

Domestic Violence and Victim/ Police Interaction

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Context

Domestic violence has received increasing attention in Scottish policy and legislation, through criminalisation of abusive behaviour and the provision of civil measures to protect victims, and the development of broad frameworks for action in the field. Alongside this activity, the number of domestic abuse incidents coming to the attention of the police has increased by 50% over 10 years, rising from 36,000 recorded incidents in 2000 to just under 52,000 in 2010 (Scottish Government, 2010).

Approaching the police is a critical step for victims in securing protection and ending the relationship/ abuse (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000), but very few domestic abuse victims come into contact with the police at all (MacLeod et al., 2009; MacLeod and Page, 2010), and particular groups of victims are more likely than others to receive police attention (MacQueen and Norris, 2014).

Addressing Public Protection priorities identified by the Scottish Policing Assessment 2011-15 around protecting vulnerable individuals and encouraging reporting of domestic violence and abuse, this study examines who is affected by domestic violence and abuse, and how victims interact (or not) with the police. Developed through collaborative partnership and funded through the SIPR Strategic Research and Knowledge Exchange programme, the study is led by Sarah MacQueen (University of Edinburgh), with co-investigators Paul Norris and Susan McVie (University of Edinburgh) and partners Mark Hollinsworth, Tina Ward and Lesley Bain (Police Scotland, Performance and Analysis). Utilising Scottish Crime and Justice Survey data and information on anonymized incidents of domestic abuse collated by Police Scotland, four key questions are addressed:

1. *Who are the victims of domestic abuse?*
2. *Which victims of domestic abuse come to the attention of the police?*
3. *How do the police and victims of domestic abuse interact?*
4. *Who else do victims of domestic abuse tell?*

Key findings

Who are the victims of domestic abuse?

Analyses of prevalence and risk of domestic violence are controversial. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) is a key source of domestic violence data, yet its findings are often contested. The analyses undertaken in this study have problematised the consistent reporting of the SCJS results, by the Scottish Government and various media outlets, as indicating similar prevalence of abuse amongst men and women in Scotland (see MacQueen 2014; Scottish Government 2011; Macleod and Page 2010; Macleod et al 2009). This single figure finding is frequently used by academic and other commentators to dismiss the survey as a means to explore the prevalence and

experience of violence and abuse. However, multivariate analyses suggest that an assessment of risk should not be based on summary, top-level figures, and that lifetime prevalence of abuse must be considered in doing so, so as not to falsely label victims as non-victims. Exploring the effects of a range of factors on the likelihood of victimisation, including gender, age, socio-economic disadvantage, characteristics of local communities, ethnic minority status, sexual orientation, disability, as well as experiences of wider victimisation and offending behaviour highlights the importance of utilising an intersectionality framework in conceptualising domestic violence, and highlights that, while gender is a critical risk factor, current explanatory models need considerable development.

Factors that strongly and significantly increased the likelihood of a respondent reporting *ever* having experienced partner or domestic abuse included:

- Being female
- Living in a low income household or a household with limited financial resources
- Having a disability (both limiting and non-limiting)
- Experiencing wider victimisation, particularly multiple victimisation that included other violence
- Having a history of offending (indicated by whether respondent had ever been sentenced or remanded)

Other significant factors with a less strong impact included:

- Living in an area of high deprivation
- Experiencing relative isolation within the local community
- Self-reporting as 'gay or lesbian'

Looking at recent experiences (within the last 12 months), the results change substantially. Many of the factors found to be significant predictors in the previous model were no longer significant. Those that remain significant are:

- Wider victimization experiences, again, particularly multiple victimization and broader violence
- Having a limiting disability

Another key difference is the emergence of patterns not observed or examined in the prior model. Factors that strongly and significantly increase the likelihood that a respondent reports a recent experience of partner or domestic abuse are:

- Being a young adult (aged 16-24 years)
- Experiencing partner or domestic abuse prior to the last 12 months, i.e. experiencing long term or ongoing abuse

Overall, it appears that the likelihood of experiencing partner and domestic abuse, or the risk of experiencing such abuse, is heightened where individuals experience a wider range of inequalities or social, economic or physical vulnerabilities.

Which victims of domestic abuse come to the attention of the police?

Scottish Crime and Justice Survey respondents whose most recent experience of abuse occurred within the last 12 months are asked follow up questions about whether the police came to know. Only 1 in 4 (n=1,011) reported that they did.

Further analyses examined what factors explained this pattern. Overall, particular groups of victims *and* particular types of incidents appear significantly more likely to receive police attention, with incident specific factors exerting the strongest effect on the model.

