

# The Victim Journey

***A participatory research project seeking the views and experiences of victims of stalking and harassment***

Commissioned by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary as part the National Joint Thematic Stalking and Harassment Inspection.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was commissioned by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) as part of the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection into stalking and harassment. This thematic inspection seeks to understand how the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are currently handling these offences throughout England and Wales.

When commissioning the research, HMIC requested a qualitative study that would collate the experiences and perceptions of victims of stalking and harassment who had approached the police for assistance. The project was commissioned in December 2016 and the fieldwork ran over seven weeks from mid-February to the start of April 2017. In total, 35 people shared their experiences of reporting stalking and harassment to the police.

The following report presents the findings of this in-depth qualitative study according to three main themes: the nature of stalking and harassment disclosed by participants, the impact stalking and harassment had on their lives, and their views and experiences of the police, and where relevant, the CPS.

### The Nature of Stalking and Harassment

#### *Key Messages and Implications for Practice:*

- Participants in this research disclosed a range of behaviours associated with their experience of stalking and harassment. These behaviours impacted on every aspect of a person's life – at home, work, in public and online.
- The importance of context cannot be overestimated. Incidents that may appear innocent or innocuous to a police officer are likely to carry significant meaning to the victim – this is relevant in both domestic abuse and non-domestic abuse cases - and so officers must take the time to place the most recent incident in context.
- Interview participants who were being harassed and stalked by an ex-partner had also suffered a history of abuse within the relationship – previous research suggests this is associated with greater risk to the victim (Sheridan and Davies, 2001 and Scott, Nixon and Sheridan, 2013) and so officers need

to ensure appropriate risk assessment is carried out and support mechanisms put in place

- In the context of domestic abuse, children were used as a means of pursuing the victim, despite the involvement of the police or courts. Officers should be mindful of this when dealing with situations that may appear to be 'civil matters' and consider any risks to the victim and their children.
- The use of the internet and social media was a significant means of stalking and harassment amongst this sample, yet the response of the police was not always helpful – therefore further training in this area is required to ensure appropriate action is taken and available evidence collected.

## The Impact of Stalking and Harassment

### Key Messages and Implications for Practice:

- The nature of stalking and harassment experienced by participants in this research had a significant impact on their physical, emotional and psychological well-being.
- The majority of participants described how they had had to change their daily routine in order to avoid the offender – this ranged from not shopping locally, not walking the dog, not going out alone, to moving house.
- Over half of women interviewed described feeling unsafe because of their experience of stalking and harassment, with a number installing security measures such as CCTV.
- Given the impact described by participants, it may be expected that some offenders in this research would have been convicted of stalking – considering how many victims had to make substantial changes to their daily routine and were living in fear. Despite this, as will be seen in Chapter Five, only one offender was arrested for stalking, yet he was later charged with harassment.
- It is therefore imperative for the police to be given the time to speak to victims about the impact stalking and harassment is having on them, so that a complete picture can be given to the CPS.

## Victims' Experiences of the Police and CPS

### Key Messages and Implications for Practice:

- The majority of participants decided to contact the police following an escalation in behaviour, or when someone close to them became a target. It is therefore important for the police to understand that one incident, which may appear trivial, is likely to be the 'tip of the iceberg'.
- Overwhelmingly, participants just wanted the abuse to stop as a result of police involvement, however, a number were prepared to attend court and give evidence in order to achieve some sort of resolution.
- When victims described a positive first contact experience with the police, this was characterised by being taken seriously, and having a proactive response.
- However, when a victim felt their experience was trivialised and they were somehow responsible, they described a negative first contact experience. This was particularly true for those experiencing stalking and harassment online – with most being told to stop using social media. Considering the fact that half of all participants in this research were harassed and stalked in this way, it is vital for the police to consider their response more appropriately.
- Despite all participants describing behaviour that might constitute offences of stalking and harassment, only 40% of offenders were arrested, with 20% being convicted. It appears from the advice given to victims that there is a misunderstanding of the nature of stalking and harassment legislation, with only one offender being arrested for stalking, despite the vast majority of victims describing behaviour that caused them alarm or distress and that had a substantial impact on their day to day activities.
- There is an urgent need for the police and CPS to review the use of Police Information Notices (PINs) as in every case described by interview participants where a PIN was issued, this was not done in accordance with the Association of Chief Police Officer (ACPO) guidance (ACPO, 2009).
- The majority of participants did not have an entirely positive follow-up experience to their report of stalking and harassment. The main themes associated with a negative experience related to the incidents not being



deemed 'serious enough', victim-blaming attitudes and responses, not being kept informed, missed opportunities to take action against the offender and counter-allegations.

- When asked about their overall views on police involvement, responses were mixed. Just over half felt their concerns were taken seriously, with 13 suggesting they were not taken seriously at all. Views such as these affected the likelihood of whether a victim would call the police again; with a quarter saying they would no longer approach the police due to their most recent experience. It is therefore essential that the police respond to victims by taking their concerns seriously and acknowledging the impact this behaviour is having on them.
- Participants made two main recommendations for how the police could improve their response to stalking and harassment – the first being to understand the 'bigger picture' and the second to receive specialist training.

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

### ‘Stalking and Harassment’

This report refers to stalking and harassment as part of a pattern of behaviour and does not distinguish between participants who referred to their experience as either harassment or stalking. This is largely because only three participants made any direct reference to stalking, yet the majority described behaviours that would imply this had been their experience. Furthermore, only one offender was arrested for stalking (as far as the participants were aware). As will be explained in the introductory chapter – there is often ambiguity about how to define stalking and harassment – essentially it is how a victim experiences and interprets a particular behaviour – namely, whether they feel alarmed or distressed – that determines whether an offence may have been committed. Furthermore, offences of stalking require that the victim has suffered harassment, and therefore, for the purpose of this report, the experiences of participants will be discussed under the umbrella of ‘stalking and harassment’.

### ‘Victims’

The term ‘victim’ will be used throughout this report, in addition to the term ‘participant’. In the context of domestic and sexual violence in particular, the term ‘victim’ is contentious, with some preferring the term ‘survivor’ (Marie, 2009). However, when referring to victims in this report, this is from a purely criminological point of view, in that they have been a victim of crime, and hence reported their experience to the police.

## ACRONYMS

ACPO – Association of Chief Police Officers

CCTV – Closed Circuit Television

CD – Compact Disc

CPS – Crown Prosecution Service

HMCPST – Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate

HMIC – Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual

ONS – Office for National Statistics

PIN – Police Information Notice

PHA – Protection from Harassment Act

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Project Rationale

This project was commissioned by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary as part of the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection into stalking and harassment. This thematic inspection seeks to understand how the police and CPS are currently handling these offences throughout England and Wales.

Offences of stalking and harassment have a devastating impact on their victims. The very nature of the offending behaviour often leads victims to change their lives in an attempt to avoid the perpetrator (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2016). The Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates that 20.9% of women and 9.9% of men have experienced stalking since the age of 16 (ONS, 2017). It is also the case that stalking and harassment occur within, and are very much part, of domestic abuse, with the Office for National Statistics suggesting 54% of reported stalking offences occurred within this context (ONS, 2017). Yet the true extent of stalking and harassment is difficult to measure as there is often ambiguity for victims, the legal profession and wider society about what actually constitutes stalking with a number of myths and stereotypes prevailing (McKeon, McEwan, Luebbers, 2015).

Legislation in England and Wales has been in place since 1997 with the Protection from Harassment Act (PHA). This Act made it a criminal offence to pursue a course of conduct (meaning on two or more occasions) that would cause a person to suffer 'alarm or distress', where the offender knew, or ought to have known that this would be the case. In addition, the Act also made it a criminal offence to pursue a course of conduct that would cause a person to fear that violence will be used against them.

However, there was consensus amongst those working with victims and perpetrators that the existing legislation was unable to protect people from behaviours that typically characterised 'stalking'. Following an independent parliamentary inquiry in 2011, it was concluded that the PHA 1997 was not fit for purpose (Gowland, 2013).

In 2012, the Protection of Freedoms Act clarified 'stalking' as a criminal offence. The legislation still requires that the person has suffered harassment in terms of being

caused to suffer 'alarm or distress', but specifies particular behaviours associated with stalking – such as following someone, loitering in a public or private place, or watching or spying on them (Gowland, 2013). The legislation also recognises the serious impact that stalking can have, and has created a new offence where a defendant pursues a course of conduct which causes the victim 'serious alarm or distress', and which has a substantial adverse effect on the victim's usual day-to-day activities' (Gowland, 2013). Finally, the legislation makes it a criminal offence to pursue a course of conduct that amounts to stalking, and which causes someone to fear violence will be used against them.

A more recent legislative change that relates to stalking and harassment is the criminalisation of Revenge Pornography in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015. The legislation makes it an offence for someone to upload personal, sexual images of another person with the intention of causing them distress (CPS, 2015).

The changing nature of these offences with increasing use of social media to track and intimidate victims, requires the police and wider legal system to constantly reflect and adapt their approach. However, there is evidence to suggest that the criminal justice response to victims of these crimes requires improvement. For example, Korkodeilou (2016) found that most victims of stalking were 'disappointed' with the response they received from the police, who described being dealt with 'disbelief, their complaints were dismissed and in some cases, they were treated with disrespect and inaction' (p.263). In addition, Paladin, a national stalking advocacy service have highlighted the significant levels of attrition for these offences, commenting that in 2013/14, only 1% of cases of stalking and 16% of cases of harassment recorded by the police resulted in a charge and prosecution by the CPS (Paladin, 2015).

In light of the above issues, this research sought the views of people who had contacted the police regarding stalking and harassment in order to ensure their experiences and suggestions could inform the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report.

## Literature Review

It is helpful to begin by briefly summarising the existing literature on stalking and harassment, so that the findings of this research can be understood in their wider context. The literature will be summarised according to the three themes covered within this report – the nature of stalking and harassment, the impact of stalking and harassment, and victims' experiences of the police and CPS. It is important to note that the majority of research literature refers specifically to 'stalking' as opposed to harassment. For the purpose of this research, and the fact that according to legislation in England and Wales harassment must have occurred in order for the offence of stalking to be committed, this report will refer to both offences.

### *The nature of Stalking and Harassment*

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is still considerable ambiguity regarding how to define behaviour that constitutes stalking and harassment. The crux of the issue lies in the fact that it is how the victim experiences the unwanted contact, as opposed to the contact itself (Campbell and Moore, 2011, Korkodeilou, 2017, McKeon et al, 2015). For example, returning property to an ex-partner by leaving it on their doorstep may, in isolation, appear innocent. However, when this action is understood within the context of an abusive relationship and post-separation stalking and harassment, then it can make a victim feel 'alarmed or distressed' because they know their ex-partner has been to their home address. As Campbell and Moore (2011) explain: "*In some cases normally benign behaviour can be interpreted as threatening and sinister by the victim*" (p.506). It is this issue that makes stalking and harassment different to most other crimes and requires the legal system to take into account the impact on victims when determining whether an offence has been committed.

