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How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse

Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint



A joint investigation by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct



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Contents

Senior panel foreword	4
Summary	6
Background	15
Investigation methodology	20
Data on sexual assault victims from ethnic minority backgrounds	24
Feature 1. Overuse of voluntary suspect interviews	28
What is voluntary attendance?	28
Our findings	29
A victim's perspective	29
Evidence on the use of voluntary attendance in sexual abuse cases in which there is a risk of honour-based abuse	29
Evidence on the use of voluntary attendance in all sexual abuse cases	30
Feature 2. Failure to consider honour-based abuse as a concomitant safeguarding concern following sexual abuse reporting	32
Our findings	32
Context and prevalence of honour-based abuse	33
How well police identify and safeguard against the risk of honour-based abuse	33
Victims' perspectives	35
Fieldwork findings	36
Feature 3. Failure to keep victims informed following the report of sexual abuse	39
Keeping victims informed.....	39
Our findings	39
A victim's perspective	40
Evidence on keeping victims updated in sexual abuse cases in which the victim may be at risk of honour-based abuse	41
Evidence on keeping victims updated in all sexual abuse cases	41
Feature 4. Failure to provide information during the prosecution process	43

Assessing a victim's needs.....	43
Our findings	43
A victim's perspective	44
The need for bespoke support services.....	44
Other evidence on keeping victims informed in sexual abuse cases in which the victim may be at risk of honour-based abuse	45
Existing evidence on keeping victims informed in all sexual abuse cases.....	45
Feature 5: Failure to discuss special measures and other protective measures with victims/survivors	47
What are special measures?	47
Our findings	48
Evidence on the provision of special measures to ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse	48
Evidence on the provision of special measures to all victims of sexual abuse	48
Feature 6: Lack of empathy from the police.....	51
Our findings	51
Victims' perspectives	51
Evidence on the empathy police show to all victims of sexual abuse	51
Feature 7: Ineffective and inadequate use of police resources	54
Our findings	54
A victim's perspective	54
Evidence on the use of police resources for all victims of sexual abuse	55
Feature 8: Disproportionate focus on community impact	57
Our findings	57
Victims' perspectives	58
Fieldwork findings.....	58
Understanding and working with communities.....	60
Feature 9: Failure to understand the retraumatising effect of the prosecution process	63
Our findings	63

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

Victims' perspectives	64
Evidence on understanding the retraumatising process for all victims of sexual abuse	64
Conclusions and recommendations	66
Annex A – People and organisations consulted	71

Senior panel foreword

All [victims](#) of sexual abuse should be able to make a report to the police with confidence. They should know they will be supported effectively, protected fully and that offenders will be brought to justice when that is possible. Recent reviews and inspections have shown clearly that this is too often not the case.

As a result, policing and the wider [criminal justice system](#) have put in place several major improvement programmes. Operation Soteria Bluestone, for example, aims to improve the policing response to rape and sexual offences. And the work of the [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#) (2021) seeks to bring consistency to the response police give victims of sexual abuse (and of other crimes).

While these and other programmes focus on all victims, referring to the specific needs and barriers that victims from ethnic minority backgrounds might experience, this super-complaint investigation focuses on ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse. In this investigation, we comment on the police response to all victims of sexual abuse and what we know about the experiences of those victims who are from ethnic minority backgrounds. This, however, was significantly impeded by poor-quality ethnicity data recorded by the police.

In features 2 and 8, we examine the experiences of victims of sexual abuse from ethnic minority backgrounds who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. We make clear in the report which group of victims we are referring to. Tees Valley Inclusion Project, who submitted the super-complaint, is concerned that ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse receive a particularly poor service, which doesn't take sufficient or appropriate account of the specific risks and vulnerabilities they face.

We found ourselves unable to gather compelling evidence that would either prove or disprove this concern. Information on the experiences of victims of sexual abuse is plentiful, recent and rich, but it lacks an in-depth consideration of differences in experience based on ethnicity or vulnerability connected to honour-based abuse. There are significant gaps in the data collected by the police as well as quality concerns. This is a well-known problem. We believe it has now become an intolerable one.