Victims most likely to receive police attention:

- are female,
- aged between 35 and 64 years,
- and have lower household incomes

Similarly, the incidents most likely to receive police attention involve:

- children witnessing the abuse,
- and the victim accruing physical injuries or effects

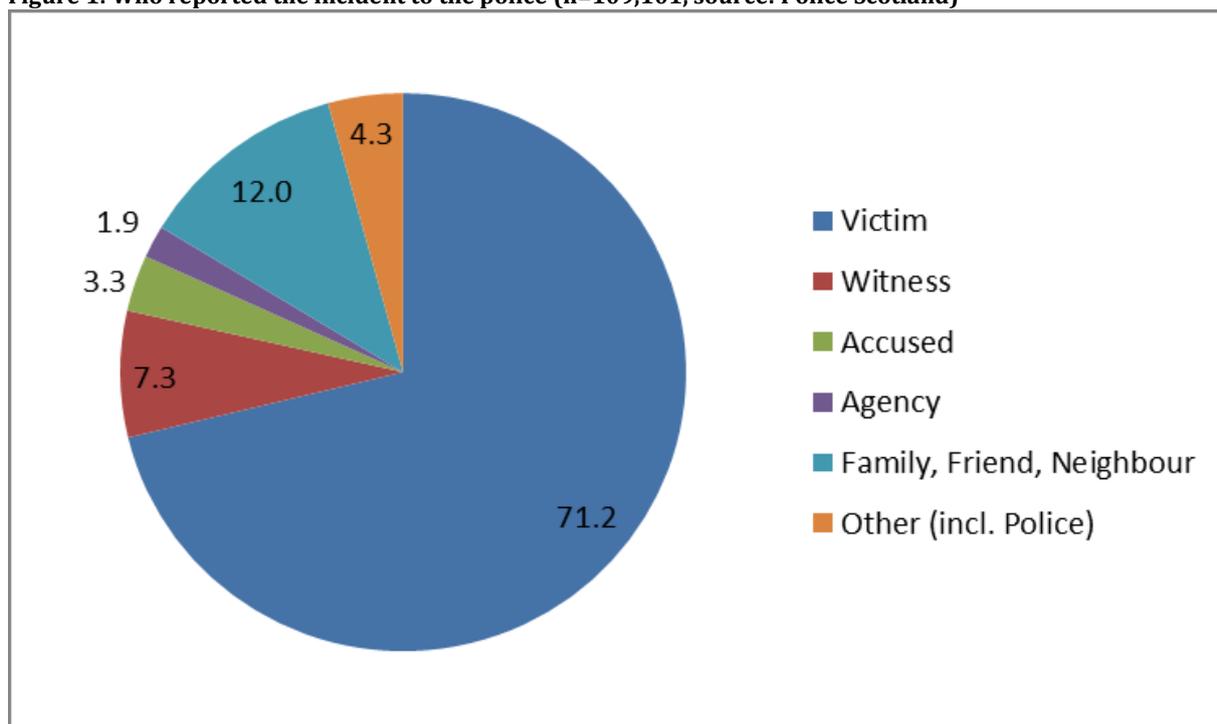
How do the police and victims of domestic abuse interact?

The Police Scotland database contains 109,101 incidents of domestic abuse coming to the attention of the legacy Strathclyde Police Force between 2008 and 2011, recording patterns of contact and the mechanisms by which victims come to police attention for each incident.

'Single' contacts account for 39,742 incidents (36%). Thus almost two thirds of incidents recorded involve repeat contact between the victim and police. Ninety per cent of repeat contacts are preceded by less than 10 prior contacts, with the majority of repeat contacts occurring within a short time frame, i.e. within 1 to 2 days of the prior contact. This pattern will be examined further over the course of the project.

The following chart shows that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence incidents are reported to the police by the victim directly and that the input of other formal agencies is very small:

Figure 1: Who reported the incident to the police (n=109,101, source: Police Scotland)



Interestingly, examining reporter type for 'repeat contacts' reveals that as the level of previous contact increases, it may be more likely for incidents to come to police attention via the victim directly. This is only a very small increase in likelihood however (68% for incidents where no prior contact has occurred versus 75% for incidents with more than six prior contacts between victim and police).

Similar patterns are observed in the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, wherein respondents are asked 'who told the police about your most recent experience?'. Very small numbers state that friends, neighbours or other agencies did, although 18% (n=261) state that they 'do not know'.