The types of behaviour usually referred to in the literature as constituting stalking and harassment include: following, watching, repeated and unwanted phone calls, text messages and emails, property damage, surveillance, threats, leaving unwanted material, interfering with personal items and physical and/or sexual violence (Korkodeilou, 2017) In addition, McKeon et al, (2015) refer to posting compromising material on the internet, and a recent study by Woodlock (2017) exploring the role of technology in the context of intimate partner stalking, concluded that perpetrators

use mobile phones, Facebook, and the threat of posting sexual images of the victim online to continue their abuse and control.

### *The impact of stalking and harassment*

It is acknowledged in the literature that stalking and harassment have a devastating impact on victims, with physical, psychological, social and financial consequences (Diette et al, 2014, Korkodeilo, 2017, Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2016). Furthermore, the impact can last long after the stalking behaviour appears to have stopped (Logan and Walker, 2010), with female victims of stalking having greater odds of experiencing poor mental health in later life (Diette et al, 2014). In a research study conducted in the UK, Korkodeilo (2017) interviewed 26 people who identified themselves as being a victim of stalking. She found the impact on their lives to fit into three broad categories. Firstly, the disruption of their everyday life – such as having to change the route they took to work, or going shopping in the middle of the night. Secondly, a reduction in their social life and economic harms – where victims described not going out socially, as well having the financial burden of changing their phone, car, moving home or changing jobs. Finally, Koekodeilo (2017) described the interpersonal and emotional impact of being stalked, with participants describing how they had lost contact with friends and family and found it difficult to trust people, as well as the long-lasting impact of living in a constant state of fear.

It is important to note at this point, that the literature suggests there are two factors where the impact of stalking and harassment may vary. Firstly, the literature suggests women are more likely than men to experience 'fear' (Podana and Imriskova, 2014 and Reyns and Englebrecht, 2012) and secondly, that people who are stalked by an ex-partner are at greater risk of harm (Sheridan and Davies, 2001).

### *Victims' Experiences of the Police and CPS*

There is a consensus within the existing literature that the criminal justice response to victims of stalking and harassment requires improvement. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust who run the national stalking helpline, have suggested that victims are 'far from guaranteed a helpful response' when they report to the police (2016, p.9).

Furthermore, literature suggests that victims in the UK are generally disappointed and dissatisfied with the response they receive (Budd and Mattinson, 2000, Korkodeilou, 2016, Sheridan and Davies, 2001). In Korkodeilou's (2016) research,

victim's suggested that the police did not take them seriously and this was, in their opinion, because they did not understand the complex nature of stalking and the impact on their lives.

In addition to victims being treated with disbelief and inaction, research in both the UK and internationally, has identified that the police are more likely to see behaviour as stalking when the offender is unknown to the victim and less likely to categorise behaviour as stalking when the offender is an ex-partner (McKeon, 2015, Pearce and Eastel, 1999, Scott et al, 2013, Weller, Hope and Sheridan, 2013). These misconceptions about what constitutes 'real' stalking and where responsibility lies can have serious consequences for victims and reflect similar issues to those associated with 'rape myths' (Korkodeilou, 2016, McKeon, 2015).

### Participant Overview

In total, 35 people shared their experiences of reporting stalking and harassment to the police. Of these, 29 identified as female, and six identified as male. In terms of offenders, the majority were described as being male (25), six were described as female, two offenders were described as a group of local children/young people, the gender of one offender was unknown, and one victim explained they were being stalked and harassed by both a man and a woman.

The relationship between the victim and offender(s) is set out in Table 1 below:

**Table 1 – Relationship between victim and offender**

<b>Relationship between victim and offender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Partner/ex-partner	13	37%
Neighbour	9	26%
Acquaintance	4	11%
Stranger	4	11%
Friend	3	9%
Local children/young people	2	6%



It is interesting to note that of the six men who participated, all but one were being harassed/stalked by other men – of these, 5 were described as neighbours, and one stranger. Of the women in the sample, nearly half (45%) were being stalked by a male ex-partner – a figure that is consistent with existing research (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2016).

In terms of the length of time the stalking and harassment had been on going, this varied from three phone calls, to 19 years. Two thirds of participants had been harassed and stalked for more than a year (66%), with six people having experienced this abuse for over four years.

### **Report Structure**

The next chapter explores how this research project was designed and conducted – with a particular focus on how the safety of participants was at the centre of design process. Chapter Three discusses the nature of stalking and harassment disclosed by participants in this study, while Chapter Four describes the impact this behaviour had on them. Chapter Five moves on to explore how victims perceived the response of the police and CPS when reporting their concerns, and Chapter Six draws the study together and makes a number of recommendations for practice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methodology

When commissioning the research, HMIC requested a qualitative study that would collate the experiences and perceptions of victims of stalking and harassment who had approached the police for assistance.

The project was commissioned in December 2016 and the fieldwork ran over seven weeks from mid-February to the start of April 2017.

HMIC set out two eligibility criteria for the research:

- The victim should have reported their experience of harassment and/or stalking to one of the six police services involved in the in-depth investigation.
- The report should have been within the last 12 months.

In addition to this, the project team added two further criteria:

- Only victims whose cases were finalised should participate - in order to avoid interfering with the judicial process should the case reach court.
- In the case of people who were also victims of domestic abuse, contact should only be made via organisations who were supporting them.

The definitions of stalking and harassment that were used for the project were focussed on how the individual perceived their experience, as opposed to whether the police felt a crime had been committed. The following definitions were provided to support services, the police and participants:

‘Harassment is when someone behaves in a way that makes you feel distressed, humiliated, or threatened, and this has happened on at least two occasions. It could be by someone you know or a stranger’  
([www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)).

‘Stalking can be understood as ‘repeated and persistent unwanted behaviour that is intrusive and creates fear. It may, or may not involve threats’

([www.paladinservice.co.uk](http://www.paladinservice.co.uk)). Again, this may be by someone you know, such as an ex-partner, or work colleague, or it could be a stranger’.

## Ethical Considerations

This research project was granted ethical approval from the Institute of Health and Society at the University of Worcester. Ethical considerations were central to the design of the study.

### *Recruiting participants safely*

The research team aimed to recruit 10 participants from each of the six regions in England and Wales (set by HMIC). There were two recruitment methods. The first, and most preferred method was to recruit through support services in each area who were likely to be supporting people who had reported stalking and harassment to the police. These organisations included Victim Support, domestic violence services, sexual violence services, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (LGBTQIA) organisations, stalking charities, and women’s centres. The second method was to contact the Stalking and Harassment Single Point of Contact (SPOC) in each of the six police services to ask them to identify around five people who had reported harassment or stalking within the last year. For this route there was a further exemption – this was to not include anyone who was also experiencing any form of domestic abuse. The police were asked to make a judgement on the facts of the case about whether a victim would be suitable for the research based on the information provided to them.

When contacting support agencies, the research team explained what the research was about and how it would be conducted (face-to-face interview, telephone interviews, or an online survey). The communication set out the criteria for involvement in the research (a report to the police within the last 12 months), and explained our rationale for contacting victims through support services (in relation to the need for participants to receive support following their involvement). This approach required a limited confidentiality clause for interview participants as their involvement in the research would be known to the organisation supporting them (if they required follow-up support). The researcher addressed this by asking each

organisation who facilitated involvement of their service users for interviews to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Contact was made with over 70 local organisations in the six areas as well as five national organisations. However, the majority of organisations either did not respond, or were unable to help, with only 13 interview participants being recruited in this way. The exact reasons for the low levels of engagement cannot be fully known, however, they may relate to the time and resource constraints on the types of organisations who were contacted or they may relate to the fact that people who have experienced these forms of abuse have enough going on with managing their safety and so speaking to a researcher is not a priority for them.

As a result of the low response rate, the second recruitment method of identifying victims through the police was then used. This had varying success across the six areas, with one police service identifying eight people who consented to being contacted, while another police service was unable to provide any contact details to the researcher due to confidentiality reasons.

Towards the end of the fieldwork stage, because of the difficulties in recruiting, HMIC agreed for the research team to approach participants from outside the six areas they were investigating. At this point, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust assisted the project team in identifying suitable participants and provided ongoing support.

In total, 35 people participated in the research – 14 completed the online survey, five people were interviewed face-to-face and 16 were interviewed over the telephone.

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and therefore represent a somewhat self-selecting rather than representative sample of individuals who have experienced stalking and harassment (Beckett et al, 2015). Participants were not excluded for any reason relating to gender, ethnic origin/colour/nationality, religious identity, sexuality, age, disability or parental status. The initial email to support services explained that there were funds for interpreters should there be victims whose first language was not English, or someone who required a signer, however, no participants with these needs were identified or requested to participate in the study.

### *Informed consent*

All potential participants were provided with information about the project, including their right not to participate, as well as contact details (other than the researcher) if they had a complaint or questions about the project. In addition, participants were asked to sign a consent form which is kept on file for a limited time and then securely destroyed. This document and the information sheet provided, detailed our responsibilities regarding confidentiality and explained that no identifiable details would be recorded by the team. Instead, a pseudonym would be used and any quotes or case studies used in the report would be fully anonymised.

### *Support for Participants*

The research team were aware of the fact that interviewing victims of abuse about the response they have received from the police was likely to trigger difficult and painful memories. It was therefore the responsibility of the research team to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to access support services after their interview. In terms of practicalities, this was more likely if the victim was already engaged with a support service, and hence the reason for adopting this recruitment strategy first. When recruitment was conducted via the police, the researcher collated details of relevant support organisations which she shared with anyone who required additional support. Participants who completed the online survey were provided with a list of national organisations and links to their websites.

### *Data collection*

Due to the nature of the subject matter, it was important to design data collection methods that would ensure the safety and well-being of any potential participants. While focus groups were suggested in the initial tender, the research team felt they would not be a safe option for such a sensitive topic, as the confidentiality of participants could not be guaranteed (Robinson, 1999). Instead, participants were provided with three options for contact. The first and most preferred method was a face-to-face interview based on a semi-structured interview schedule (Smith, 1995). The next best method involved a telephone interview, again based on the same semi-structured interview guide. The final option, which was reserved for those victims who wanted to be involved, but for whom talking to a researcher directly may have been overwhelming (Kitzinger, 1995) or time-consuming, was an online survey

that covered the same issues as the interview guide, and allowed sufficient space for the participant to express their opinions and experiences.

## Analysis

Due to the short time-scales involved, the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service who signed a confidentiality agreement. The data was then analysed using NVivo software, and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants were asked to review their transcripts for accuracy – all but four participants took up this offer, and of those who did, they were all satisfied that the transcripts reflected their account. This approach is one of a number of techniques that was used in order to ensure the quality of the analysis (Shenton, 2004).

Each interview participant was also asked if they would be happy to be used as a case study depending on whether their experiences were perceived by them as particularly positive or negative. They were then given the opportunity to review the written summary and to check it for accuracy. Of the six case studies prepared, all participants were satisfied with the account (and the pseudonym chosen to protect their identity) and felt it was an accurate reflection of their involvement with the police and expressed their appreciation at having their experiences recorded in this way. When presenting quotes from interview and survey participants, their interview participant number, gender and relationship to offender will appear at the end of the quote.

