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# Prevalence and patterns of domestic abuse victimisation in an English police workforce

Iain Brennan, Leticia Couto and Nicola O'Leary

University of Hull, Hull, UK

## ABSTRACT

Perhaps more than any other occupation, police witness the context and aftermath of domestic abuse but little is known about the police-victim overlap with regard to domestic abuse. This paper, based on survey responses from approximately one-quarter of the workforce in an English police force (weighted  $n = 876$ ) addresses this gap. In the survey, respondents described personal characteristics, colleague and personal experience of domestic abuse victimisation. Weighting the data to address non-response patterns, we found lifetime prevalence of domestic abuse in the police workforce around 22%. Females were more likely than males to experience domestic abuse (relative risk (RR) 1.61, confidence interval (CI) 1.25–2.08). Of victims, 47% disclosed their victimisation to a colleague, while 37% disclosed to a line manager and 27% were abused by a partner who also worked in policing. Although there was no difference in disclosure between males and females, disclosure to a colleague (RR 1.66, CI 1.24–2.13) or a line manager (RR 1.79, CI 1.24–2.58) was more likely if the abuser worked in policing. This paper – the most comprehensive description of domestic abuse victimisation in a policing population – demonstrates that, despite their occupational role as guardians and enforcers of the law, the police workforce experience domestic abuse in similar ways as do the general population. As with the general population, this frequency of victimisation, coupled with the repetitive and continuous nature of domestic abuse and the harm it causes, represents a widespread problem and threat to the wellbeing of the police workforce.

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## KEYWORDS

Domestic abuse; policing; victimisation; police-perpetrated crime

## Background

In a simple model of crime, there are three actors: perpetrators, victims and capable guardians but these roles are not mutually exclusive. Their dynamic nature is the basis for entire research areas: offenders can be victims, and vice versa, as emphasised by victim-offender overlap research; guardians, such as police, can be perpetrators, as examined through studies of police brutality, corruption and, more recently, police-perpetrated domestic abuse. The link that has rarely been explored is when police become victims independent of their role as police (i.e. off-duty). This study seeks to stimulate research into the police-victim overlap by examining the experience of and response to personal domestic abuse victimisation in a police workforce in England. As one of the first studies of its kind with this population, and the first published research in England and Wales, we prioritise

**CONTACT** Iain Brennan  [i.brennan@hull.ac.uk](mailto:i.brennan@hull.ac.uk)

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description over causal explanation. We begin by describing the prevalence and nature of domestic abuse victimisation. Then, informed by 'cop culture' and feminist theory, we test hypotheses about gendered patterns in domestic abuse, disclosure and the influence of the abuser also being a police member.

## Gender, domestic abuse and occupation

The estimated lifetime prevalence of domestic abuse as an adult in the general population in England and Wales is around 27% for women and around 14% for men (Office for National Statistics 2021). A similar ratio exists for one-year prevalence rates in the general population (7% women: 3% men). These ratios are also generally similar across the types of abuse experienced, with the exception of sexual assault, which is approximately ten times more likely to be experienced by female victims than by male victims of domestic abuse (Office for National Statistics 2021). Although lifetime prevalence data are not disaggregated at the level of occupation in England and Wales, the one-year prevalence of domestic abuse victimisation is estimated to be 5.4% for managerial professions, 6.7% for intermediate occupations, 6.9% for routine and manual occupations, 5.8% for those who have never worked or are long-term unemployed and 7.9% for full-time students.<sup>1</sup> Across these groups, the ratio of female-to-male victimisation ranges from 1.1 in those who have never worked or are long-term unemployed to 3.6 in full-time students. Prevalence of domestic abuse across occupation is rarely disaggregated below these strata, but a meta-analysis found that within healthcare workers the lifetime prevalence and gender ratio of victimisation is consistent with general population estimates (Dheensa *et al.* 2022). Conversely, among military personnel, that ratio is reversed and males are more likely to be victims than females (Sparrow *et al.* 2020). The variation in prevalence estimates and gender ratios suggests that there may be occupation-related factors that can contribute to our understanding of vulnerability to domestic abuse.

## Policing and domestic abuse

With growing public awareness and increasing political energy being committed to addressing domestic abuse, police forces are under pressure to tackle victimisation and perpetration within their forces in England and Wales (NPCC 2021). Beyond the responsibility of employers to support the wellbeing of their workforce, policing has the added societal responsibility of upholding the law against domestic abuse perpetration and protecting those vulnerable to domestic abuse (HMICFRS 2019). Awareness and understanding of criminality within policing has increased in recent years (College of Policing/HMICFRS/IOPC 2022), but victimisation within policing is rarely examined despite the clear role ambiguity that this situation presents.