For this investigation, we spoke with four ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who had experienced honour-based abuse. We also spoke with professionals from relevant specialist support agencies. Almost universally, the people we spoke to said the police don't sufficiently take into account vulnerability connected with honour-based abuse when responding to sexual abuse cases. We also heard concerns that the police response may be worse for sexual abuse victims from ethnic minority backgrounds.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

This is very concerning. It points to failings in individual cases but also to a perception that the police won't be responsive to specific risks connected with a victim's cultural background.

Police culture is currently in the spotlight. High-profile cases in the past three years have put a focus on racist, sexist and misogynistic behaviour in the workforce. Policing must understand how these concerns may further undermine victim confidence in reporting sexual abuse offences when there is an added risk of honour-based abuse. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) recently raised numerous concerns in its report [*An inspection of vetting, misconduct and misogyny in the police service*](#) (2022).

We recognise the focused work that forces are carrying out as a result of the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and College of Policing [Police Race Action Plan](#). While the action plan focuses on improving policing for Black people, the learning from this work needs to be applied across all communities that are at risk of harm because of their ethnic or racial backgrounds. We stand ready to support and monitor these improvements with all the means at our disposal.

The Police Race Action Plan seeks to improve the recording of ethnicity data. This is urgently needed. The current data, which is generally poor, constrained the scope of this investigation considerably. We have, however, reviewed the data that exists and carried out focused fieldwork to establish further evidence. And we have assessed, in detail, evidence on community involvement and honour-based abuse. We conclude that much greater cultural awareness and confidence are needed for policing to consistently get the basics right. This means supporting victims and asking the right questions at appropriate times in investigations.

We recognise the many dedicated and committed officers and staff who provide excellent and sensitive policing. Their work should benefit anyone who reports sexual abuse. We make recommendations aimed at improving the way forces identify and [assess the risks](#) of honour-based abuse. The police must work with local communities to manage expectations and fears. They must make sure victims and other members of communities feel confident that forces understand these complex issues and will support them if they report crime to the police.

We thank Tees Valley Inclusion Project for making this super-complaint and for shining a light on this area of policing. And we thank the victims who bravely shared their experiences with us.

Summary

What is a super-complaint?

A super-complaint is a complaint where “a feature, or combination of features, of policing in England and Wales by one or more than one police force is, or appears to be, significantly harming the interests of the public” ([section 29A, Police Reform Act 2002](#)).

The system is designed to examine problems of local, regional or national significance that may not be addressed by existing complaints systems. The process for making and considering super-complaints is set out in the [Police Super-complaints \(Designation and Procedure\) Regulations 2018](#).

More information on police super-complaints is available on the Government [police super-complaint webpage](#).

What does this super-complaint say?

Tees Valley Inclusion Project (TVIP) is concerned about the police response to ethnic minority [victims](#) of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. In its super-complaint, TVIP says there are nine features of policing that are causing significant harm to these victims:

1. Overuse of voluntary suspect interviews.
2. Failure to consider honour-based abuse as a concomitant safeguarding concern following sexual abuse reporting.
3. Failure to keep victims informed following the report of sexual abuse.
4. Failure to provide information during the prosecution process.
5. Failure to discuss [special measures](#) and other protective measures with victims/[survivors](#).
6. Lack of empathy from the police.
7. Ineffective and inadequate use of police resources.
8. Disproportionate focus on community impact.
9. Failure to understand the retraumatising effect of the prosecution process.

TVIP says these failures damage the effectiveness of police investigations into these sexual abuse allegations and that this damages confidence in the police's commitment and capability to investigate these allegations.

TVIP recognises that many of the concerns it raised in its super-complaint submission aren't unique to victims at risk of honour-based abuse. TVIP says the effects of an inadequate police response can be even more severe for those at risk of honour-based abuse.

Victims who face extra repercussions from reporting sexual abuse will experience additional barriers to reporting to the police. When they do report but feel let down, they have further reason to regret police involvement in their case and more reason to deter others from their community reporting similar allegations in the future.

Not all sexual abuse victims will be at risk of honour-based abuse. TVIP's super-complaint features victims from a Southeast Asian background. We know that people from other backgrounds, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, may also be at risk. It is important to note that the risk of honour-based abuse isn't synonymous with ethnicity.

