to victims, if appropriate, by neighbourhood staff.

A dedicated child sexual exploitation investigation team operates at force level to manage the more serious and complex organised child sexual exploitation investigations. The LPUs are supported by child sexual exploitation co-ordinators deployed in each LPU. The force has seen a significant increase in the amount of child sexual exploitation intelligence information recorded in the last twelve months.

Compliance with the code of practice for victims of crime

All police forces have a statutory duty to comply with the code of practice for victims of crime, which sets out the service that victims of crime can expect from all parts of the criminal justice system. The code states that all victims of crime should be able to make a personal statement,¹¹ which they can use to explain how the crime has affected them. Victims should also be kept updated about the progress of their case.

¹¹ 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.

Through dip sampling of files and reality checks during our inspection, we found that officers have a clear understanding of vulnerability and repeat victimisation and the requirements of the victim code. Victim contact is identified through the primary investigation and will be adhered to by the investigation team. Victims are kept updated throughout the course of the investigation and are able to choose how they receive these updates.

Working with partners

Separate multi-agency child sexual exploitation meetings deal with supporting victims multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) and preventing perpetrators from offending (CMOG). The force has a clear focus on child sexual exploitation; we found local initiatives raising awareness with local taxi firms and hotels, and directing targeted patrols where vulnerable young people socialise is standard practice.

The force works well with other agencies to safeguard victims. The force area covers seven local authority areas. The force has aligned the LPUs to cover the same areas, sub-dividing Birmingham into four, to provide a local service that meets the need of the community.

Multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs)¹² are not in place in every LPU area. The force is working with three MASHs and there are plans to introduce them across the remaining four local authority areas. Although the different agencies do not have access to each other's systems, there are clear processes in place to share information. Where a MASH is not in place, central referral units (CRU) manage referrals of incidents involving children at risk from harm and then sharing information with other statutory agencies. The CRU coordinates work with external agencies and partners, providing an effective intelligence hub. In areas where a MASH is not in place, twice weekly meetings are held with partner agencies to review the level of risk to children. In most areas this appears to be working well, but in some areas partner organisations expressed concern that the police were not attending all meetings. This affects the effectiveness of the process and resulted in a backlog of around 24 days of referrals in Wolverhampton (approximately 200 referrals) and a backlog of 5 days in Dudley.

It is a challenge for the force to represent the police in all seven local authority areas at the right level. The force appears to manage this well with a combination of LPU and PPU staff involved in the engagement.

¹² A multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) brings together into a single location key safeguarding agencies to better identify risks to children (and in some areas, vulnerable adults), and improve decision-making, interventions, and outcomes. The MASH enables the multi-agency team to share all appropriate information in a secure environment, and ensure that the most appropriate response is provided to effectively safeguard and protect the individual.

The partnership meetings are well-established, particularly those relating to domestic abuse and safeguarding children, including child sexual exploitation and missing children meetings. Clear information-sharing protocols are in place across the force's strategic and tactical partnership structures. Staff and partners spoken to during the inspection confirmed the meetings generally worked well.

The force IT systems do not currently support the effective information sharing and do not integrate with partner organisations' systems. The force is aware of this and has plans for improvement with the forthcoming IT strategy.

The force has made the best use of its current databases. A web-based portal has been developed to which officers submit a referral document which is accessed by the MASH and a wide range of partner agencies. Officers receive feedback and updates from partners through this same portal, adding real value to the process.

To highlight awareness of specific issues affecting vulnerable people, the force has created a unique recognisable programme of work called Sentinel. This developed from a successful police operation several years ago and is now an acknowledged area of work which the workforce and statutory and non-statutory partner agencies recognise. The force, sometimes as a joint venture with partners, selects a vulnerability topic such as domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation or rape to launch activity or raise awareness to tackle the problem. Sentinel focuses attention on different areas of vulnerability as trends emerge and knowledge grows.

The learning from IPCC investigations, serious case reviews and domestic homicide reviews is taken to the crime governance board, chaired by the assistant chief constable. The learning is identified and a plan to educate staff and improve outcomes is agreed. The SIT records the agreed activity and monitors the progress ensuring future training programmes are influenced where appropriate.

How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent & victims of domestic abuse), and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

The first three questions have explained how the force identifies those that are vulnerable, the response that is provided to them and what action the force takes to investigate crimes and to work with partners to keep victims safe. This question looks specifically at how the force deals with three specific areas of vulnerability: domestic abuse, missing and absent children and its preparedness to deal with child sexual exploitation.