Worldwide, the volume of research on domestic abuse perpetration within policing vastly outweighs the research on victimisation but the prevalence of victimisation has been measured a small number of times in localised samples. A survey of 1,104 police officers in Baltimore, USA, between 1997 and 1999 revealed that 17% of officers had ever been assaulted by a partner<sup>2</sup> (Zavala 2013). Among a sample of 425 police officers in the southwestern US, 33% of male officers and 37% of female officers had experienced domestic abuse in the past year<sup>3</sup> (Neidig *et al.* 1992). Because of the large disparity in victimisation prevalence, the differing measures used and the limited description of sampling methodology, these estimates should be considered and compared with caution.

In England and Wales, Freedom of Information requests undertaken as part of a recent supercomplaint about the police handling of police-perpetrated domestic abuse (Centre for Women's Justice 2020) led to the release of some aggregated data on police-perpetrated domestic abuse and some anecdotal evidence about domestic abuse victimisation within the police community, but the data were drawn from a small number of forces, were not collected in a routine or standardised way and are not suitable for determining the prevalence or nature of domestic abuse experienced within

policing. Although there has been no regional or national effort to describe domestic abuse exposure within policing in England and Wales, to our knowledge – and including the survey that underpins this paper – four forces have surveyed their workforce about their experience of domestic abuse victimisation and perpetration.<sup>4</sup> With our study being an exception, none are in the public domain. All were undertaken after 2018 and were in medium- or large-sized forces. They varied in the questions asked, the population frame<sup>5</sup> and the quality of their sampling: response rates ranged from 3% to 9%. In the absence of a rigorous sampling strategy, this response rate is too low for studies seeking to establish the prevalence of an experience or behaviour as there is a substantial risk of response bias in the estimates. Within the three other forces (excluding the sample described in this paper) that explicitly asked about experience of domestic abuse victimisation<sup>6</sup>, the lifetime prevalence was relatively consistent: between 44% and 54%. Despite the sampling limitations, this provides a useful baseline estimate of domestic abuse prevalence for our study.

### **Victim disclosure of domestic abuse**

Victims of domestic abuse have a range of formal, informal and semi-formal routes through which to disclose or report domestic abuse. Estimates vary across populations and sampling methods, but among adults who had been a victim of domestic abuse in the preceding twelve months before completing the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW;  $n = 135$ ; Office for National Statistics 2022), 80% disclosed or reported their abuse to someone. Seven in ten told someone known personally, three in ten told someone in an official position and a similar proportion told someone in another support or professional organisation: these three sources are roughly analogous to informal, formal and semi-formal sources. Noteworthy for our study, 16% of victims who completed CSEW disclosed to a work colleague and 13% disclosed to the police. Of further note is the observation in the report that there are gendered patterns in disclosing and reporting domestic abuse (*ibid.*). Across disclosure types, populations and study designs, male victims are less likely than females victims to disclose domestic abuse victimisation (Ansara and Hindin 2010; Sylaska and Edwards 2014; Cho *et al.* 2020).

For police victims, their work colleagues are police officers or staff who have a responsibility to enforce the law and a duty of positive action when domestic abuse crime comes to their attention (College of Policing 2018). This blurs the boundaries between formal and informal disclosure and, presumably, adds an element of uncertainty over how a colleague will respond – formally or informally – to disclosure of a crime. Furthermore, this group face unique practical disincentives against disclosing such as concerns over the privacy of their records, a lack of anonymity compared to other victims and worries that disclosing may reflect poorly on their perceived competence as a police officer or staff member (Wetendorf 2007).

The concerns police victims may have about disclosing their abuse to colleagues are compounded if the abusive partner is also a member of the police force. Firstly, the abuser's role in the police places an additional professional standards responsibility on the victim to report this police-perpetrated offending<sup>7</sup> and places pressure on the colleague to address the disclosure formally, which may exacerbate any disempowerment experienced by a victim (Sylaska and Edwards 2014). Secondly, the past performance of the force in dealing with similar cases may affect their decision to disclose. There is anecdotal evidence that some victims who have reported abuse by their police intimate partner have been harassed and ostracised by colleagues and reassigned by line managers (Centre for Women's Justice 2020). Thirdly, the abusive partner can potentially use the disclosure as another abuse tactic, manipulating and gaslighting the victim to further isolate them from their support network.

### **Theoretical perspective**

In addition to the added potential for harm to victims described above, the challenges presented by victimisation in policing create an intellectual conundrum that has received surprisingly little

attention. While there is no theory that explains domestic abuse victimisation explicitly within policing populations, feminist and ‘cop culture’ theory can be integrated to frame a set of hypotheses to guide this fledgling work.