TVIP focused its evidence on cases in which community or family honour or shame are a particular concern. It includes:

- experiences of four victims;
- articles based on the experiences of a further six victims;
- interviews with support workers from the [Halo Project](#) charity (of which TVIP is the parent arm); and
- supporting evidence from three professionals identified by TVIP.

Examples from the super-complaint and from our fieldwork highlight some of the barriers to reporting sexual abuse for some ethnic minority victims. They also illustrate some of the features listed above.

A victim who contributed to the super-complaint

Baz (not his real name) is a British Pakistani man. He reported to the police that he had been sexually abused by his three cousins. He was aged between five and nine at the time. He reported these offences when he was an adult.

Baz believes his own experience of abuse isn't isolated, but that no one speaks out about it in his community. He says the police assured him they would question the suspects promptly. But they didn't speak to them until three months later. The police then asked the suspects to attend a voluntary interview, meaning they were released with no [bail](#) conditions. Baz feels this put him at further risk. Community and family members, including the suspects, approached him and his close family to try to persuade him to withdraw his complaint.

Baz feels that the police didn't put enough resources into investigating his case.

Baz's case study refers to culture, izzat (meaning personal dignity or honour) and shame as some of the most substantial reasons why certain South Asian victims/survivors are less likely to report sexual abuse than their White counterparts. The super-complaint says: "Many members of the Asian community feel that reporting sexual abuse will bring shame to themselves and their family's reputation and is thus better kept a dirty secret. This reluctance can be compounded by family and wider community pressure to not report. Alongside family pressure, fear of the consequences of going against the wishes of the family and/or the community can act as a significant deterrent to reporting."

Baz believes the police failed to understand the link between the abuse and community honour. He feels there was a clear lack of understanding and empathy from the police about the pain and frustration he was experiencing.

Finally, Baz believes that the Pakistani heritage of his perpetrators played a significant role in shaping the way police dealt with the case. In particular, he feels that the police seemed disproportionately focused on how their involvement in a complaint involving Pakistani suspects would affect community cohesion and their own relationship, as an institution, with the Pakistani community.

A victim we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

A victim of sexual abuse, who was at risk of honour-based abuse, told us:

"I'm thankful to the police for bringing justice to me and my daughter. But I found it difficult and felt unsupported as they didn't appreciate the additional difficulties I faced. They weren't doing it intentionally. They're just not equipped with the knowledge."

We are mindful that some of the content within this report may be upsetting for some individuals. [Annex A](#) cites some organisations that might be useful sources of support.

Our approach

Our investigation examined whether there was evidence that the concerns set out by TVIP are features of policing. We then considered whether there was evidence that they are, or appear to be, causing significant harm to the public interest.

First, we carried out an extensive literature review, examining relevant reviews, reports and data. This gave us good evidence, including the experiences of victims of sexual abuse when they report to the police. Much of this evidence is recent and (like the super-complaint) includes the end-to-end experiences of victims in the [criminal justice system](#), from first report through to prosecution. However, none of this evidence specifically relates to the experiences of those from specific ethnic minority backgrounds.

In particular, we found relevant information in:

- [The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions](#) (Ministry of Justice, 2021);

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

- [*A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape*](#) (HMICFRS and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI), 2021); and
- [*Police response to violence against women and girls*](#) (HMICFRS, 2021).

We also examined the emerging findings from Operation Soteria Bluestone. This is part of a joint programme involving the police, Crown Prosecution Service and academics. It seeks to improve the investigation and prosecution of rape and sexual abuse cases.

Between them, these reports and this programme provided some evidence in support of most of TVIP's allegations (specifically, features 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9). But we again emphasise that this evidence is about the experiences of all victims of sexual abuse, as opposed to victims whose cultural background means reporting sexual abuse may put them at risk of honour-based abuse.

As a result, this report is briefer in these areas than in the remaining two areas. While the super-complaint system applies only to policing, our investigation also found evidence about some of the features relating to other parts of the criminal justice system, such as the prosecution process.

Our review of police-recorded data found that it is too patchy, poor-quality and inconsistent for us to be able to compare the experiences of people of different ethnicities. This means there could be no statistically significant findings about any disparities either in reports to the police or in victims' experiences after reporting crimes.