Missing and absent children

West Midlands Police's response to missing and absent children is inconsistent and the force needs to improve its response in this area of work.

The force has a clear policy in relation to people who are missing, including children. The policy identifies two distinct categories of missing episodes: those who are missing from home and those who are absent. Children defined as missing from home are managed through the missing person's database. Currently the version of the database used by the force is not able to manage periods of absence. However, the force intends to introduce the latest version of an IT system by the end of 2015 which will allow it to manage absent episodes on the database. The force currently maintains the records of absent children on individual LPU spreadsheets.

West Midlands Police has a high ratio of children categorised as absent compared to missing. HMIC is concerned that staff are assessing some children inappropriately as absent instead of missing.

HMIC looked at a small number of the records of children reported missing and absent. We found some good assessments of risk of vulnerability and identification of risk from child sexual exploitation. However, we also found incidents where the risk had not been identified, even where good information was available on the police database. The cases indicated children were at risk of sexual exploitation, but this did not influence the assigned risk and categorisation. Children were incorrectly graded at a lower level and could have been exposed to an increased risk of harm.

Where missing children had been correctly assessed we found staff actively pursued them and inspectors consistently reviewed the activity to locate them. In cases of missing children, the COMPACT missing persons system is used to share information with partner agencies. The information is also 'flagged' for the attention of the PPU safeguarding team who make sure the information is shared with the right people.

HMIC found incidents of staff downgrading the risk to justify an absent classification, and using the absent category to manage demand rather than risk. An absent classification does not require the deployment of an officer and is not subject to regular review to check the progress of activity to locate the person.

Our review of some absent cases showed that staff had not considered risk factors, including child sexual exploitation and physical or mental health issues, despite the information being clearly available within the incident log or on the missing person's database. One of the cases reviewed showed a child assessed as missing and at medium risk, even though a force trigger plan directed the child should be considered as a high risk if they went missing again.

When children are properly assessed, the force provides a good response to missing children. Officers are directed to find them, the cases are featured in daily briefings and supervisors review regularly progress to locate them.

To understand the risk to a missing child and to understand what caused them to go, it is good practice for the child to be interviewed by an appropriate professional when they are found.¹³ This service is provided by different third sector agencies across the force area and is inconsistent. Some of the children have face-to-face interviews and others receive very little support. The quality of these interviews can achieve a better outcome for the child and information obtained can help the police to identify crime hotspots and perpetrators who prey on vulnerable children.

The force is committed to identifying and tackling longer term issues resulting from missing and absent episodes. It has started to co-ordinate its approach; but there are still different practices across the ten LPUs. It is very clear that the force works well with partners to protect children, with committed staff in local areas working with care home staff to review care plans and conduct early interventions.

The force itself has identified that there are improvements to be made regarding missing and absent people. A force missing and absent bi-monthly meeting is chaired by the head of public protection and an audit of missing and absent incidents has taken place. The force is making progress in this area. However the particular issue of children being inappropriately assessed has not been addressed and should be reviewed immediately.

The force cannot properly allocate resources to risk if it does not understand the nature and scale of the problem it faces. The working practices discovered evidence that the force can only have limited confidence that any analysis is based on a true picture of risk.

Preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation

The force has made an impressive start in its preparedness for tackling child sexual exploitation. The force has clear strategic focus and a detailed child sexual exploitation delivery plan. There is strong support and direction aligned with this vulnerability strand. HMIC found there a high level of engagement and preparedness across the force area.

However, the particular issue of inappropriate assessments of missing children, some of whom could be vulnerable to child sexual exploitation, is a weakness in the force's preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation.

¹³ Independent return interview is an in-depth interview and is best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. The responsible local authority should ensure the return interview takes place.

Senior police officers are working closely with other agencies in the West Midlands preventing violence against vulnerable people board (PVVP). The PVVP board has a collective responsibility to protect vulnerable people. The PVVP board is reviewing governance and capacity across the West Midlands region, is influencing both health and education, and is considering the best ways of mobilising the wider community in responding to child sexual exploitation.

The force has re-deployed staff to investigate child sexual exploitation cases which has resulted in some successful outcomes. The primary focus of these teams is on the organised crime elements of child sexual exploitation within the force area. The investigative teams are supported by child sexual exploitation co-ordinators within each LPU, providing a local knowledge base that supports the force approach and increases the intelligence flow.