At this point, it is important to recognise that this research reports on the views and opinions of a small number of people who identified their experience as stalking and harassment. While the findings of this research can help to highlight some of the issues experienced by those who contact the police for assistance, they should not be considered a representative sample.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Nature of Stalking and Harassment

#### Key Messages and Implications for Practice:

- Participants in this research disclosed a range of behaviours associated with their experience of stalking and harassment. These behaviours impacted on every aspect of a person's life – at home, work, in public and online.
- The importance of context cannot be overestimated. Incidents that may appear innocent or innocuous to a police officer are likely to carry significant meaning to the victim – this is relevant in both domestic abuse and non-domestic abuse cases - and so officers must take the time to place the most recent incident in context.
- Interview participants who were being harassed and stalked by an ex-partner had also suffered a history of abuse within the relationship – previous research suggests this is associated with greater risk to the victim (Sheridan and Davies, 2001 and Scott et al, 2013) and so officers need to ensure appropriate risk assessment is carried out and support mechanisms put in place.
- In the context of domestic abuse, children were used as a means of pursuing the victim, despite the involvement of the police or courts. Officers should be mindful of this when dealing with cases that may appear to be 'civil matters' and consider any risks to the victim and their children.
- The use of the internet and social media was a significant means of stalking and harassment amongst this sample, yet the response of the police was not always helpful, and so further training in this area is required to ensure appropriate action is taken and available evidence collected.

## Type of contact

It was clear from both the survey responses and interviews with victims, that the nature of stalking and harassment they experienced was extremely varied. Only three people experienced one type of contact (two people received phone calls and one person was abused via social media) – in all three cases, the offender was a stranger.

The vast majority of participants (91%) experienced a number of different types of contact from the person stalking and harassing them. Table 2 below shows the range of behaviours identified in this research as contributing to the stalking and harassment of victims.

**Table 2 - Variety of the different stalking and harassment behaviours experienced by participants**

Type of contact	Number	%
In person/following	23	66%
Damage to car/garden/property	22	63%
Via social media	18	51%
Phone calls	10	29%
Contacting friends/family	10	29%
Shouting abuse in public	8	23%
Spreading malicious rumours	8	23%
Text messages	8	23%
Attends work/contacts employer	8	23%
Recording with a mobile phone/taking pictures	7	20%
Threats to harm the victim/victim's family	7	20%
Threats to kill/harm themselves	6	17%
Constantly ringing doorbell/banging on door	6	17%
Using other people to harass/stalk you	4	11%
Report to stop victim's benefits	3	9%



Emails	3	9%
Creating websites about the victim	3	9%
Report to police/Children's Services	2	6%
Sending things to victim's home	2	6%

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These behaviours suggest a range of tactics used by offenders that have the potential to impact on every aspect of a person's life – when they are at home, out in public, at work and using the internet/social media. The remainder of this chapter draws out some of the key themes relating to the nature of stalking and harassment experienced by participants in this research.

### Understanding 'incidents' in their wider context

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the nature of stalking and harassment is characterised by the impact it has on the victim, and therefore, behaviour that may seem 'innocent' may be part of a wider pattern of abuse. For example, one woman who was stalked by her ex-partner explained that when he left some old CD's on her driveway, that this was distressing because she knew he had been to her home address where she was meant to feel safe. This woman also described how a paving slab was placed on her car window – which she interpreted as a warning, and that one morning she discovered her entire driveway had been covered in eggs – the significance of which being that she has a phobia of eggs (a fact known to her ex-partner). Another participant explained that her ex-partner would post a picture on social media of a car the same make and model as hers, but it would be on fire – which she interpreted as a threat. While another participant explained that the act of returning property, when understood in the context of continued stalking and harassment, had the potential to cause serious distress:

“But, collectively, taken on the back of everything that that man has done, it has really hurt us and upset us. And it's like...you've been punched in the stomach. That's how I felt, I felt sick. Because I knew- I know what that man has done. And all they'll do, the police talk to him and he'll hold his hands in the air and he'll say 'All I've done, officer, is return property’”. (I12, Female, Acquaintance)

Examples such as these highlight the fact that taken in isolation, these 'incidents' may not appear significant, however, when considered as part of a wider history of abuse, they understandably create alarm and distress in the victim. Moreover, they indicate that it is the victim's perception of these events, which is influenced by their prior experience with the perpetrator, which creates the meaning attributed to them. Consequently, the police need to accept on face value victim fears associated with seemingly trivial 'one off' incidents.

### History of Domestic Abuse

All nine interview participants who were being harassed and stalked by their ex-partners disclosed a history of abuse within the relationship. One woman had been in an abusive relationship for over 16 years, and another for 13 years. All but two of the women had been experiencing the stalking and harassment for over a year following the end of their relationship.

Women who were being stalked and harassed by their ex-partners described the persistence of the offender:

"I was in work the one night, in the small hours and I had over a hundred messages off him". (I11, Female, Ex-partner)

"I cut him off completely...the e-mails and text messages were just incessant every day it was like 60 e-mails, 20-odd text messages, every day". (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

"He just abused me by text message and phone calls...I think he sent 50 text messages in one day". (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

A history of domestic abuse, combined with a persistent offender, is significant given the research evidence, which suggests those harassed and stalked by ex-partners are at greater risk of harm (Sheridan and Davies, 2001, Scott et al, 2013).

### Use of children and child-contact

Connected to the issue of domestic abuse in the relationship, was the use of children and child-contact. Of the seven interview participants who were being stalked and harassed by their ex-partners and had children with them, they all explicitly referred

to how the children or child-contact had been used by the offender to further harass them. In one case, the offender was arrested for making a threat to the victim, and within two hours of being released, he had contacted her to ask when he could see the children. Another woman described how the offender was requesting contact through the family court and so she had set up an email address specifically for this – which he then started to use as a means to harass her. Two women also described how the offender had threatened to take the children, which concerned them because the police had advised there was nothing they could do if the father was on the birth certificate. One participant explained how her ex-partner specifically used child contact as a means of harassment after he was issued with a restraining order:

“He was still doing stuff once the restraining order was put in place...We were going to court because...when I cut him off every other angle...he then put a child access case in”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

The use of children and child contact in the context of domestic abuse has long been recognised (Morrison, 2015) and it is therefore important for the police to understand how this may be used by an offender to maintain control over their victim.

### Use of the Internet/Social Media

A number of participants (18) cited the use of the internet and social media in their experience of stalking and harassment. The most commonly cited social media platform was Facebook, with 11 participants having experienced unwanted contact in this way. It was also common for fake Facebook accounts to be used as a means of making contact with someone who had previously ‘blocked’ them. As one participant explained:

“So anyway, so he'd been using all these different fake accounts, and using attempts to get through. Then he'd contacted my friend, on Facebook, and sent her messages giving out loads of personal information from when we were together, which was- I was absolutely horrified at. And, that's what made me think 'I can't handle this any-more'”. (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

Two participants described how the official Facebook pages of the police had been used to post malicious content about them. For example, one victim discovered that

a picture of him had been tagged to a local police Facebook page, with a comment that he was a paedophile. In addition, a victim who was stalked online for two years discovered that a number of websites had been created about her, in which personal and malicious content appeared. The offender had sent links to these websites to friends, family members, colleagues and even the victim's children. The prevalence of the use of social media and the internet in this research is significant – with over half of all respondents having been harassed and stalked in this way.

### Use of Threats

A number of participants commented on the use of threats by the offender. These ranged from direct threats to the victim, such as:

“I'm going to go home and get me gun and I'm going to blow your windows out, and then I'm going to blow your head off, and I know where you walk the dogs”.  
(I4, Female, Local Children)

To more indirect threats such as: *“I'm going to put flowers on your grave”*. (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

In two cases where a female victim was being harassed and stalked by a female offender, the threats were not about direct physical harm – one offender threatened to ‘destroy’ the victim, and the other stated:

“I will stay in your life forever...I will make sure nothing in your life or your family's ever runs smoothly”. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

One of the most common threats made by offenders, however, related to a threat to kill or hurt themselves – this was most common for those being harassed and stalked by an ex-partner. For example, one woman was sent a picture of her ex-partner with a rope around his neck calling her a murderer.

The significance of threats is important because of the potential they have to cause alarm or distress to the victim – thereby satisfying the offences of stalking and harassment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Impact of Stalking and Harassment

#### Key Messages and Implications for Practice:

- The nature of stalking and harassment experienced by participants in this research had a significant impact on their physical, emotional and psychological well-being.
- The majority of participants described how they had had to change their daily routine in order to avoid the offender – this ranged from not shopping locally, not walking the dog, not going out alone, to moving house.
- Over half of women interviewed described feeling unsafe as a result of their stalking and harassment, with a number installing security measures such as CCTV.
- Given the impact described by participants, it may be expected that some offenders in this research would have been convicted of stalking – considering how many victims had to make substantial changes to their daily routine and were living in fear. Despite this, as will be seen in Chapter Five, only one offender was arrested for stalking, yet he was later charged with harassment.
- It is therefore imperative for the police to be given the time to speak to victims about the impact stalking and harassment is having on them, so that a complete picture can be given to the CPS.

Given the nature of stalking and harassment explored in Chapter Three, this chapter moves on to describe the impact of this behaviour on those who shared their experiences for this research. The key themes to emerge relate to the physical, emotional and psychological impact of being stalked and harassed, being forced to make changes to daily life and the victim's overall sense of safety.

At this point, it is helpful to explain that 11 participants disclosed some form of vulnerability at the time they were being stalked and harassed. These ranged from

having a disability themselves, caring for someone with a disability, having a substance misuse problem, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety and physical health problems including angina, cancer, diabetes and arthritis. These issues are important as they can exacerbate the impact of being stalked and harassed.

### Physical and emotional impact

It was clear from the response of participants that being harassed and stalked was having an overwhelming impact on them physically and emotionally and led to increasing their vulnerability to poor health and psychological outcomes. For those participants who already had health issues, these were made worse as a result of the harassment and stalking. As one participant explained:

“I don't want to move, it's just...I have to move because of...me health reasons, because...me health's suffering through it”. (I13, Male, Neighbour)

Similarly, another participant who suffers with angina, explained the impact it was having on her health:

“And it was making me ill to be honest, I was getting more chest pain...I wasn't sleeping properly”. (I5, Female, Neighbours)

11 participants explained that they had suffered with depression and/or anxiety as a result of the harassment with three participants disclosing that they had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. One participant explained that she had been diagnosed with a stress-related health condition, one woman had collapsed and ended up in hospital through mental exhaustion, another disclosed she was now bulimic as a result of her experiences, and a male participant disclosed having taken an overdose in the previous year.