A feminist perspective on the gendered distribution of domestic abuse is that unequal power dynamics within society more readily allow males to use physical, emotional and economic abuse to control their female partners (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Coker *et al.* 2000; Swan *et al.* 2008). Accordingly, we posit that female police officers and staff are female first and police second and that, regardless of their occupation, females will be more exposed to all forms of domestic abuse than males and that abuse will take more forms than abuse experienced by males (Archer 2000). In addition, a feminist perspective would dictate that female victims will disclose formally and informally at higher rates than male victims for a variety of reasons: the abuse they experience may be more severe and prolonged than abuse experienced by males, disclosure can help overcome gendered obstacles to leaving the abusive relationship or stopping the abuse, or that the stigma of domestic abuse as a gendered experience will inhibit male victims from disclosing (Addis and Mahalik 2003; Williamson 2014).

We integrate this theoretical position with ‘police culture’ theory that frames policing as an inherently masculine occupation wherein officers see themselves as ‘invincible’, support the use of violence to resolve problems, are resistant to outsider scrutiny and disdainful of those who break this code (Reiner 2000). Through this lens, we posit that, the prevalence of domestic abuse in a police population will show similar patterns to that of the general population but that rates of informal and formal disclosure will be lower than in the general population and that this will be particularly pronounced when the perpetrator is also a police member.

Accordingly, our research questions and hypotheses are:

R1: What is the prevalence of domestic abuse victimisation among police officers and staff?

H1: Domestic abuse victimisation is more prevalent in female police members than in males police members

R2: What is the distribution of victimisation type among these victims?

H2: The type of domestic abuse victimisation in policing varies by sex

R3: Does the perpetrator of domestic abuse being a police officer affect disclosure of domestic abuse victimisation?

H3: Police victims are less likely to disclose victimisation to other police if the perpetrator is also a police member

## Methods

### *Sampling and recruitment*

The study data were collected from a single police force in England.<sup>8</sup> The study population was all police officers and police staff employed by the police force during the study timeframe 26th January 2021 to 13th July 2021.

### *Materials*

The survey items were developed solely by the police force then formatted for an online survey tool that allowed logical conditional forking based on previous response. The survey was based around nine core questions with follow-up items conditional on response to the key question. All respondents were asked the core items, which were based on four themes: personal characteristics, colleague experience of victimisation, personal experience of victimisation and suggestions on staff support. The survey contained a mixture of closed (forced response) and open questions.

Completion of all forced response items was mandatory but open questions could be left blank. Below we describe only the items pertinent to this paper: the full list of items is described in Appendix One.

The first theme established basic respondent characteristics: length of service (five-year intervals from '0-5 years' up to '30 years +', current age) (five-year intervals from 'Under 20 years' to 'Over 70', police role (officer, staff or volunteer) and sex ('Male', 'Female' and 'Prefer not to say').<sup>9</sup> Respondents were then asked if they had been a victim of domestic abuse during their time working for a police force. Indicating that they had triggered a series of items about the nature of the abuse, whether the perpetrator worked for the police force at the time of the abuse, whether they spoke to a colleague about the abuse and whether they spoke to a line manager about the abuse.

## **Procedure**

A link to the survey was sent to all staff and officers in the force. This represents a probability sampling design in that all member of the defined population had an equal chance of participating in the survey. The anonymised recruitment email is included as Appendix Two. Although it explained that the survey was 'designed to understand the numbers of staff and officers that have experienced [domestic abuse], and how [the force] deal with such reports when it happens', there was nothing specific to imply that recipients should complete the survey based on experience of domestic abuse. In addition, the email also emphasised the value in a large sample completing the survey: 'as many people as possible complete the survey to provide us with an accurate picture and feedback'.

The population size was over 3,000<sup>10</sup>, the weighted sample size was 876 and the response rate was between 20 and 30%. Based on the sample characteristics, males were under-represented in the sample while females were over-represented in the sample. Fortunately, these disproportionalities were not substantial and were addressed using sample weighting techniques.

The data were made available to the authors through a data processing agreement with the police force that stipulated that the force should remain anonymous and that ONS guidance on the avoidance of statistical disclosure be applied. With this agreement in place, the secondary nature of the data set and the lack of personal data therein, the requirement for ethical approval by University of Hull was waived.

## **Analytic strategy**

### **Preregistration**

The study methods, hypotheses and analytic strategy were pre-registered on Open Science Framework on 4th October 2021 [https://osf.io/yvxh9/?view\\_only=616c32c51371420a9eb68389dc456ed1](https://osf.io/yvxh9/?view_only=616c32c51371420a9eb68389dc456ed1). As the data for the study were provided under the condition of anonymity through a data processing agreement, the original raw data are not permitted to be shared.