West Midlands Police has adopted a mature approach to child sexual exploitation. Recognising that traditional criminal justice outcomes may not be the preferred option, it continues to make concerted efforts to prevent child sexual exploitation and protect vulnerable children. The force works with other agencies to improve their understanding of their responsibilities to prevent child sexual exploitation. Campaigns, social media, training and providing presentations to other agencies have been led by committed staff in the force. Separate multi-agency child sexual exploitation meetings (MASEs) deal with supporting victims and preventing perpetrators from offending (CMOGs). Good information sharing and intelligence gathering is needed to tackle child sexual exploitation and the force has maintained detailed records. Every identified victim, offender and location related to child sexual exploitation can be tracked. The investment and commitment in this area is clear. HMIC found a good level of awareness of child sexual exploitation from staff at all levels, a genuine understanding of the risk and a desire to tackle the once-hidden crime.

However, all of this is undermined by the way the force handles some reports of missing and absent children. The failures discussed earlier limit the effectiveness in their approach to dealing with individual victims or potential victims of child sexual exploitation. The lack of awareness of some of the absent episodes means the force misses some investigative, intervention and intelligence opportunities to protect children.

Domestic abuse

West Midlands Police's response to victims of domestic abuse is a mixed picture and HMIC judges that it requires improvement.

The policy is clear and well understood by officers and staff. Supervision is focused and staff have a clear understanding of what is expected of them to support victims and investigate incidents of domestic abuse.

In March 2014 HMIC published the results of its inspection of 43 forces on the effectiveness of the police approach to domestic abuse, with a focus on outcomes for victims and whether risks to victims are adequately managed. The report¹⁴ found that while tackling domestic abuse is a priority for West Midlands Police, there were areas that required improvement. The force has made progress in some of these areas, however they have not all been addressed and remain a concern.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2015, recorded domestic abuse increased by 18 percent against the previous 12 months and accounted for 10 percent of all police recorded crime. Across England and Wales during the same period there was a 21 percent increase, with domestic abuse accounting for 10 percent of all police recorded crime.

We found staff taking effective immediate and longer term safeguarding measures to protect victims of domestic abuse. HMIC also examined the force's use of new legal powers to protect victims. Domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs) were introduced in England and Wales in 2014 to prevent a suspected offender from returning to a victim's home or contacting the victim.

HMIC found a surprisingly low number of DVPOs issued across the force area. We found this safeguarding option was not generally considered by attending officers, nor encouraged or considered in the domestic abuse team. The force began using DVPOs in June 2014; it made 64 applications to magistrates' courts for their use, all of which were granted. Two DVPOs have been breached. Breaches occur when the offender fails to comply with the condition of the order and is taken back before the magistrates' court. This represents a DVPO breach rate of 3 percent compared with the England and Wales rate of 17 percent.¹⁵

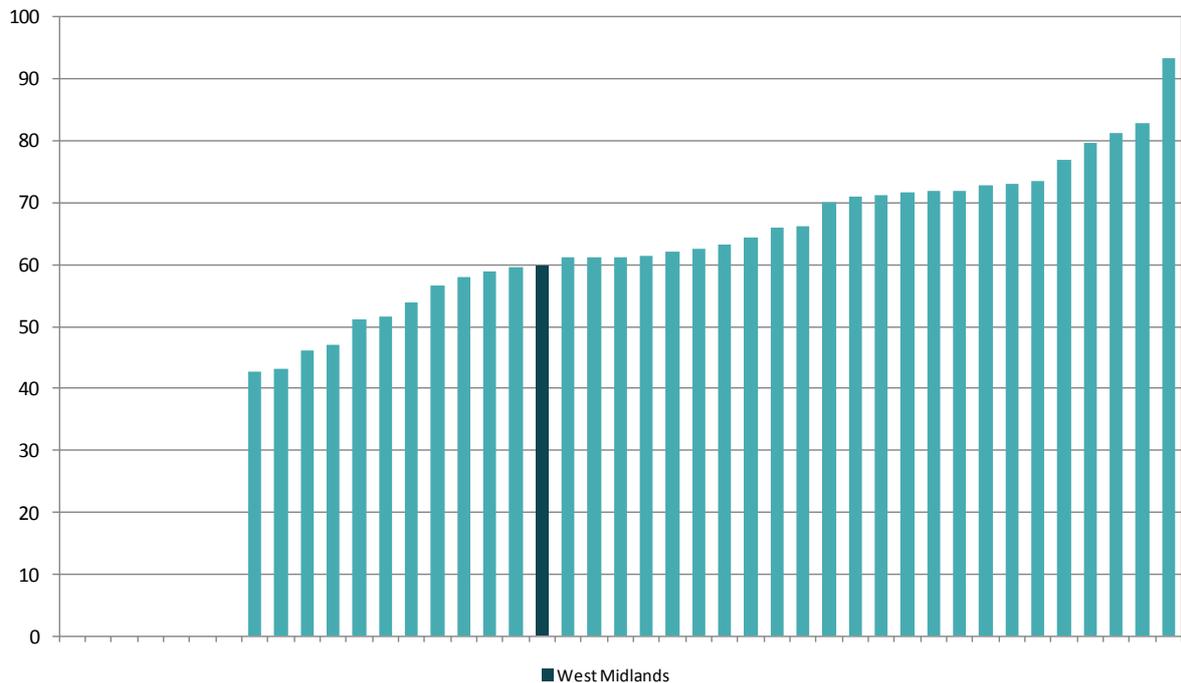
The low use of DVPOs and a high number of outstanding suspects for domestic abuse are both causes for concern. While criminal justice outcomes are not the only measure to assess success in this area, DVPOs are a useful tool to safeguard victims when bail conditions cannot be imposed. HMIC encourages the force to consider the use of DVPOs in future cases.