This data gap was our first major finding. But it also fundamentally limited our investigation of this super-complaint and shaped the approach we took. This meant we couldn't focus on whether there was a difference in the service received by ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse to that received by White victims of sexual abuse. But we could assess how the police approach honour-based abuse risk when ethnic minority victims report sexual abuse. This approach was broadly to:

- evaluate how much evidence there is to support each of the nine features for all victims of sexual abuse;
- examine that evidence for differences based on the ethnicity of the victim and risk of honour-based abuse; and
- gather new evidence on the two features that aren't covered in the major recent reports listed above (specifically, feature 2 (an alleged failure to consider honour-based abuse as a concomitant [safeguarding](#) concern following sexual abuse reporting) and feature 8 (an alleged disproportionate focus on the community impact of investigating crimes against and committed by people from particular ethnic minority backgrounds)).

We carried out fieldwork in six forces: Cleveland Police, Devon & Cornwall Police, Gwent Police, Merseyside Police, Suffolk Constabulary and West Midlands Police. And we conducted interviews with national stakeholders and academics. We consulted on our emerging findings, mainly to test the results of our preliminary evidence review and to gather new evidence specifically on the two features that aren't covered in the major recent reports.

Finally, our approach in this investigation was to assess policing practice through the eyes of the victim. To do this, we drew extensively on the victim testimonies TVIP provided in its super-complaint, we spoke to one further new victim and we spoke to two victims named in the super-complaint. We also tried to find further victims to come forward for interview. We conducted interviews with practitioners from specialist victim support services, who shared insight from their many relevant cases.

Our main findings

Lack of robust police data on victims' ethnicity is a fundamental failing

Almost universally, the victims and support service practitioners we spoke to in this investigation suggested that ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse don't receive a service that takes sufficient account of their vulnerabilities. They also suggested that the service they receive is worse than that of victims who don't come from ethnic minority backgrounds. TVIP said that this is at the heart of its super-complaint. We are disappointed that we couldn't investigate a potential difference in service quality based on ethnicity. This is because there is no reliable data sample to test it against.

During our fieldwork, we found that the task of asking victims about their ethnicity appears to be a sensitive one for some officers and staff. Some may choose not to ask a victim their ethnicity because they believe it might offend them or make them think they will be treated differently. When a force's crime-recording or call-taking system allows the ethnicity field to be left blank, this doesn't encourage officers and staff to ask about a victim's ethnicity and may result in their ethnicity being reported as 'unknown'. 'Unknown' results skew forces' ethnicity data and lead to an incomplete picture.

While these are valid concerns, forces need to address how they can make officers and staff feel more confident and comfortable with asking victims about their ethnicity and identifying the most appropriate, earliest possible opportunity to do so. Victims also need to be confident that they are being asked about this for appropriate reasons and that the data will be used properly. This is fundamental to improving ethnicity recording and is included in our recommendations.

This lack of data is a well-known failing, as shown in previous reports such as the 2017 [Lammy review](#) and *Police response to violence against women and girls* (HMICFRS, 2021). The lack of data is fundamental to this super-complaint. It means the police are severely limited in the way they can monitor their own performance. They can’t adequately identify and, if necessary, act on any differences in the service they give the public. And, crucially, they can’t have fully informed and evidence-based engagement with all the communities they serve.

This situation, we believe, has gone on for far too long. It is unacceptable that poor data is hampering forces’ abilities to police and the ability of other organisations to help address any inequalities that would become clear if that data was collected.

Sexual abuse victims aren’t receiving a consistently good service

Our review of recent major inspections and programmes found common failings in the police response to sexual abuse cases involving victims of all ethnicities, as the following table summarises. The commonly-raised concerns are in line with the issues raised in TVIP’s super-complaint submission. While our investigation couldn’t assess whether these problems are more common for victims from ethnic minority backgrounds and/or those who may be at risk of honour-based abuse, we agree with TVIP that these problems often feature in these cases.