### **Weighting**

To assess and adjust for non-response bias in the sample, we compared the characteristics of the sample (i.e. those who completed the survey) and the population (i.e. those who were eligible to complete the survey) across three pairs of characteristics for which data were available: role and sex, role and age, and role and length of service. The sample data were included in the survey data set and the population-level data were available from the Office for National Statistics Police Workforce Open Data Tables<sup>11</sup> or were provided to us by the police force. Comparing the distribution of the proportion of the sample who were, for example, male and a police staff member with the proportion of the population who were male and a police staff member allowed non-response propensity and inverse probability weights to be calculated to adjust for non-response. Weights were calculated iteratively with the weights for the second pair of characteristics being

calculated based on a version of the sample that has been weighted using the first pair of characteristics. This adjustment allowed the sample to be more representative of the entire population.

### **Statistical software**

All data was collected using Microsoft Forms. All statistical analyses were undertaken using R v4.0.4 (R Core Team 2021), RStudio v2022.02.3 (RStudio Team 2022) and R packages ‘tidyverse’ (Wickham *et al.* 2019), ‘gtsummary’ (Sjoberg *et al.* 2021) and ‘survey’ (Lumley 2020). Statistical weights were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

### **Descriptive statistics and models**

To protect the identity of the police force and to produce statistics that were representative of the police force, descriptive statistics and frequencies are presented as weighted counts and percentages and all statistical models are also weighted. When comparing across groups, comparison is presented as relative risks with confidence intervals. To compare the number of forms of abuse experienced by male and female victims, a Wilcoxon rank sum test was applied.

## **Results**

### **Sample characteristics**

The survey was completed by a weighted sample of 876 people with a combined 9,000 years of service in policing as an officer or police staff. The distribution of sex, role, age and length of service are described in Table 1 when adjusted for non-response.

Table 2 describes the weighted distribution of victimisation in the sample. On average, 23% of respondents had been a victim of domestic abuse while working for the police force. Comparing males with females, the risk of victimisation was 61% higher for females than males.

**Table 1.** Description of study sample.

Characteristic	<i>N</i> = 876 <sup>a</sup>
Sex	
Female	413 (47%)
Male	463 (53%)
Role	
Police Officer	528 (60%)
Police Staff	348 (40%)
Age	
Under 20	2 (0.2%)
21–25	64 (7.3%)
26–30	115 (13%)
31–35	99 (11%)
36–40	126 (14%)
41–45	127 (15%)
46–50	125 (14%)
51–55	115 (13%)
56–60	68 (7.7%)
61–65	27 (3.1%)
66–70	4 (0.4%)
Over 70	4 (0.5%)
Length of service	
0–5 years	338 (39%)
6–10 years	64 (7.3%)
11–15 years	139 (16%)
16–20 years	185 (21%)
21–25 years	64 (7.3%)
26–30 years	59 (6.8%)
30 years +	26 (3.0%)

**Table 2.** Distribution of domestic abuse victimisation experience by sex .

Characteristic	Overall, <i>N</i> = 876	Female, <i>N</i> = 413	Male, <i>N</i> = 463	RR (95% CI) <sup>a</sup>
Victim of domestic abuse				
No	683 (78%)	299 (72%)	383 (83%)	1.61 (1.25-2.08)
Yes	193 (22%)	114 (28%)	79 (17%)	

<sup>a</sup>Relative risk (95% Confidence interval).

Given the sensitivity of the question and the small number of respondents who selected sex as 'prefer not to say', the distribution of victimisation by sex did not include this subsample. However, it is noteworthy that, in this subsample, the prevalence of victimisation was similar to that of the rest of the sample.

### ***Distribution of victimisation type***

As detailed in Table 3, emotional abuse was the most prevalent type of domestic abuse experienced by the sample and this was, proportionally more likely to be experienced by females than males. Similarly, physical abuse was more likely to be experienced by female police members than male. The only form of domestic abuse that was not more likely in females than in males was financial abuse. Sexual abuse was vastly more likely to be experienced by females than by males.

Victims could report experiencing more than one type of abuse. The frequency of experience between one and four types of abuse is detailed in Table 4. Almost half of all victims experienced more than one type of abuse. While there were no extreme patterns of co-occurrence, around one-third of victims of emotional abuse also experienced physical victimisation. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no statistically significant difference in the number of forms of abuse experienced by male and female victims ( $W = 4684.5$ ,  $p = 0.40$ ); in both groups, the median number of forms of abuse experienced by males and females were 1 and 1.5, respectively.