As shown in figure 1, for every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded West Midlands Police made 60 arrests.

¹⁴ *Crime inspection 2014 – West Midlands Police*, HMIC, November 2014. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/west-midlands-crime-inspection-2014.pdf

¹⁵ The England and Wales figure is based on data provided by 35 forces.

Figure 1: The number of arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015

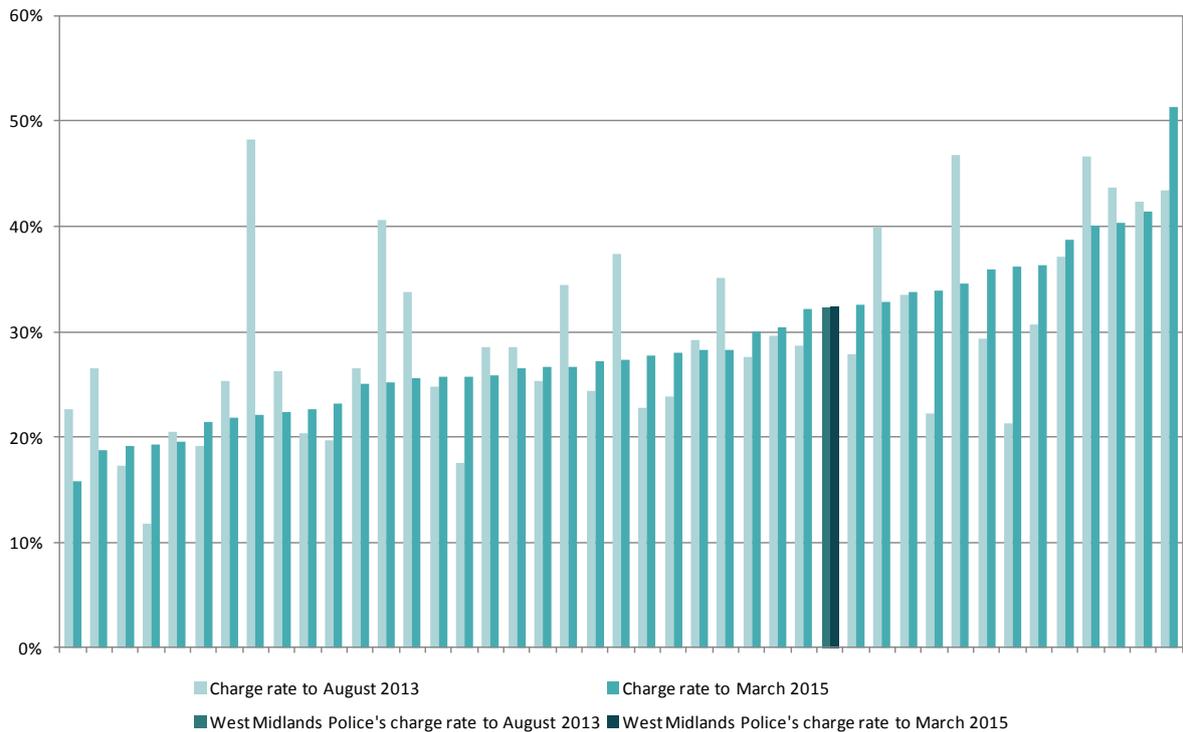


Source: HMIC data return

The force considers safeguarding from the point of initial reporting and throughout the investigation. However, the force policy, which allows an officer discretion to complete a DASH risk assessment in some crimes and incidents, does not give us confidence that risk is always assessed appropriately. This relates to one of the recommendations that still need to be implemented from HMIC’s domestic abuse inspection in 2014.