Overall, the majority of incidents of domestic abuse come to the attention of the police via the victim directly, or by someone close to the victim (whether by relationship or physical proximity to the abuse) reporting anonymously (to the victim anyway) on behalf of the victim.

Who else do victims of domestic abuse tell?

Given how few victims come to the attention of the police, understanding who else victims may be telling is imperative to achieving further outreach and engagement.

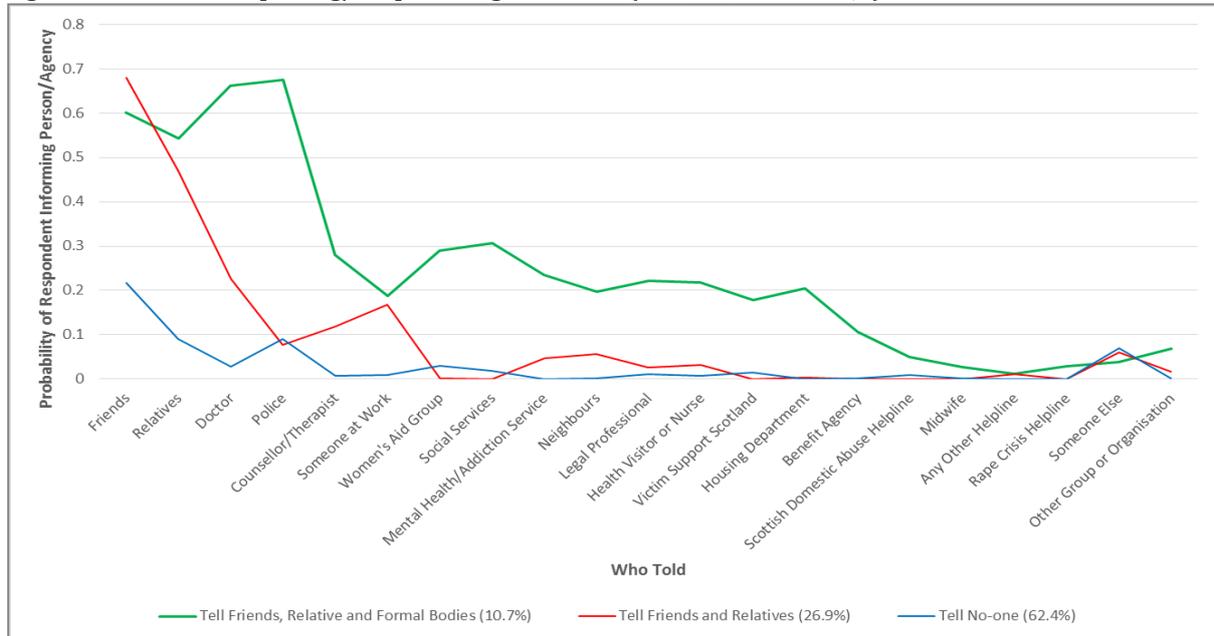
Scottish Crime and Justice Survey respondents identify from a range of formal agencies and informal networks who they told about their most recent experience of abuse. Three categories of victims are identified:

- those likely to inform formal agencies, specifically the police and doctors, *and* informal networks, such as friends and families;
- those likely to inform friends and (to a lesser extent) family only;

- those not likely to tell anyone.

Almost two thirds of victims fall into the last category, and the probability of victims in any of the categories drawing on formal support beyond doctors or the police is low, as illustrated below:

Figure 2: Patterns of reporting/ help-seeking behaviour (n=1,011, source: SCJS)



Conclusions

While analysis is still ongoing, the emerging findings have a number of implications. The study has illustrated those groups most at risk of experiencing domestic abuse and violence, and highlighted the disparity in terms of the groups of victims and types of incidents currently receiving police attention.

The findings suggest that small groups of victims may repeatedly draw on police support, whilst the majority remains largely silent about their abuse. To address the under-reporting of domestic abuse and violence, the experiences of these victims need to be explored further to establish whether a police response is appropriate and desirable, and what other kinds of support may be helpful.

Victims' friends and family, as well as neighbours and other witnesses, have been highlighted as important in terms of providing direct support and reporting abuse to the police. Wider communication and outreach may usefully be explored to encourage broader community responses to abuse, such that the onus is not solely on victims to seek help and intervention. Formal agencies may also usefully be brought to the fore here.

The issues raised are complex, and the findings raise more questions to be addressed. Further research will be needed to fully inform an approach to identifying and protecting vulnerable individuals in Scotland. The study has recently been extended to

explore the different nature of the experiences reported in the SCJS. Findings will be reported later in 2015.

References

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