### ***Perpetrators and the response to domestic abuse victimisation***

Twenty-seven per cent of victims were offended against by a member of the police force. The relative risk of being a victim of domestic abuse by a police member was higher for females than for males, but this difference was not statistically significant. Most victims did not speak to a colleague about the abuse they experienced and fewer than 40% spoke to a line manager; there was no difference between male and female police members in this sample. Reasons for this varied across respondents and these reasons are summarised in the next section (Table 5 and Table 6).

**Table 3.** Distribution of nature of abuse experienced.

Characteristic	Overall, <i>N</i> = 876	Female, <i>N</i> = 413 <sup>a</sup>	Male, <i>N</i> = 463	RR (95% CI)
Sexual				
No	853 (97%)	394 (95%)	460 (99%)	7.10 (2.12-23.82)
Yes	23 (2.6%)	19 (4.7%)	3 (0.7%)	
Emotional				
No	705 (81%)	313 (76%)	393 (85%)	1.61 (1.23-2.12)
Yes	171 (19%)	101 (24%)	70 (15%)	
Physical				
No	800 (91%)	368 (89%)	433 (94%)	1.71 (1.10-2.66)
Yes	76 (8.6%)	46 (11%)	30 (6.5%)	
Financial				
No	831 (95%)	389 (94%)	442 (96%)	1.34 (0.75-2.39)
Yes	45 (5.1%)	24 (5.8%)	20 (4.4%)	

<sup>a</sup>Relative risk (RR) statistic uses male as the reference category.



**Table 4.** Frequency of co-occurring types of abuse .

Characteristic	<i>N</i> = 190	Female	Male
Number of types of abuse experienced			
1	102 (54%)	59 (53%)	43 (55%)
2	59 (31%)	34 (31%)	25 (32%)
3	24 (13%)	14 (12%)	10 (13%)
4	5 (3%)	5 (5%)	0 (0%)

## Discussion

More than in any other profession, police witness domestic abuse, deal with its consequences and are responsible for the prevention of these crimes. Frequent exposure to domestic abuse and its consequences has the potential to cause additional harm when a police officer becomes a victim but may also have mitigating effects on harm through familiarity with processes and awareness of formal, informal and semi-formal support mechanisms. Police also operate within a culture that is intolerant of vulnerability, which may deter help-seeking behaviour, particularly when an abusive partner is also a colleague. In light of these risks and potentially mitigating factors, it is important to describe the prevalence and nature of domestic abuse victimisation in policing and, in so doing, show the need for a research agenda on police-victim overlap that extends beyond domestic abuse.

Our study demonstrates that police are not immune to occupying both the roles of victim and perpetrator in domestic abuse, nor are they disproportionately exposed to victimisation. In our sample, which captured between 20% and 30% of the eligible population of all police officers and staff in a single force and was weighted to reflect the demographic and professional characteristics of the population, the lifetime prevalence of domestic abuse victimisation was approximately 23%. Notably, this prevalence is consistent with that in the general population of adults in England and Wales and serves to further illustrate that domestic abuse affects all facets of society. Even those who witness a significant amount of abuse in their professional lives are not immune; nor does their victim's having the power of arrest (or, for police staff, being close to that power) appear to be a substantial deterrent for perpetrators. Conversely, this finding also suggests that victims of domestic abuse are not disproportionately drawn to policing but as the timing of the abuse (i.e. if it preceded joining the police) was not recorded, we cannot answer this definitively.

There does not appear to be a routine source of data on victimisation of police members for comparison, but we can speculate that the 23% lifetime prevalence rate makes domestic abuse one of the most common forms of 'off-duty' crime experienced by police.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, only recently has this issue received meaningful attention in policing and, even then, this has only been the result of an emphasis on identifying police-perpetrated abuse rather than a concern about police victimisation. As with the general population, this frequency of victimisation, coupled with the repetitive and continuous nature of domestic abuse and the harm it causes, represents a widespread problem and threat to the wellbeing of the police workforce.

**Table 5.** Weighted descriptive statistics of prevalence of police-perpetrated abuse and victim response to domestic abuse.