Feature	Supporting evidence
1. Overuse of voluntary suspect interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); and • Operation Soteria Bluestone.
3. Failure to keep victims informed following the report of sexual abuse.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service’s response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021); • <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); • <i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021); and • Operation Soteria Bluestone.
4. Failure to provide information during the prosecution process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service’s response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021); • <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); • <i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021); and • Operation Soteria Bluestone.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

Feature	Supporting evidence
5. Failure to discuss special measures and other protective measures with victims/survivors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021);• <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); and• <i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021).
6. Lack of empathy from the police.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operation Soteria Bluestone; and• <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021).
7. Ineffective and inadequate use of police resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021);• <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); and• <i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021).
9. Failure to understand the retraumatising effect of the prosecution process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021);• <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021); and• <i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Each of these reviews also found many examples of excellent, empathetic and sensitive responses to victims of sexual abuse. The new evidence we gathered for this investigation also supports this. We found dedicated and committed officers and staff in every fieldwork force, working to do their best for victims.

But the amount of activity aimed at improving the police response to sexual abuse victims (including the work of the [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#) (2021)) is a sign that policing recognises the improvements it needs in this area. In this activity, there is inherent acknowledgement that there are policing failings and that these failings are harming the public.

Finally, representatives from the police, the third sector and national stakeholders told us that feature 7 (ineffective and inadequate use of police resources) is a major constraint to making improvements. There is an acceptance that specialist teams generally result in better experiences for victims but that the level of specialist and detective resources is currently inadequate.

Cultural awareness and confidence

A victim we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

A victim of sexual abuse, who was at risk of honour-based abuse, told us:

"I'm thankful to the police for bringing justice to me and my daughter, but I found it difficult and felt unsupported as they didn't appreciate the additional difficulties I faced. They weren't doing it intentionally; they're just not equipped with the knowledge."

All our fieldwork, interviews with national stakeholders and discussions with specialist support services show that policing needs to be aware of the additional pressures and barriers facing some ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. These extra considerations range from a heightened risk of being a victim of honour-based abuse to pressure from families and others to withdraw allegations against others in the community. TVIP describes the latter as the "labyrinth of familial connections and pressures". Without policing having a greater understanding of the potential risks and pressures some victims face, these people could go unprotected and unsupported.

We found some excellent examples of sensitive and effective policing that did recognise this context. In general, forces also understand the importance of asking the right questions to determine all risks to victims and of making sure interpreters are neutral.

We acknowledge the difficulties for policing in getting this right. For example, it requires a nuanced understanding of the communities the police serve and confidence in asking what can seem very sensitive questions.

We recognise that it isn't just the police response that needs to change. It is also important that victims have access to specialist victim support services, which can tailor their responses to the specific needs of the local community that the force serves.

Crucially, to identify the risk of honour-based abuse in the first place, officers need local cultural awareness. We found that cultural awareness training and other resources that might help officers navigate this subject are generally lacking. Officers also reported having very limited time to learn more about their communities.

We see benefits in investing in this sort of awareness-building. This means giving individual officers the skills they need to identify and manage certain risks and making sure their [independent advisory groups](#) and other similar groups are effective and used appropriately. In 2015, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary published [The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes – An inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation](#). Since then, policing has developed and provided training about honour-based abuse. But there are no records

to show how much of this type of training has been rolled out and its effectiveness hasn't been evaluated.

Conclusion

This investigation reiterates much that has already been said about the experiences of sexual abuse victims of all ethnic backgrounds. There is far too much inconsistency in the service these victims receive from the police. Too often, investigations are beset by delays, poor communication and, sometimes, a lack of empathy. There is a lot of policing activity to improve victims' experiences. But we recognise the additional barriers faced by ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

Some of these barriers (such as community and family pressures not to report) are outside policing's control. Police can work with partners to help address community relationships, but they can't solve some of the problems caused by deep-seated family or community pressures. However, the major gap in data is a problem largely created by policing and one which the police service must work on breaking down, at pace. We make recommendations to this effect.

Improved data will allow police to monitor and improve their service and assure the public they are treating everyone fairly. It will also help bring about smarter commissioning of specialist victim services, which can support victims through court processes.