There was an overwhelming sense from participants of the fact they were constantly on edge:

“And, obviously, every time my phone went, it made me nervous... every time the doorbell went, or there was a bang on the door, me and the children would

be really scared, to the extent that my children would run upstairs and hide, screaming". (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

"You carry it all the time. You carry it and it's with you day in day out. Day in day out. And you breathe it, and...it's in the back of your mind all the time, 'What is he going to do? What are we going to find? What... Who's going to come knocking at our door?'" (I12, Female, Acquaintance)

"Yeah, even this morning I've been to the local shopping centre this morning, and me panic alarm goes in me hand when I go in the shopping centre in case he's there. And I'm like, on radar, scanning...And you don't really see somebody properly, but you see the sort of, their outline, and like, the hair type, if I see somebody that remotely looks like him, me stomach turns over". (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

"And you like, live your life on edge sort of thing, thinking 'What's going to happen next?'" (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

Commenting on the long-term impact that living with this type of uncertainty could have, seven interview respondents commented on how they themselves had contemplated suicide or could understand why people in the same situation may have done so:

"And you realise...people who are under this kind of stress on a- on a daily basis sometimes, I can understand how suicides occur. Because people feel that they don't know where to turn". (I5, Female, Neighbour)

"And, you could walk out of there and think 'I've had enough, I just want to end it all. Because I- what's the point? No one's going to help me, I'm never going to be free'" (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

"I mean, there's been really low points for me where I've kind of said 'Do you know what? Actually, why don't I just end life?' Because- because there's nowhere to go with this" (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

## Changes to daily life

Another consistent theme to emerge from both the interviews and survey responses, was the impact of stalking and harassment on the victim's quality of life, and the changes they had to make in order to manage their own safety.

11 participants explained that they would either not leave the house at all, or would only do so if someone was with them.

"It got to the stage when it was all happening that I wouldn't go out. I would stay in. I had to hide". (I2, Female, Local Children)

"I wouldn't go out on me own. Like, I'm 42-years-old and me mother was going everywhere with me, do you know what I mean"? (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

"I wouldn't go out the house because I was terrified". (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

"It's kind of very much got to the point that I don't go out the house unless I've actually got somebody with me". (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

Two participants had already moved house permanently in order to escape the harassment with another planning to move soon. One participant had to move out for six months while a court case was ongoing. Two other participants mentioned the possibility of moving, but felt they shouldn't have to do this in order to feel safe.

"And...while it's very tempting to move out, and I may do so, but it'll be for health reasons. But, they would have won, and people like that shouldn't- they're doing the wrong thing, and they shouldn't be, however old they are, they should not be allowed to do it". (I5, Female, Neighbours)

One woman had to change her profession due to the nature of online stalking she was experiencing:

"It resulted in my having to change jobs, and take a lower-paid job, because the profession I was in before meant me being on a public register, where I had to declare where I worked. And because she's contacted my employers... And ex-



employers, I felt that I had to go into a lower-paid job where I had some anonymity". (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

While another woman stayed with the same employer but took a demotion and had to request for her contact details to be changed as she was being called constantly at work:

"I've even had to go and speak to my employers and ask for my company mobile phone number to be changed. Um, they can't change my work land line number, but because I've moved departments, basically they've just switched me off having a land line number that can be contactable at the moment". (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

Other changes described by participants included changing their route home from work/school, shopping and socialising outside of their local area, and not being able to walk their dogs.

"We were avoiding groups, we were avoiding situations where we knew this woman would be, I didn't even go on the local shop". (I16, Female, Friend)

"It was scary just to go to the shop, or to walk the dog round the block. That's how bad it was, we couldn't even walk the dog round the block. They used to wait for us." (I5, Female, Local Children)

### Feelings of safety

The final theme regarding the impact of stalking and harassment disclosed by participants, relates to their general sense of safety. Over half of the 18 female interview participants expressed how unsafe they felt as a result of their experiences:

"And it got to the point where I actually said to me mum one night that "Do you know what? I'm going to be a story in the newspaper. I'm going to be another one of these girls that gets murdered by her ex". (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

"I do live in fear of the fact that he is going to come back". (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

“I feel I have to worry and monitor the situation because I'm so scared... I am literally terrified. I think 'Well, y'know, is she going to turn up at the house? Is she going to...’”? (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

Of the three male interview participants, only one described feeling unsafe, but this was not because he was scared of the offender per se, but because there had been a smear campaign against him in the local area, where his name had been written on public buildings calling him a paedophile. He was therefore scared that he may be attacked by someone in the street who believed the accusations.

In response to this sense of fear, three female participants explained that they had installed CCTV in their properties, with one woman having six cameras throughout her home. Three victims described carrying personal attack alarms with them at all times, and one woman had higher fences erected around her home.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Victims' Experiences of the Police and CPS

#### Key Messages and Implications for Practice:

- The majority of participants decided to contact the police following an escalation in behaviour, or when someone close to them became a target. It is therefore important for the police to understand that one incident, which may appear trivial, is likely to be the 'tip of the iceberg'.
- Overwhelmingly, participants just wanted the abuse to stop as a result of police involvement, however, a number were prepared to attend court and give evidence in order to achieve some sort of resolution.
- When victims described a positive first contact experience with the police, this was characterised by being taken seriously, and having a proactive response.
- However, when a victim felt their experience was trivialised and they were somehow responsible, they described a negative first contact experience. This was particularly true for those experiencing stalking and harassment online – with most being told to stop using social media. Considering the fact that half of all participants in this research were harassed and stalked in this way, it is vital for the police to consider their response more appropriately.
- Despite all participants describing behaviour that might constitute offences of stalking and harassment, only 40% of offenders were arrested, with 20% being convicted. It appears from the advice given to victims that there is a misunderstanding of the nature of stalking and harassment legislation, with only one offender being arrested for stalking, despite the vast majority of victims describing behaviour that caused them serious alarm or distress and that had a substantial impact on their day to day activities.
- There is an urgent need for the police and CPS to review the use of Police Information Notices (PINs) as in every case described by interview participants where a PIN was issued, this was not done in accordance with ACPO guidance (ACPO, 2009).

- The majority of participants did not have an entirely positive follow-up experience to their report of stalking and harassment. The main themes associated with a negative experience related to their concerns not being deemed 'serious enough', victim-blaming attitudes and responses, not being kept informed, missed opportunities to take action against the offender and counter-allegations.
- When asked about their overall views on police involvement, responses were mixed. Just over half felt their concerns were taken seriously, with 13 suggesting they were not taken seriously at all. Views such as these impacted on the likelihood of whether a victim would call the police again, with a quarter saying they would no longer approach the police due to their most recent experience. It is therefore essential that the police respond to victims by taking their concerns seriously and acknowledging the impact this behaviour is having on them.
- Participants made two main recommendations for how the police could improve their response to stalking and harassment – the first being to understand the 'bigger picture' and the second to receive specialist training.

This chapter describes how participants viewed their interactions with the police, and where relevant, the CPS. The chapter begins by exploring what triggered participants to involve the police, what they wanted/expected the police to do, and what impact any previous police involvement had on their decision. The chapter then moves onto participant's first contact experience and how helpful, or not, they felt this to be. The next section explores the follow-up experience of participants including any action taken against the offender and whether victims were kept informed of the progress of their case. The chapter concludes by exploring victim's views on whether they were taken seriously by the police, whether they feel safer as a result of reporting stalking and harassment, whether they will contact the police again for help, and finally their recommendations for how things can be improved.

## Decision to call the police, expectations and previous police involvement

When asked to describe their decision to contact the police, it was clear that it was usually triggered by an escalation in behaviour, or because the harassment was impacting on someone close to the victim. As participants explained:

“Well, as long as it's me, that's okay. I'll just take it.' sort of thing. When it then started being my daughter, that's when I thought 'This has got to stop’”. (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

“It- I started contacting the police when it escalated from just messages to the car being vandalised... And ((inhales)) she accosted me and my children in the street, and was shouting and swearing, and- and frightening my children’”. (I16, Female, Friend)

“Um, and he started turning up at my workplace, and the last straw was when he followed me home’”. (I19, Female, Ex-partner)

“When the calls started threatening family members’”. (Survey Respondent, Male, Stranger)

“Things started to escalate and threats became actions’”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Ex-partner)

When asked what they expected or wanted the police to do about the behaviour, the overwhelming response was for the abuse to stop.

“I wanted them to stop them... making our lives a misery, and stop them scaring me’”. (I4, Female, Local Children)

“I didn't want her to be punished, I didn't want her to be arrested and in trouble, I just wanted it to stop’”. (I16, Female, Friend)

“Just to stop the behaviour but also to help my husband who is disabled feel more secure, confident and less vulnerable - we just felt we needed someone to help really’”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Neighbour)

Only four participants stated they wanted criminal justice sanctions against the offender. Of these, two were women who were being harassed by their ex-partners, and two were men who were being harassed by their neighbours.

“I wanted him- I wanted him to go to prison”. (I13, Male, Neighbour)

“Well, I hoped that it would go to court, if I'm honest”. (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

It is important to note, however, that despite their initial desire for the behaviour to stop, a number of participants later expressed their intent to go to court and give evidence:

“I said yes, I would have gone to court if need be”. (I1, Female, Stranger)

“I was prepared to go through anything to make sure this woman was stopped. For the children's sake, I needed it...” (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

Seven participants explained that they had previously reported the offender to the police. Three of these participants suggested that the response they had received made them reluctant to contact the police about the more recent incident.

“I explained that the police had been to him before...and then it's “Oh, well why didn't you come back before?” “Well, I didn't come back before because I didn't think it worked the first time””. (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

“And it's just...I don't know, you just- we lost all faith with the police, because of what's happened from a couple of years ago”. (I12, Female, Acquaintance)

### First contact experience

The majority (21, 60%) of participants described their first contact with the police when reporting stalking and harassment as positive. Whether the experience was seen as helpful by the victim largely related to how seriously the person felt they were taken and how responsive the police were.

“They were very responsive and very helpful”. (I1, Female, Stranger)

“From the moment I talked to the dispatcher when I rang 101, they listened, they took it seriously”. (I5, Female, Neighbours)

“At first it was really good, I had my statement taken...With an officer who was really good, she said “I don't like what I'm seeing””. (I18, Female, Friend/Neighbour)

“Really helpful, I was really surprised, actually. Because of it being mental and emotional abuse, I didn't expect them to be quite so understanding as they was”. (I19, Female, Ex-partner)

“The lady was very informative and empathetic. She explained that the police would contact me ASAP to tell me their plans and for my input. They then kept me updated throughout the whole process. It was really reassuring”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Friend)

However, ten participants expressed dissatisfaction with the initial response they received. For example, one woman, who was being harassed and stalked by her ex-partner decided to attend her local police station to report the abuse:

“I took the day off work, to be told that no one could see me, that I had to come back at... eight o'clock in the evening or eight o'clock the following night. Now, I was a bit devastated about this, because I'd plucked up the courage... to go to the police, and then to be told 'Oh, there's no one here that can speak to you you're going to have to come back.'...I was determined, because I thought 'I've got to get an end to this.', but if I'd have gone- if that had happened to me, the first time I'd ever done it, I wouldn't have gone back. I know that for sure”. (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

Another woman, who was being harassed by a woman with whom she had been friends, felt she was being blamed for the stalking and harassment when she initially reported her concerns:

“There was an awful lot of victim blaming. It wasn't her fault for sending abusive Facebook messages, it was my fault for being on Facebook...And the only way to stop these messages is if I deactivate my Facebook account, and come off social media. I didn't think that was very fair at all”. (I16, Female, Friend)

This feeling was echoed by other participants who were harassed and stalked via the internet and social media. One woman, who had seven websites created about her, which contained personal and malicious content was told:

“There's nothing we can do about these recurring websites. Um, you believe it's malicious, I believe that's just your feelings, and we're not here to deal with feelings. We deal in facts, not feelings.’ So basically, 'We're not going to do anything’”. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

A female survey participant who was being harassed and stalked on Facebook by strangers described how unhappy she was with the initial response she received from the police:

“I filled in an online form. Then I received a dismissive and victim-blaming phone call at work that infuriated me. It was a female officer who said the following: "Have you closed your social media account?" I said no. She said "well you should. That's all we can do." That was it. The call was disconnected and that was that. I was not given a crime reference number. I was treated like I was the nuisance”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Stranger)

As Elaine’s case study suggests, in her experience, the police seemed unable to understand the impact that being stalked online was having on her and her family.