	Overall, <i>N</i> = 862 <sup>a</sup>	Female, <i>N</i> = 407 <sup>a</sup>	Male, <i>N</i> = 455 <sup>a</sup>	RR (95% CI)
Police-perpetrated abuse	683 (79%)	299 (73%)	383 (84%)	1.70 (0.97-3.00)
No	132 (15%)	79 (19%)	53 (12%)	
Yes	48 (5.6%)	29 (7.2%)	19 (4.2%)	
Disclosed to a colleague	683 (79%)	299 (73%)	383 (84%)	1.22 (0.88-1.70)
No	95 (11%)	53 (13%)	42 (9.3%)	
Yes	85 (9.8%)	55 (13%)	30 (6.6%)	
Disclosed to a line manager	683 (79%)	299 (73%)	383 (84%)	0.94 (0.70-1.27)
No	113 (13%)	66 (16%)	48 (11%)	
Yes	67 (7.7%)	43 (10%)	24 (5.3%)	

<sup>a</sup>*n* (%); Relative risk (RR) statistic uses male as the reference category.

**Table 6.** Weighted descriptive statistics of domestic abuse disclosure and comparison across workplace of perpetrator.

	Was your partner also working for the force at the same time?			RR (95% CI)
	Overall, <i>N</i> = 180	No, <i>N</i> = 132	Yes, <i>N</i> = 48	
Disclosed to a colleague				
No		79 (60%)	16 (33%)	1.66 (1.24-2.13)
Yes		53 (40%)	32 (67%)	
Disclosed to a line manager				
No		92 (69%)	22 (46%)	1.79 (1.24-2.58)
Yes		40 (31%)	26 (54%)	

Almost half of victims (47%) disclosed victimisation to a colleague and 37% disclosed victimisation to a line manager. These rates of disclosure in the workplace far exceed those observed in the general population (Office for National Statistics 2022), but determining if these statistics represent disproportionately high or low rates of disclosure relative to the general population of victims is not straightforward. If a police colleague or line manager is viewed as an informal source, such as a friend or co-worker, this disclosure rate is typical for general populations of domestic abuse victims (*ibid.*). However, disclosing to a police colleague or a line manager can be interpreted as formally reporting to the police, in which case, this rate of disclosure is approximately double that for the general populations of victims (*ibid.*). Furthermore, where internal support schemes are in place, such as survivor groups or listener schemes, a colleague or line manager could also be viewed as a support professional. In the presence of these semantic differences and no way to disentangle them, it is unclear how comparable these rates of disclosure are to victims in the general population.

As hypothesised, female police officers and staff were considerably more likely to have experienced domestic abuse in their lifetime than their male colleagues. Among those who experienced victimisation, the nature of that abuse varied: females were over seven times more likely to experience sexual abuse than males, approximately 60% more likely to experience physical abuse and 70% more like to experience emotional abuse. Only in the case of financial abuse was there a similar level of exposure. These distributions broadly reflect those experienced in the general population and illustrate that, despite the added complexity of the police-victim overlap, the nature of domestic abuse in policing retains the same gendered characteristics it has in the general population. Notably, however, and contrary to the hypothesis that the experience of domestic abuse would vary between males and females, was that the difference in the number of forms of abuse experienced by males and females was not statistically significant. It is possible, however, that this observation obscures variation in the frequency of abusive behaviour experiences. As noted throughout the domestic abuse literature, female victims of domestic abuse experience very high rates of abusive incidents but also may be subject to continuous coercive and controlling behaviour that is not amenable to frequency measurement (Walby and Towers 2018).

We also saw no difference between males and females in how victims disclosed their experience of domestic abuse to colleagues and line managers. Applying feminist theory to this comparison, it is plausible that males would be less likely than their female colleagues to disclose this traditionally 'gendered' form of victimisation and stark differences in formal and informal reporting by gender have been observed (Office for National Statistics 2018). However, our data do not reflect these differences. Attempting to explain our results, a counterargument to a feminist explanation is the suggestion that male police are the population who are most likely to witness male domestic abuse victimisation and, consequently, may be more willing to acknowledge their own domestic abuse victimisation and expect acceptance from colleagues and managers. Alternatively, as demonstrated across the coercive control literature, male perpetrators of abuse may report being victimised as a defence against allegations of abusive behaviour (Stark 2007). We did not hypothesise further about the causes of gender balance or imbalance in disclosing domestic abuse but there may be observable patterns in the characteristics of victims or types of abuse experienced that could

explain these patterns. This requires further theoretical exploration before undertaking additional and *post hoc* analyses.

In more than a quarter of individuals in the survey who were victim of domestic abuse, the perpetrator of that abuse was employed by the same police force. This represents one in sixteen police force members. In direct contradiction to our hypotheses, victims were more likely to disclose their abuse to a colleague if the perpetrator was a colleague compared with victims whose abusers did not work for the police force. The same pattern was observed with regard to disclosing to a line manager. An encouraging inference that can be drawn from this is that the proportion of undisclosed police-perpetrated domestic abuse is smaller than that for domestic abuse in general and that police victims are, at least, no less reluctant to disclose abuse by a police officer than by any other occupation. If accurate, this finding could be explained by a desire to get the abuse 'on record' before the abusive partner had an opportunity to address the issue, for example, through denial or other more offensive techniques. Police may also be more aware than the public of positive action strategies within policing, whereby a disclosed crime must be acted upon, which may be a more attractive route to a police response than formal reporting (although positive action may also be a barrier to reporting if, for example, it has economic or familial implications for the victim).