These data improvements must progress alongside a much better understanding of the communities that police forces serve, including the risks and vulnerabilities specific to ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. There must be processes, policies and training to support this better understanding. Forces must also give officers and staff enough time to consider, absorb and make the most of awareness-raising opportunities and improve the way they collect data. The case for all of these changes has been made in the [Police Race Action Plan](#). It is important that forces understand that although that plan focuses on Black people and Black communities, these improvements need to extend much wider and benefit people from all ethnic minority backgrounds.

Victims in the cases we have explored are [vulnerable](#) because of the nature of the crimes committed against them, which are often devastating, and because of the repercussions relating to honour-based abuse that they may face. It is the responsibility of all those involved in the criminal justice system to recognise and respond to the extra vulnerabilities. They need to assure victims they will be treated fairly and show and be able to prove this fairness in every interaction.

Background

About the super-complaint

On 7 August 2020, Tees Valley Inclusion Project (TVIP), in collaboration with the [Halo Project](#) charity, submitted a super-complaint called [*Invisible survivors: The long wait for justice. Police response to BAME victims of sexual abuse*](#).

A summary of the super-complaint is included in the section [What does this super-complaint say?](#)

Terminology used in this report

Throughout this report, the term 'victim(s)' is used to refer to those affected by sexual offences. It incorporates other terms such as 'complainant(s)', 'client(s)' and 'survivor(s)', as referred to by some of those we interviewed.

In March 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities recommended that the Government stop using the term 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)'. It recommended this because the terms 'BAME' and 'Black and minority ethnic' emphasise certain ethnic minority groups (Asian and Black) and diminish others (Mixed, Other and White ethnic minority groups). The terms can also mask disparities between different ethnic groups and create misleading interpretations of data.

The super-complaint submitted by TVIP refers to BAME. We have clarified with TVIP that we will use the wider descriptor of 'ethnic minority'. We specifically focus on ethnic minority [victims](#) of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

We have used the phrase 'ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse' to describe victims who we believe TVIP is focusing on in its complaint, given the evidence in the complaint's research and case studies. TVIP confirmed these victims are the focus of its super-complaint. We understand the term 'ethnic minority' conflates different ethnicities, as does the acronym BAME, and we are aware that ethnicity isn't synonymous with honour-based abuse. We also understand that the way we have described those at heightened risk of honour-based abuse may not apply on every occasion and may not be how victims see themselves.

Honour-based abuse

In its guidance for officers, [*Honour-based abuse: advice for first responders*](#) (2021), the College of Policing says:

“Honour-based abuse is a collection of practices used to control behaviour within families and communities to protect their perceived honour, or address shame or embarrassment perceived to have been brought to the family. It stems from a particular interpretation of cultural and religious beliefs by some families who seek to prevent any form of ‘dishonour’ resulting from those who disobey the ‘rules’. The notion of honour has always existed in all societies. These ‘rules’/honour codes are used as a vehicle/motivation for justifying abuse mainly by men (but often supported by women and children) against women, children and other men.”

Women are most often the victims of honour-based abuse, but men can be victims too. What identifies behaviour as honour-based abuse is that it is usually committed with some kind of approval or collusion from family and/or community members.

Behaviours that could constitute honour-based abuse include:

- assault;
- forced marriage;
- neglect and abandonment;
- keeping victims away from family or friends;
- failing to make sure a child regularly goes to school;
- theft (for example, of a passport or other form of identity);
- abducting an unmarried girl under the age of 16 from a parent or guardian;
- not giving familial support to a victim who has made a complaint;
- kidnapping;
- forced repatriation to the country of family origin or threat thereof;
- rape; and
- murder.

We are mindful that there is a vast range of behaviours that constitute honour-based abuse.

The effect these behaviours have on victims will differ, depending on the victim's circumstances and the abuse afflicted.

There has been a growing focus on honour-based abuse following high-profile crimes such as the murder of Banaz Mahmod. In January 2006, Banaz was murdered by members of her own family after she left an allegedly abusive marriage and fell in love with another man.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) (the predecessor body to the Independent Office for Police Conduct) carried out an [investigation into Banaz's contact with the police](#) before her murder. It found that both forces involved showed a lack of awareness of the trigger factors of domestic violence and the effect that cultural issues can have on the outcomes.