### **Case Study: Elaine**

Elaine has been stalked online by an acquaintance for the last two years, although she believes she has been watched by this person for much longer. Elaine became aware of the stalking when websites were created about her. There were approximately seven websites in total. They contained malicious content about Elaine, including pictures of her, details of her personal life, and links were made to the social media accounts of Elaine’s children and her previous employers.

When Elaine initially contacted the police, she felt that they were not interested, and she was advised that as there were no threats it was just someone expressing their ‘freedom of speech’. Elaine had to arrange to have the websites taken down herself, which was difficult as they were being hosted in another country. When the



websites continued to appear, the police became involved and traced them back to someone known to Elaine.

In addition to the websites, this person was also posting content about Elaine on social media – in particular Facebook. Despite being aware of who was posting this information, the police advised Elaine that there was not enough evidence to arrest the person as there was no direct threat. It took 12 months of monitoring the posts before the person was arrested. Elaine's case was made more complicated by the fact the person posting the abuse lived in a different part of the UK, and so Elaine was advised there were cost implications associated with making an arrest.

When the offender was arrested, they were given a conditional caution. Elaine was informed that this was because the CPS did not feel there would be enough evidence for a conviction at court. The conditions of the caution included not posting content about Elaine on social media and not creating websites about her. Since the caution was issued, content has continued to be posted. However, the police have advised that an offence is not being committed because Elaine is no longer being named within the content.

Elaine described the impact this has had on both her and her family. Elaine was afraid to go out of the house, she had to change to a lower-paid job where she would have some anonymity, her children had to move schools and Elaine has suffered with anxiety.

Elaine felt the police could have handled her case better if they had taken it seriously from the start, if they had listened to her, and if they had tried to understand the impact it was having on her and her family.

### Action taken

Of the 35 people who reported issues of stalking and harassment to the police, 14 stated that the offender had been arrested. Of these, two were cautioned, eight were charged with harassment, seven convictions secured, and six restraining orders issued. There was one offender who was arrested for stalking, but later charged with harassment.

Furthermore, over half of all participants (18) explained that the offender had been issued with a Police Information Notice or PIN. This is a written notice that should be issued to someone the first time they have caused harassment to a victim. The notice warns them that if they continue with their behaviour, they can be arrested for harassment as there would then be two incidents which satisfies the condition of a 'course of conduct'. However, it became clear from interview participants, how these notices were not being issued in accordance with ACPO guidance (ACPO, 2009). For example, four interview participants stated the police had issued the offender with a PIN after having first given the offender a verbal warning. For the offence of harassment to be proven, there must be just two occasions where a victim has been caused alarm or distress as a result of the offender's behaviour (and the offender knew, or ought to have known this would be the case). However, interview participants described a clear course of conduct at the point the PIN was issued.

“Um, they had another word with him then, and then the third time he was issued with a harassment order. But that was only because, it wasn't just me then, he started on my mum as well...And it got to the point that I actually, um, collapsed, ended up in hospital for mental stress. For mental exhaustion, and it happened then, they did give him a harassment order” (I11, Female, Ex-partner).

One woman described how she had been suffering harassment from an ex-friend for over 13 months. The police had warned the offender on two occasions, and it was only three weeks before she was interviewed for this project that a PIN was issued. It was also clear that even when a PIN had been issued, this did not necessarily stop the unwanted contact. Of the 18 participants who suggested the offender had been issued with a PIN, the contact only stopped in six of these cases:

“They come out and they took a statement from me, what had gone on, and I showed them all the e-mails and the text messages and everything else. And they went and gave him a harassment warning... To see if it'd sort of make him back off. Well, it didn't, it still continued, the e-mails, the text messages, trying to contact me through social media” (I14, Female, Ex-partner).

In this particular case, the stalking and harassment escalated and the offender was eventually convicted of harassment and issued with a restraining order – however, as Sally’s case study suggests, this was not the end of the abuse.

### **Case Study: Sally**

Sally was in an abusive relationship for 13 years. When she left her partner, he continued to control her through access to their child for around 18 months. Sally decided to cut all contact with her ex-partner when she was diagnosed with a stress-related health condition. The decision to cut all contact triggered an escalation in her ex-partners harassment, with around 60 emails and 20 text messages a day. It was at this point Sally decided to contact the police for advice.

Sally described the first response she received from the police as ‘fantastic’. They came and took a statement from her and issued her ex-partner with a Police Information Notice (PIN). Unfortunately, this warning did not stop the unwanted contact, with Sally continuing to receive emails, text messages and contact via social media. The police spoke to her ex-partner to warn him and remind him of the PIN. Her ex-partners behaviour became more insidious, with items being left at her property, which made Sally fearful as she knew he had been to her home address. The situation escalated, and Sally’s car was damaged. The police were called and tried to locate her ex-partner. They put markers on her address and phone numbers so that if she contacted the police in an emergency, they would be aware of the situation. The following night, Sally witnessed her ex-partner returning to her address and smashing a glass bottle over her car. Following this, the police arrested and charged him with harassment, and the court issued him with a restraining order not to contact Sally and not to go to her street.

However, Sally has continued to receive unwanted contact from her ex-partner. She has had a number of silent phone calls to her mobile and landline, he has posted things about her on Facebook and he has contacted her friends. Sally sought advice from a stalking charity, and went back to court to ask for the restraining order to be extended so that her ex-partner could not post things about her on Facebook and could not enter the estate she lives in. Despite presenting the court with copies of

over 200 Facebook posts, and explaining the fact that her ex-partner would stand at the end of her street watching her, the Judge refused to amend the order.

Sally explained that this has really affected both her and her child. They are scared to leave the house alone and her child has suffered with anxiety. Sally had hoped that she would feel safer with the restraining order, however, this has not been the case because none of the reports she has made since it was issued have resulted in her ex-partner being arrested.

In Sally's opinion, if the police and wider criminal justice system had understood the history of the abusive relationship she had suffered, and not viewed each incident in isolation, then they may have been able to respond more appropriately.

## Evidence issues

Related to whether any action was taken by the police is the issue of evidence. Fourteen participants commented on the problem of evidence in proving their experience of stalking and harassment. Seven participants described how there were independent witnesses to particular incidents, or CCTV evidence, but that this had not been collected.

“There's been witnesses in my flat before, but they've been friends, relatives, other neighbours, and they've not been accepted as witnesses because they know me”. (I5, Female, Neighbours)

“He was waiting for me. Now, I got home and phoned the police straight away, and I said “Look, there's CCTV right outside that supermarket.” Police never bothered to get the CCTV”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

“Because the original investigating officer...should have taken certain witness statements from individuals that supported things that had happened to me, particularly even from my father, he'd witnessed an incident and an altercation between me and my ex-partner on several times. And she basically refused to take statements from those individuals. So that evidence has never even been brought out”. (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

A particular issue regarding evidence was raised in relation to social media, as one participant explained:

“Basically they've told me, any contact that I receive through social media is irrelevant, because they can't prove that it's associated to them. Even though their daughter set up four different Facebook accounts, with her name just spelt in four different ways, with the same profile picture” (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

The quality of evidence gathering is an issue that has been raised in relation to how the police deal with offences of domestic abuse – where there are potential sources of corroboration, yet these are not always collected (HMIC, 2014, HMCPSI 2004). It is therefore vital for police officers to be given the time and resources necessary to build a case by collecting the available evidence.

### Positive follow-up experiences

Participant's views on the follow-up service they received from the police varied considerably and were generally less positive than their first contact experience. Of those who did feel the follow-up service was positive, it was largely due (as with their first-contact experience) to a proactive response and feeling that their concerns had been taken seriously.

“They patrolled the streets day and night, looking for these kids, and uh, they would wait outside the schools, they would wait outside my house, they would hide, and just to try and find them and catch them”. (I2, Female, Local Children)

“Every time a police officer came, they not only treated me with respect, they would, be humorous, because I appreciate that... kind of thing, and they would not leave until I would say 'Look, I feel alright now, I feel safe.' And I was always grateful that they came”. (I5, Female, Neighbours)

In addition, keeping victims informed of the progress of their case is a key factor in whether a victim/witness is likely to give evidence should the case reach court, and the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime reiterates the importance of this (MoJ, 2015). In this research, 13 participants stated they were regularly kept up to date, with six having a named officer.

However, even when participants were generally satisfied with the follow-up service they received from the police, there were still situations that could have been dealt with better – as Rachel’s case study explains:

### **Case Study: Rachel**

Rachel and her son (who has a disability) moved into a new property two years ago. Within six months they were having problems with young people from the local area who would stand outside her gates and shout; they would knock her bins over; they would bang on the door all night, every night and they would rev motor bikes and track bikes outside her front door. Rachel explained that it got to the point that she and her son could no longer go to the local shops or walk their dog around the block without being hassled.

This went on for over 18 months, and while Rachel reported the problems to the police, she was advised that because some of the young people were under-age, there wasn’t much they could do. Rachel stated that things did go quiet for a while, but then she started to have problems with one young man in particular, who was also part of the group who had been harassing her. The situation escalated to the point that he stood outside Rachel’s back door and threatened to get his gun, blow her windows out and blow her head off. Rachel immediately called the police as she was scared for her life – but it took officers over an hour to arrive.

The young man who made the threats was arrested and convicted of harassment and issued with a three year restraining order. Rachel explained that she and her son suffered intimidation from the defendant’s brother and friend up until the trial, when he eventually pleaded guilty. Rachel was supported by Victim Support throughout the court case and described their service as ‘brilliant’.

Rachel explained that she and her son feel safer as a result of police involvement and feels the police listened and understood her concerns. However, she did suggest that they should take people more seriously, and felt that when she reported the threats to shoot her, that the police could have been quicker to respond.