The force’s charge rate for domestic abuse recorded crimes for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was 32 percent, compared with 27 percent for England and Wales. The force charge rate is the same as it was at the last HMIC domestic abuse inspection (12 months to 31 August 2013) when the England and Wales rate was 30 percent.

Figure 2: Domestic abuse charge rate for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 compared to the 12 months to 31 August 2013



Source: HMIC data return

HMIC reviewed 17 domestic abuse files, and found a good standard of investigation centred on the victim. The force provides regular updates on the investigation to the victim, also maintaining good contact with the victim. We found active supervision and a clear investigation plan where needed. We also found good compliance with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime and appropriate consideration for special measures.

West Midlands Police has tried to address the increase in demand in domestic abuse by increasing the number of staff in the domestic abuse units. The investment is considerable and their remit has widened to provide the best service to victims and improve the management of offenders. The commitment of the force to tackle domestic abuse is evident but there are still some areas for concern which the force should address to ensure it provides the best possible service.

Summary of findings



Requires improvement

West Midlands Police generally provides a good service to vulnerable victims. The force has a clear commitment to protecting vulnerable people and is working to improve its performance in this area. It has increased the number of officers and staff in public protection teams, widening their remit to provide a better service for victims.

Officers and staff believe safeguarding vulnerable people and pursuing those who commit crimes against them is part of everyone's day to day work. However some activity undermines this commitment. Most victims receive a good service, but there are some gaps in the way the force assesses risk. Some officers are not following force policy and it was not always clear to us how the force assesses the risk to the victim. In some domestic abuse cases officers are not locating and dealing with suspects as quickly as they should.

Victims are kept updated throughout the course of their investigation and can choose how they receive these updates. The supervision of investigations and safeguarding is generally to a good standard.

HMIC found that in some cases the assessment of risk for children who go missing from home was inappropriate. We found some instances where children were classed as absent when they should have been recorded as missing, and risk levels for missing children were sometimes incorrectly assessed at a lower grade. This could expose children to even more risk of grooming for child sexual abuse.

The force has made an impressive start in its preparedness for tackling child sexual exploitation. It now has a force-wide team to investigate complex and organised child sexual exploitation. Local officers help tackle the problem at a local level and the force is good at analysing of the victims, offenders and locations.

Causes of concern

The force's response to domestic abuse is a cause of concern to HMIC. The force policy allowing an officer discretion to complete a DASH risk assessment in some crimes and incidents does not provide confidence that risk is always assessed appropriately. This relates to one of the recommendations from HMIC's report on its domestic abuse inspection in 2014 that still needs to be implemented. In cases where a DASH risk assessment is not completed the officer should record their assessment on the crime management system. HMIC found inconsistency in the recording and a lack of effective supervision to ensure this takes place. There are examples of inappropriate downgrading of risk, even when the DASH assessment was used.

At the time of our inspection, 750 named suspects for domestic abuse crimes had not been dealt with, and a further 650 suspects were still to be dealt with for other public protection type offences. Although the force seeks to put in place plans to address this, HMIC is concerned that a sustainable solution needs to be established to manage outstanding perpetrators and safeguard victims.

Recommendation

To address this cause of concern, HMIC recommends the force should immediately take steps to ensure that:

- there is effective supervision of the initial risk assessment process, specifically on recording on the crime management system; and
- a process is established to manage outstanding perpetrators of domestic abuse so that action is taken to arrest at the earliest opportunity.

Causes of concern

The force's response to missing and absent children is a cause of concern to HMIC. HMIC found that the assessment of risk for children who go missing from home was inappropriate in some cases. We found some instances where children were classed as 'absent' when they should have been recorded as 'missing', and risk levels for missing children were sometimes incorrectly assessed at a lower grade. We also found incidents where the risk had not been identified, even where good information was available on the police database. In some cases there was information to indicate children were at risk of sexual exploitation, but this did not influence the assigned risk and categorisation. Children were incorrectly graded at a lower level and could have been exposed to an increased risk of harm.

Recommendation

To address this cause of concern the force should immediately review its approach to reports of missing children and take steps to ensure that:

- frontline staff understand and appropriately use the missing and absent categories;
- frontline staff have the necessary knowledge to identify risk factors associated with child sexual exploitation and how to respond to such cases; and
- supervisors provide the correct oversight of missing person enquiries and direct appropriate and timely investigative and safeguarding action.