This intriguing and, to us, counterintuitive finding needs to be interpreted with caution. First, it is contrary to a large body of 'cop culture' literature demonstrating that police are often reluctant to report on illegal behaviours by colleagues and disdainful of those who break this code (Reiner 2000; Punch 2009; Silverii 2014). However, in the 'cop culture' literature, the person in a position to report is not also the victim of the offence. It is possible that police-on-police domestic abuse represents an exception to this code. Secondly, it is important to note that sampling through the workplace introduced a vulnerability to 'survivorship bias' within the data, i.e. only those victims who were still working in the force were available to complete the survey. This vulnerability is not just an issue with representativeness, it also has technical implications for the accuracy of estimates. If both the exposure (the perpetrator being a police officer, or not) and the outcome (disclosing the abuse, or not) affect leaving the force or policing, only sampling serving police members (i.e. conditioning on survivorship) potentially introduces 'collider bias', which is known to have an adverse impact on the accuracy of estimates. For example, it may obscure a pernicious effect of reporting: if a victim was vilified for disclosing abuse by a partner in policing, they may be more likely to leave the job. Similarly, if they suffered health problems, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from the abuse that led to their leaving policing or led to unavailability to complete the survey, survivorship bias would also be present. Unfortunately, there is little that could be done within our data set to address this risk. Consequently, our results should be interpreted with caution and explored further through qualitative and quantitative means.

### ***Adherence to pre-registration***

The study largely followed the pre-registered protocol. However, we limited the number of hypotheses that we sought to test and report. We did this to limit the scale of the paper to a reasonable size. Unreported hypotheses have not yet been tested and, consequently, have not affected their inclusion in the paper.

### ***Limitations***

Although this paper is, methodologically, an advance on other surveys of domestic abuse victimisation in policing, it suffers from a number of noteworthy limitations. While the distribution across males and females, the course of the abuse and the nature of abusive behaviours experienced were consistent with that of the general public, the observed prevalence of victimisation was lower than that observed in other police forces. We believe this discrepancy is a result of better sampling and measurement methods in our study rather than a true reflection of varying prevalence

of victimisation between forces. However, our sampling and the corrections applied to it have limitations. We were able to correct for variations in some general characteristics, but there are sampling issues for which we could not correct. Primary among these – a fundamental concern of all victimisation studies – is when probability of being surveyed and patterns in responding are affected by victimisation. In addition to the aforementioned ‘survivorship bias’, it is feasible, for example, that victims were more likely than non-victims to respond to a survey that they know will explicitly ask about victimisation. Similarly, victims still in an abusive relationship may be less likely to respond to such a survey for fear of their abuser learning about their participation in the survey; this issue is particularly pertinent if the abuser was a colleague and also received the survey invitation.

The questions about victimisation and disclosing abuse assume that a victim would disclose their victimisation to their employing force. However, if a victim lived outside the geographical area of their employing force, routine practice would be to formally report the abuse to the force for their residential area. If living outside the force area was highly prevalent, this would potentially introduce unmeasured bias to our results. Fortunately, in the case of this force, less than 10% of officers and staff were resident outside the force area. This would be an important consideration for other forces, such as the Metropolitan Police where approximately half of officers live outside the police force area (Berry 2016)

Although this is the most comprehensive survey of domestic abuse in policing, it has limitations that might be considered in efforts to replicate this work. For example, the survey does not include stalking or harassment. Although ‘emotional/psychological’ abuse is a category, this is poorly defined and may fail to capture more complex forms of abuse such as there or coercive control. The survey also implicitly reinforces notions of domestic abuse as episodic, rather than a course of conduct and fails to account for the possibility that a victim may have experienced abuse by more than one partner. The use of a ‘rather not say’ option in relation to gender undermined the assumed intention to be inclusive by creating a ‘bin’ that included non-binary respondents and those who simply did not wish to answer this item meaning that all those responses were discarded for most of the analysis involving gender.