An important issue related to a positive experience of the police concerns whether the victim was referred for specialist support. In this research, nearly half (17) indicated that they were referred to other organisations such as Victim Support or specialist domestic violence charities after contacting the police. When this happened, participants were generally appreciative of the support on offer:

“I'm thankful to the police officer that recommended the victim support. Because the lady who came to see me, she made several visits, was excellent, and I would never now dismiss the idea, where I would have in the past” (I5, Female, Neighbours)

“And they were just, absolutely amazing. Obviously I didn't need... the emotional support, because I had me mum and me partner, and all me friends and stuff like that... But it was all the court stuff. I didn't have a clue at court, I'd never been to court, do you know what I mean? I didn't know how courts worked. So they... every time I've been to court, they've come to court with me and they've supported me” (I14, Female, Ex-partner).

However, eight participants explained that they found support services themselves, or were only referred after additional incidents had been reported:

“I'd never been offered any services, advice, or just, someone to just say, y'know, 'I'm- I'm a safe person to talk to’” (I7, Female, Ex-partner).

“When I went to the police, they never signposted me to anybody... I used my initiative and went on the internet and found all that” (I10, Female, Ex-partner).

The importance of referring victims of domestic violence for support has long been recognised (Hester and Westmarland, 2005), with research suggesting that independent support can have a positive impact on the likelihood of a successful prosecution (Taylor-Dunn, 2016). It is therefore vital that the police are aware of local support services, and crucially, that such services are adequately funded. However, when attempting to recruit participants for this research, it became clear how few local services there are specifically for victims of stalking and harassment and so it must be acknowledged that existing services may not have the capacity or expertise to adequately support victims of these particular crimes.

## Negative follow-up experiences

For those participants who were clearly dissatisfied with the follow-up service they received, there were some common themes.

### ***Not 'serious enough'***

The first relates to the fact that participants were advised that what they were experiencing was not serious enough to be a criminal offence. For example, two women who were being harassed and stalked by their ex-partners were advised that unless he tried to break into the property, then there was no action they could take:

“A couple of times when I spoke to the police they said obviously, ‘Unless he's actually tried to physically get into the property... then obviously there's nothing we can really do, just not- note down every time he comes round’”. (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

“I've kind of learnt throughout the years, as well, it's all about evidence... I could ring up and say I- and plenty of times I did, call nine-nine-nine, and say, y'know, 'He's sitting outside my house.', and they used to say 'Well, unless he's threatening to you, or knocking at your door, it's, y'know, it's a road, he's allowed to. He's allowed to sit outside’”. (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

Similarly, two other women were advised that unless the offender made specific threats, then no offences had occurred.

“It's not a threat. Until she makes a threat or names me again, or threatens she's going to do something, they've made it clear that there is nothing they can do”. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

Responses such as these suggest a misunderstanding of the harassment and stalking legislation – which simply requires the victim to feel alarmed or distressed by the offender's behaviour (where the offender knew, or ought to have known this would be the case).

Another woman, who reported to the police that her ex-partner had posted indecent images of her on Facebook was advised that the images were not ‘indecent enough’.



The advice most commonly given by the police in these situations was to keep on reporting and keep a log of any further incidents, however, as one female interview participant explained:

“It's so disheartening, it's really disheartening...I just have to keep reporting stuff basically!” (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

### ***Victim-blaming attitudes and responses***

The second theme to emerge amongst those who were dissatisfied with the follow-up service they received from the police related to the issue of ‘victim-blaming’ and a sense that the victim was somehow responsible, should change their behaviour, or were just ‘over-reacting’.

“They only suggested that I close my blinds, and move my TV to another part of the room so that I couldn't see anybody going past the window when I was watching TV. And I says “That doesn't solve the problem. That- that's not an answer. That's making me even more of a prisoner and even more of a victim.” (I5, Female, Neighbours)

“He come- they come to me flat and says “Right. The best thing you can do is move.” Hang on a minute, me move?” I said “Are you sure? But if I move, what do you think people are going to think?” “I'm not moving. See, I've been living here for years”. (I13, Male, Neighbour)

“Have you thought about just not looking? Don't monitor it. Don't...’ That was their answer initially, was 'Don't look.' If you don't look, you won't know it's there”’. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

“I wish I hadn't gone to the police in some ways. Because they did nothing. And, y'know, when I was discussing it with them, the sergeant also said “Well, I had this woman who was convinced her neighbour was staring, as she was pulling out, and he was literally just going to his car,” And I said “Look, it's not in my head, this guy's admitted things.” And he's saying “Well, y'know, it is a bit in

your head.” I was like “It's not.”, and I said “You're not doing anything about it. I'm in danger here”. (I18, Female, Friend/Neighbour)

“But no, as far as the police are concerned, it's not. To the point that I've had several police officers in the house tell me that I'm paranoid and that I'm going crazy, and, y'know, I just need to get on with my life, and stop worrying about all of this, and stop being frightened to go out the door, and just get on with life. And I'm like 'It's not that simple’”. (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

As Joanne’s case study illustrates, not only did she feel she received a victim-blaming response from the police, but her reports were not being treated as stalking and harassment.

### **Case Study: Joanne**

Joanne has been harassed by a local woman who used to be her friend. Joanne’s car has been vandalised, dog faeces have been left on her front door step, she has received abusive Facebook messages, and she and her children have been accosted and sworn at in the street.

Joanne decided to involve the police when the behaviour escalated from abusive messages to her car being vandalised. At this point, Joanne didn’t want the woman to be arrested and get into trouble, she just wanted the harassment to stop. The police did speak to the woman and warned her. However, the woman made counter-allegations to the police against Joanne, suggesting Joanne was harassing her. This resulted in the police advising Joanne and the woman to leave each other alone. This was distressing to Joanne as she had not been making any contact with the woman and was instead doing everything she could to avoid her.

When the harassment continued, and had been going on for nearly 18 months, Joanne contacted a national stalking helpline. They advised her to call the police again and ask them to link the incidents together – which she did. This resulted in the police acknowledging that there was a ‘course of conduct’ and they then issued the woman with a Police Information Notice. However, this was not an appropriate action to take as a PIN should only be issued before a course of conduct has been established.

Joanne suggested there was a lot of 'victim-blaming' by the police. She felt that the police were implying it was her fault for being on Facebook and that she could just stop using it. Joanne explained that the fact the other woman made counter-allegations against her, resulted in the police viewing this as 'tit-for-tat' as opposed to seeing her as a victim.

Joanne described one incident when she was heavily pregnant. The woman made a threat to Joanne's husband that she would 'beat the baby out of her'. Joanne was terrified for the safety of her unborn child, yet when she reported this to the police, she felt they did not take her seriously as no action was taken.

When discussing the impact that this situation has had on Joanne, she explained that she and her family started shopping in a different county; they would not socialise or attend any clubs in their local area, and they would drive miles away for a day out. Joanne does not feel the police have understood the impact this has had on her, or how scared she has been. Joanne has suggested that the police should not engage in victim blaming and should link incidents together so that a 'course of conduct' is established.

### ***Being kept informed***

The third theme amongst those who felt they had a negative follow-up experience with the police concerned how well they were kept informed of the progress of their case. In total, ten participants stated they were not kept informed, even when significant action had been taken. For example:

"You don't always have to see it, but you tend to find out that they didn't even tell me, but then two days later they said 'Oh, we've arrested him, we've got him locked up'". (I4, Female, Local Children)

"In his plea hearing, which I didn't find out about. The police never told me about that...and that night he was waiting at the end of the road, because me and me little girl drove past, so I just sort of drove into the street as quick as I could, opened the garage door, and just whipped the car into the garage as quick as I could". (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

One woman had a particularly negative experience because her local police service was undergoing a number of boundary changes, which resulted in her case being passed between several officers:

“Then we had an issue in that because they were rearranging boundaries within the police force at that time, within that particular force, so people were getting moved into different departments and different areas. So I went through quite a few more months of it being passed to one officer, then they'd contact me and say “Look, I'm going to be taking it over, I'll be in touch with you. I need to make myself au fait with it all, because obviously it's quite complicated.” I'd then not hear from them...I'd contact and I'd get somebody else back saying “Sorry they've- they've had to move. They were given the case, but they've been now moved. It is going to be deployed to somebody else, we'll be in touch when it is.” And this continued for about three or four officers”. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

### ***Missed opportunities***

The fourth theme relating to those who described a negative follow-up experience with the police related to ‘missed opportunities’. For example, two respondents explained that the police admitted they had missed opportunities to arrest the offender:

“And they have actually admitted to me since that there's been occasions that they've missed arresting him... They've had the evidence to arrest him and they've missed it”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

Similarly, as Andrew’s case study describes, due to a clerical error by the officer in the case, they had missed the chance to summons the offender:

#### **Case Study: Andrew**

Andrew has been experiencing harassment from his neighbour since he moved into his home three years ago. Andrew’s neighbour constantly shouts abuse at him through the wall, on the street and on the bus. Andrew was assaulted by his neighbour in 2015 – this was reported to the police and his neighbour was found guilty of assault and given a conditional discharge for 12 months.

During this time, Andrew continued to be harassed by his neighbour and reported approximately six separate incidents to the police. At one point a summons was going to be issued to arrest Andrews neighbour for harassment, however, the officer dealing with the case made a mistake on the file and recorded the offence date as the date of the first incident of harassment. By the time the file was passed to the CPS, it was outside of the six-month limitation for a harassment offence, which meant the summons could not be issued. Andrew has received an apology from the local Inspector regarding this mistake.

Andrew continues to experience harassment from his neighbour, however, he has now lost trust in the police and has stopped calling them to report incidents. Andrew's health is suffering and, although he does not want to, he is going to move house in order to escape the situation.

Andrew feels that the police should have dealt with the incidents of harassment properly and has commented that the council could have done much more to help as they are the landlord and could have evicted his neighbour some time ago.

### ***Counter-allegations***

The final theme to emerge from interview participants who described a negative follow-up experience of the police concerned counter-allegations and how this caused serious distress to victims who were made to feel as though they were also an offender, or that this was just a 'tit for tat' situation. In total, nine interview participants (nearly half) described at least one incident where the offender had made counter allegations against them. For one woman, she had suffered years of coercive control from her partner and when the relationship finished, he reported her for stalking and harassment.

"These two policemen turned up on my doorstep... one was a woman, And she came in, all hurly-burly, and she said "Sit down." and, she said "Do you know why we're here?" And I went "No." And she went..."Well, he's made an accusation of harassment and that he is very distressed by your behaviour towards him.".. So, I think I started crying, - so I was saying "No no, no no no."

And all the time my heart was in my mouth, because I've got two police officers here, and I'm thinking 'Oh my God'". (I20, Female, Ex-partner)

"So she was- because she was making these false accusations back, they were treating it as a bit of tit for tat type of situation. Rather than us being the victim and her being the perpetrator, it was sort of like local women fighting going on... she would make claims back with no evidence whatsoever. And it was treated as a 'Well, she said that you're sending her messages.' 'Well, I'm not. Ask her to prove it'". (I16, Female, Friend)

"And- and one inappropriate comment, I think, from the PCSO was I could just knock heads together, and I thought 'Yes, that- that could well be how you feel, and it's understandable.' But it's not something you should say to a victim, I don't think" (I5, Female, Neighbours)

"I mean, the day they delivered the verdict to me, um, to tell me that they weren't going to press charges for him raping me, 20 minutes later, the officer...turned up at my house and arrested me and took me in for questioning under caution, because he'd made a counter-allegation against me, and I had to go to the police station with my father, in an absolute state, and was interviewed for two hours for counter-allegations that he made, which obviously all charges were dropped, because they were just complete nonsense... and then they kind of wondered why we lost faith". (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

The issue of counter-allegations has been identified as problematic in cases of domestic violence – with the CPS suggesting that police and prosecutors need to be mindful of the fact perpetrators may present as a victim, or use a counter-allegation to disrupt the investigation. As their guidance explains:

"The police should explore the nature of the relationship between the individuals; the context of the offending, including any previous call outs, allegations and/or convictions involving the individuals; and, whether there are any other factors at play which may impact on an allegation, such as civil or family proceedings" (CPS, 2013).

## CPS involvement

In total, seven participants referred to the involvement of the CPS with their case. This was most commonly when the CPS had advised not to take any further action with five participants making reference to this.

“The lady who was in charge of the interview phoned me back and said, um, “We're waiting for the CPS to check if it can go to court so we can get the harassment charge.” Um, the CPS came back and said there wasn't nothing-enough evidence for them to pursue that”. (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

“But the harassment kept on going and going and going and going from month to month to month, and I kept phoning every time it happened. I kept phoning the police, and all they were doing is coming out and like, talking to him and this, that and the other. So eventually, we went to the CPS. They took no further action, because they didn't think it warranted anything. (I6, Male, Neighbour)

The CPS were also mentioned in the context of attending court. One woman explained how pleased she was with the CPS who not only consulted her on the conditions she wanted for her restraining order, but also the fact she did not have to give evidence:

“We didn't actually have to go in, because they did such a good job. And the CPS did a brilliant job, they made sure that we didn't have to go through that, so it was really good”. (I4, Female, Local Children)

However, another participant expressed her disappointment with a CPS Lawyer who said she would help request a change to her restraining order, but failed to attend court:

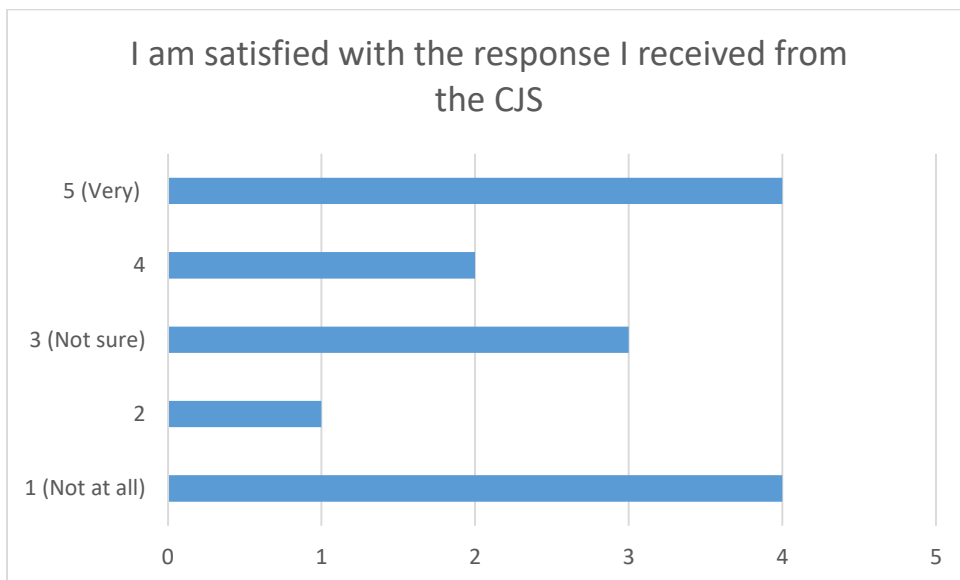
“The CPS lady was there, and she said “Right, yeah, I'll represent you, this needs changing.’ Then on the day of the case ..., she never even turned up... So I had to represent meself, which meant he was questioning me in court... It was just horrendous, absolutely horrendous. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

## Views on police involvement

Considering the range of both positive and negative experiences described above, participants in this research were asked to consider their overall experience of reporting stalking and harassment to the police, including how seriously they were taken, whether they felt any safer, and whether, as a result of these experiences, they were likely to call the police again for help.

As the below graph shows, survey respondents were fairly mixed when rating their overall satisfaction of the criminal justice system:

**Graph 1: Survey Respondent's Satisfaction with the Criminal Justice System**



In terms of interview participants, only two expressed a completely positive view of how the police dealt with their case:

“I was really pleased that the police dealt with it so- quickly, and efficiently, and, y’know, like I said, now I’m trying to draw a line under that and move on”. (I1, Female, Stranger)

“They’ve done everything they could, and they kept me informed, by phoning, or coming in to see me and everything”. (I2, Female, Local Children)

Others were generally satisfied, however, they recognised that issues such as resources or legislation impacted on what the police could do:



“Because I think in a lot of respects, their hands are tied. There's so- so many cutbacks, they have to cover such a big area, and I think, with what they've got, they did a fab job. To be absolutely honest”. (I4, Female, Local Children)

“The police, as I say, the- the police officers themselves, I can't fault the Police, they've been absolutely superb. The only thing that I- I can fault is- is the law. Because the police officers have been like 'Right, let's go and get hold of him.' And then obviously, when they've gone and checked the laws, they can't, they're not allowed to”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

The majority of interview participants however, expressed a more negative overall view of police involvement:

“They don't seem to be seeing the thing that's upsetting me and the children.' So I'm sort of sat there thinking 'Well, I don't know why in a way, I'm bothering.', if that makes sense”. (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

“I just don't trust the police any more... Because obviously every time he does something wrong I phone them, and all I'm getting is 'Well, I'm going to come and make a statement, make a...' How many statements do they need before they actually do something”? (I6, Male, Neighbour)

“But, I wish they'd have realised and taken it seriously from the start, tackled it from the start, and not just let it ((slight pause)) carry on for 14-odd months”. (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

“I actually got made to feel a drama queen about it all. And that it was my fault, and that, um, because of the family history, and that um, I was making a mega fuss, basically”. (I18, Female, Friend and Neighbour)

All participants were asked whether they felt their concerns had been taken seriously by the police. Over half (20) did feel they were taken seriously, two people were undecided, and the remainder felt they had not been taken seriously.

“I feel like I've been taken seriously this time, and someone has actually said 'Yes, it is harassment.' That's the biggest thing, as well, is for someone to say

'Well, actually, all this stuff you've got here, all these letters, all these things you've been sent, all the situation I've gone through, solicitors, police information notice. It is harassment'". (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

"I don't think anybody has actually acknowledged the harm it has caused me and is causing me to date, because it's not physical harm...I did feel it was very much a case of 'This isn't serious. We've...' It was said to me a few times, y'know 'we do have, obviously, more pressing crimes and things going on, you're not in immediate danger'". (I17, Female, Acquaintance)

"I've been very much made to feel that I'm a bit of an inconvenience, and that I am just wasting their time". (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

"After my experience I personally felt like I should never have opened my mouth. I don't feel I was taken seriously or my concerns and this resulted in me being attacked even after a restraining order was put into place. Even after contacting the police about being attacked once again I felt as though I wasn't taken seriously". (Survey Respondent, Female, Ex-partner)

Comments such as these show how important it is for the police to acknowledge the severity of what the victim is experiencing, regardless of whether there is enough evidence to pursue a criminal charge. Moreover, whether a victim felt they were taken seriously or not, has a direct impact on how likely they are to contact the police again in the future. While it is encouraging that two thirds of participants said they would contact the police again, nearly a quarter said they would not (with the remainder being undecided), and even of those who would, some of them expressed they had little faith anything would be done.

"I don't know. Because obviously, the last time I spoke to them, I just had to write down when he came round, so I don't know how- how many times I've got to do that before I can phone them". (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

"No, because I'm just putting up with it now, because I'm not getting involved with the police any-more, because I've had three years of getting involved with the police and I'm not getting no satisfaction out of it". (I6, Male, Neighbour)

“I would, but I would have very little faith that they would actually do anything”.  
(I16, Female, Friend)

“Because as I say, I think if it ever happened to me again, I don't think I'd have the confidence right now to pick the phone up and say 'Come and help me’”.  
(I21, Female, Ex-partner)

“I wouldn't go back to the police if I had another issue of stalking or harassment as I felt they didn't really care and didn't do their job properly”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Ex-partner)

Comments such as these are concerning, especially considering the risks associated with stalking and harassment and the serious impact it has had on those who shared their experiences for this research. As Jenny's case study illustrates:

#### **Case Study: Jenny**

Jenny was in an abusive relationship that ended in 2015 after she was assaulted by her now ex-partner. The police were involved and her ex-partner was charged with assault, and was found not guilty.

Jenny continued to suffer harassment from her ex-partner following the end of their relationship. As a result, Jenny moved house. However, within 2 weeks, her ex-partner had located her new address. He would then turn up, bang on the door and shout through the letterbox. Jenny called the police who attended and took her statement. Jenny was advised that unless he actually tried to get into the property there was nothing they could do – but they suggested she keep a record of the dates and times that he came round.

Jenny then received a text message from her ex-partner that she interpreted as a threat to kill her. Jenny called the police as she was scared for her safety. The police arrested him and sought advice from the CPS to see if there was enough evidence to charge him with harassment. The CPS advised that they did not feel there was sufficient evidence and so he was released. Within 2 hours of leaving the police station, Jenny received a call from her ex-partner asking to see their children.

Jenny's ex-partner continues to turn up at her home address, in particular at significant times such as Christmas or the children's birthdays. Jenny explained that this leaves her in a constant state of fear, and just when she and the children think they are rebuilding their lives, her ex-partner will attend the address and set them all back again. One of Jenny's children has been particularly affected and is receiving specialist support.

Until recently, Jenny was scared to leave her own home and always had someone with her. Jenny has stopped calling the police when her ex-partner attends her address because she does not feel that contacting them is helping to resolve the issues. Instead, Jenny just keeps a log of the date and time that her ex-partner contacts her. Jenny suggested that the police could improve how they deal with similar situations if they looked at the broader picture instead of focussing on specific incidents. Jenny believes that if they did this, they may be able to understand the impact that this is still having on her and her family.

Finally, when asked whether they felt safer as a result of calling the police, it was clear that for some interview participants, police involvement had had a positive impact.

"Oh yes, I do, yeah, yeah. I mean, I can go out and about now, and I know my son has finally now started walking the dog around the block on his own. Because he feels safer. So yes". (I4, Female, Local Children)

"I was just glad they came. Because I felt safer when they came". (I5, Female, Neighbours)

However, it was also clear that for some people, regardless of the action taken, their sense of safety had not improved.