## Conclusion

Domestic abuse in policing, as in the general population, is highly prevalent across the life-course and represents one of the most common forms of ‘off-duty’ victimisation experienced by police. The prevalence rates observed suggest that a career in policing is neither a protective nor a risk factor for lifetime victimisation, but our data can say little about any contribution that dealing with domestic abuse may make to the harm experienced by police victims of domestic abuse. Our sample reflects the exposure of officers and staff in just one of the 43 police forces in England and Wales and, at present, we have no way to know if our findings are representative of the overall police workforce. We have provided sufficient detail in our OSF project webpage to allow replication of this study across multiple forces so that more accurate estimates can be obtained.

The dual role occupied by police – as victims and guardians – is likely to have compounding negative effects that are felt after disclosure, such as disempowerment, fears about damage to professional identity, privacy concerns and exposure to triggering events in their routine work. All of these must be explored to understand these issues and to establish appropriate workforce responses.

We observed similar gendered patterns in domestic abuse experience and the type of abuse suffered by police and the general public. Compared to their male counterparts, domestic abuse is more likely to be experienced by female officers and staff. Female victims were also more likely to experience sexual, physical and emotional abuse than male victims. The observation that male and female victims did not differ in the number of forms of abuse they experienced contradicts

feminist explanations of domestic abuse wherein females will experience a range of interconnected abuse types. While this may reflect differences between male and female police, the inability to attribute the number of forms of abuse to a single perpetrator undermine the informative value of this observation. Although it remains a highly gendered problem, the prevalence of domestic abuse victimisation among males was far from negligible; fortunately, we saw little evidence that domestic abuse victimisation is more hidden by males than females. That this observation contradicts both 'cop culture' and feminist theory may indicate that unexpected results can be found at the intersection of these two theories.

The observation that, for around one-quarter of victims, the perpetrator was also a police officer is a chilling and crucial factor that must be addressed urgently. While it is encouraging that victims are more likely to report police-perpetrated abuse, this is outweighed by the additional burden that it likely creates. Forthcoming research by our team using the qualitative items from the dataset will explore this in greater detail.

Finally, going beyond domestic abuse, we have identified a substantial lack of research on police experience of 'off-duty' victimisation, the police-victim overlap. There is significant potential for a police identity to impact on the experience of and response to victimisation as well as the experience of being a victim. Similarly, victimisation may affect – favourably or adversely – police performance, in particular their interaction with victims and perpetrators. Understanding the police-victim overlap from both perspectives has great potential to better inform and improve the interactions between these police and victims.

## Notes

1. These occupation categories are a standardised set from the SOC 2020 Volume 3: the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC rebased on the SOC 2020). <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume3thenationalstatisticsocioeconomicclassificationnssecbasedonthesoc2020>. Police officers and staff at the level of sergeant or more senior are classed as 'managerial professions' and those less senior are classed as 'intermediate occupations' and the female:male ratios of one-year domestic abuse victimisation prevalence for these categories are 1.7 and 1.4, respectively.
2. The item used to measure victimisation was: 'Have these people ever gotten physical with you: Your spouse/significant other?'
3. The measure of victimisation was constructed using the Conflict Tactics Scale. This well-validated scale measures the frequency of 25 types of behaviour used during inter-partner conflict.
4. Summaries of these surveys were made available to the research team by the College of Policing, but they are not available to share or to describe in detail.
5. The population frames could include police officers, police staff, police volunteers, trainees and ancillary staff.
6. One force survey did not explicitly ask respondents if they had experienced domestic abuse.
7. The 2003 International Association of Chief Police Officers policy on police-perpetrated domestic abuse noted that officers were excluded from the responsibility to report police-perpetrated domestic abuse if they were, themselves, the victim of that abuse.
8. The conditions of our access to the study data are that the force remains anonymous.
9. The sample were permitted to select their 'sex' as 'male', 'female' or 'prefer not to say'. Less than 2% selected 'prefer not to say' as their sex. This may reflect a non-binary gender identity, but it could also reflect an attempt by a respondent to reduce their identifiability. As far as possible, we have attempted to represent the data of this subsample in our analyses. However, guidelines to reduce the risk of statistical disclosure have been followed. Therefore, in some cases where the data are reduced through conditional responding (e.g., limiting the sample to those who report having been a victim of domestic abuse) or when data are cross-tabulated, this subsample were excluded from the data analyses. In addition, in the calculation of odds ratios for outcomes, the small number of 'prefer not to say' respondents prevented sufficiently precise estimates to be calculated. Consequently, the relative risk estimates are based on a comparison of male and female respondents only.
10. The precise population has been withheld to maintain the anonymity of the force.
11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-open-data-tables>
12. We note the potential, when an abusive partner is also a colleague, for abuse to be experienced while on-duty and use 'off-duty' to distinguish between domestic abuse and victimisation experienced in the course of police work.

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