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I'm just waiting for something else to happen next. Y'know, I'm looking over me shoulder all the time". (I8, Male, Neighbour)

“No, I feel safer because I moved 245 miles away”. (I18, Female, Friend/Neighbour)

“I don't know. I wouldn't say safer, I would say m- more, like, I'm less worried, but I wouldn't say safer”. (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

“The police have done what they can but unfortunately I still don't feel safe, as he does not appear to understand after 3 years this is not normal behaviour and doesn't seem to understand I do not want to hear from him” (Survey Respondent, Female, Stranger)

These comments underline the long-term impact of stalking and harassment on victims, and are a reminder to both the police and CPS that not only is a victim likely to have been suffering for a considerable amount of time before they report, but they are likely to suffer the consequences for a long time after.

### Participant Suggestions

It is important for this research to conclude with suggestions from those who have reported stalking and harassment to the police. It is significant, given the discussion in Chapter Three about the importance of context, that the most common suggestion was for the police and CPS to look at the ‘bigger picture’.

“So if they'd had looked at it as a broader picture, and not just on a specific event, I think it would have helped me more, and they could have helped me more in that respect”. (I3, Female, Ex-partner)

“All they wanted was the one jigsaw piece, when the whole puzzle meant- was part of... It's a lot of a bigger picture. He was a violent husband, I left him, he stalked me for two years before that happen- before that incident on that night happened. And that wasn't allowed to be talked about in court, it wasn't allowed to be considered, and it's all part of the same picture”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

“And also, the police are incident-based. So they'll res- they'll look at stuff that's based on that incident. I think they should look at- should look at it at the historic thing as well”. (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

“Um, and I think they should have linked it all together, it shouldn't have taken me seeking separate advice to phone up and say 'Would you mind linking all the cases together?', and for them to, um, then for it to switch on like a light bulb... Oh yes! Look! Quite a course of conduct, maybe we should start doing something.' It should have all been done across each incident”. (I16, Female, Friend)

“I don't know, it's just, I just wish the police would look at it from a bigger picture, and instead of just going 'Right, well there's this.', and 'No, there's no evidence’”. (I21, Female, Ex-partner)

“They should get a wider picture of what is happening, rather than making snap judgments”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Neighbour)

The second most common suggestion was for the police to receive specialist training to help them understand the impact on victims and how to respond appropriately.

“So I think there needs to be- there's a need for, more police training on this”. (I14, Female, Ex-partner)

“Um, just more training, really. I'd suggest that they do some more y'know, go on as many, sort of, domestic violence training as possible, go to a refuge, maybe, and see what- see what the after-effects of this stuff is”. (I15, Female, Ex-partner)

“And I just think the police need more training in that side, where they can kind of handle the victims a little bit more delicately, I think” (I19, Female, Ex-partner)

“They should receive training on the impact of abuse on vulnerable people - such as disabled and also understand behaviours that come from being a victim and feeling vulnerable (these can often be misread)”. (Survey Respondent, Female, Neighbour)

Some participants also expressed the need for officers to think about how they communicate with victims, and even if they were not able to help at that time, to be considerate and show concern. As one participant who was turned away from a police station and told to come back later that night suggested:

“At least, even if they weren't able to, um, give me, like, a proper interview or anything, but just to just spare me ten minutes to just speak to me and say, y'know, 'Yes, we realise this is upsetting you. We're not ignoring you, we want you to come back so we can spend more time with you.'” (I10, Female, Ex-partner)

These suggestions highlight the need for both the police and CPS to better understand not only the nature of stalking and harassment, but also the impact it has, reflecting previous research in this field (Korkodeilou, 2016 and Sheridan and Davies, 2001).

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

This research, commissioned by HMIC, sought the views and experiences of people who had reported stalking and harassment to the police in England and Wales.

As the report has shown, the nature of stalking and harassment experienced by those involved in the project varied considerably and impacted on many aspects of their lives – at home, work, in public and online. It became clear in Chapter Three that context is a vital issue – ‘incidents’ that may appear innocuous or innocent to an outsider, often have meaning known only to the victim, and therefore have the potential to cause ‘alarm or distress’.

Furthermore, all interview participants who were being harassed and stalked by an ex-partner had also suffered a history of domestic abuse with the offender – giving even more importance to the issue of context. The use of children and child contact in the context of domestic abuse was also significant, with all women who had children with their ex-partner commenting on how this had been used as a means of maintaining contact with them. It was also clear that a number of offenders had used threats to the victim, many of which were not necessarily threats to harm the victim, but still induced alarm or distress. Taken together, these issues suggest that in order for the police to deal effectively with reports of stalking and harassment, they must take the time to understand the history of any prior relationship between the victim and offender (not limited to domestic abuse) and place the most recent incident in the context of a pattern of behaviour.

In Chapter Four, the impact of stalking and harassment on victims was explored. As discussed in the introduction to this report, impact is a particularly important issue when considering whether an offence has been committed. In 2012, the Government introduced changes to stalking legislation in England and Wales, and created a new offence of causing ‘serious alarm and distress’ which has a substantial adverse effect on the victim’s usual day-to-day activities. This offence therefore requires the police to ask victims about the impact of the stalking on their everyday lives. Considering the response of participants, who described a



detrimental impact on their physical and emotional health, significant changes to their daily routines, and a general sense of feeling unsafe, it is surprising that only one participant suggested the offender had been arrested for stalking (and was later charged with harassment). The remaining 13 participants who indicated the offender was arrested, stated this was for the offence of harassment.

In Chapter Five, victim's experiences of the police and, where relevant the CPS, were explored in detail. One of the most important messages from this chapter related to the fact that victims had been experiencing the stalking and harassment for some time before contacting the police, and only did so when the situation escalated. As with cases of domestic abuse, a report of stalking and harassment is likely to be the 'tip of the iceberg' and it is therefore essential that officers take the time to understand the history and context of the most recent incident.

The majority of participants suggested that what they wanted from the police was for the abuse to stop – they were not necessarily asking for the offender to be arrested. However, when the behaviour did not stop, and warnings by the police had no effect, a number of victims indicated that they would go to court and give evidence in order to put a stop to the abuse. It is therefore vital that victims are referred to specialist support services who can support them through this process (Taylor-Dunn, 2016).

It became clear during this chapter that victims who felt they were taken seriously and received a proactive response from the police, were more likely to describe their experience as positive. In terms of the action taken, only 14 offenders (40%) were arrested, and 7 convicted (20%). These figures are at odds with the response of participants who described reporting a range of criminal offences. However, the issue of evidence was also highlighted by a number of victims, with some suggesting there were sources of corroboration, but this evidence had not been collected. This reflects similar issues to those associated with the investigation of domestic abuse offences (HMIC, 2014, HMCPSI, 2005) and highlights the need for police officers to consider the range of evidential avenues – and have the time and resources to pursue them.

An important issue related to the action taken by the police relates to Police Information Notices (PINs). In all interviews where the participant described a PIN

being issued, their account suggested this was not done in accordance with ACPO guidance (ACPO, 2009), as there had already been verbal warning issued, or there had already been a course of conduct established. It is therefore vital that police services across England and Wales review their use of PINs to ensure that victims are being afforded protection through the implementation of relevant legislation.

It also became evident from the research that victims of stalking and harassment were not always being referred to support services, yet for those who were, they generally described how satisfied they had been with the service they received. This may be related to the fact that across the six police services where participants were initially recruited for this research, only two had a specialist stalking and harassment service, and both of these were very small organisations with few resources. It is therefore important for Police and Crime Commissioners to consider the services in their area and whether existing organisations have the knowledge and understanding to effectively support victims of these particular crimes.

There were a number of issues raised by participants in this research who felt dissatisfied with the service they received from the police. The first of these related to being told that what they were experiencing was not 'serious' enough. Some participants were advised that unless the behaviour escalated, and direct threats were made, or attempts to break in, then there was nothing the police could do. These responses suggest a misunderstanding by officers regarding the stalking and harassment legislation and the fact that what participants were reporting, and more importantly the impact it was having on them, could indeed satisfy the criteria for one of the offences under the PHA (1997) or Protection of Freedoms Act (2012).

A further issue related to victim-blaming attitudes, where participants were advised to move house, stop using social media, or close the blind to avoid seeing the offender. In addition, two participants were directly told by officers that they were 'overreacting' and were being 'paranoid' – it is important to point out that these two participants have suffered immensely following their abuse, with one being diagnosed with PTSD and the other suffering with bulimia. Being responded to by the police in this way is likely to have a significant impact on their recovery.

Only seven participants had direct experience of the CPS – this was largely due to

the fact that most offenders were not arrested. Some participants had been advised that the CPS suggested there was not enough evidence to continue with the prosecution and this was the only involvement they were aware of. One victim did express her satisfaction with the CPS who consulted her about the conditions of the restraining order, while another had a bad experience with a CPS lawyer who had said she would help to vary the conditions of a restraining order, but did not attend court and so the victim had to face her ex-partner directly.

Participants were mixed when commenting on how satisfied they were with the police and wider criminal justice system. There were only two interview participants who were pleased with all aspects of the service they received, others felt they had a good experience overall, but there had been some problems. Unfortunately, some participants felt their overall experience had been negative and these participants indicated they were unlikely to call the police again in the future.

Just over half of all participants felt they were taken seriously by the police. Regardless of the action the police may be able to take, and whether there is sufficient evidence, police officers can still be seen to take a victim seriously, which is then likely to result in the victim being more satisfied with their response. For example, there were two participants who described how happy they were with the police, who had taken them seriously, despite not taking any action against the offender/s for a considerable amount of time. In contrast, even when the police had taken action against an offender, if the victim felt they were not taken seriously, their overall view of the police response was much more negative. The overall experience a victim receives is important because it can impact on how likely they are to call the police in the future. Two thirds of participants said they would call the police again, however, some of these qualified this with the fact they did not believe the police would do anything. More worryingly, a quarter of participants stated they would definitely not call the police again as a result of their last experience. This is a concerning finding and suggests the police need to consider how they are communicating with victims to avoid people disengaging from police support.

Considering the impact of stalking and harassment on a victim's sense of safety, as discussed in Chapter Four, it is interesting to note how the police were able to make some participants feel safer. However, it must be acknowledged that for others,

regardless of the action that had been taken, they were still living on edge, wondering when the next incident would occur.

Finally, participants were asked to make suggestions for how the police could improve the way they deal with these offences in the future. The overwhelming suggestion was for officers to try and understand the 'bigger picture' – because without this, the relevance of what may appear a 'trivial' incident cannot be understood. Furthermore, participants suggested more training for officers so they could understand the impact of stalking and harassment on victims, and may therefore respond to their concerns more proactively.

Recommendations for Practice:

- ACPO to review the use of Police Information Notices (PINs) and whether they are being used in accordance with relevant guidance.
- Police services to review their training on stalking and harassment to ensure officers are clear about what constitutes offences covered by the PHA 1997 and Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.
- Police services to audit reports of stalking and harassment to ensure the most appropriate legislation is being considered.
- Police services to review their training on stalking and harassment to ensure officers are aware of the impact this behaviour can have on victims, the importance of not viewing incidents in isolation, and a recognition of the risks associated with these types of offences.
- Police services to consider introducing specialist officers to deal with stalking and harassment.
- Police services to ensure victims of stalking and harassment are referred for appropriate support.
- Police and Crime Commissioners to ensure there are organisations in their area with the knowledge and expertise to support victims of stalking and harassment.

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