The IPCC recommended that police forces in England and Wales should recognise that honour-based abuse is more prevalent than previously understood and that this type of crime crosses cultural boundaries – it isn't restricted to a single religion. The IPCC report led the police to overhaul its approach, and the first national honour-based abuse policy was written.

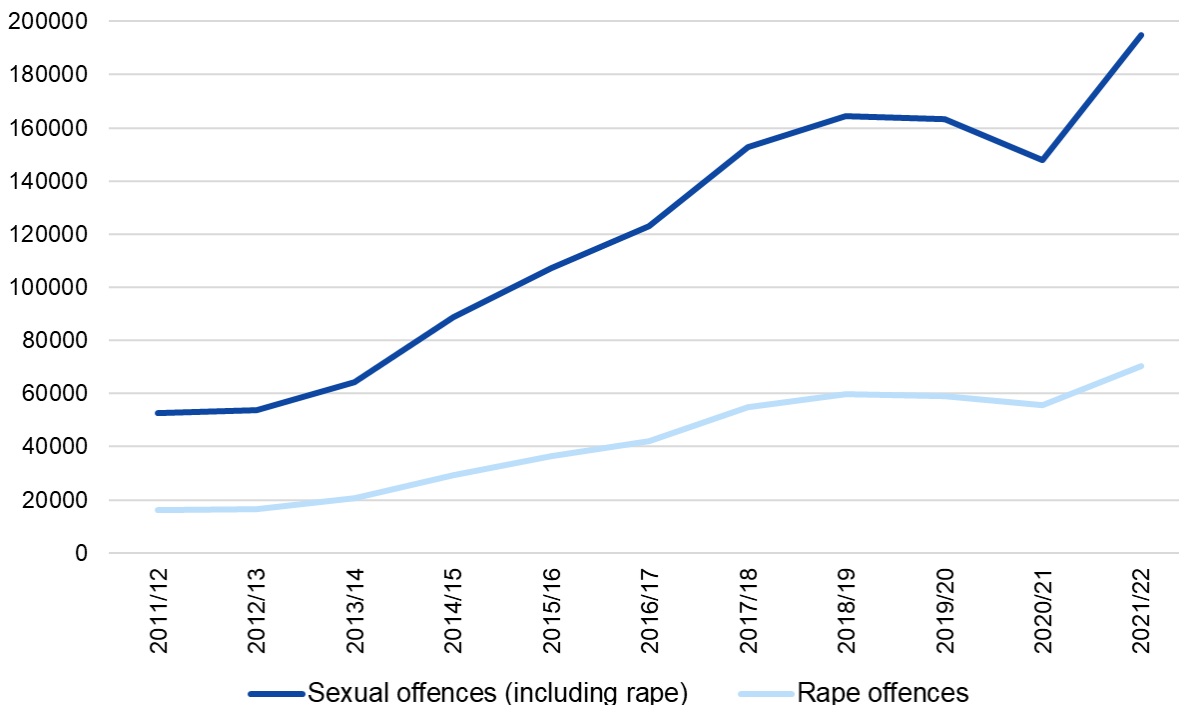
The investigation found that police didn't understand the context of Banaz's request for help. As a result, they missed the risk signs of honour-based abuse. At the time, the police didn't understand the sequence of events Banaz reported, so they didn't identify that they needed to be more proactive. The investigation found this was a major failing in the police's response.

Prevalence of sexual offences in England and Wales

As explained above, we don't have specific data for sexual abuse victims at risk of honour-based abuse. But there is general data available, which helps to provide context. Between the years ending 31 March 2012 and 31 March 2019, there was a year-on-year increase in the number of sexual offences recorded by the police. The number of offences decreased in the years ending 31 March 2020 and 31 March 2021. But in the year ending 31 March 2022, the highest number of sexual offences in England and Wales was recorded, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. This was a 32 percent increase compared to the year ending 31 March 2021. This includes the highest-ever annual recording of rape offences.

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

Figure 1: Sexual offences (including rape) and rape offences recorded by the police in England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2012 to year ending 31 March 2022



Source: Home Office – Police-recorded crime

This increase in police-recorded sexual offences is likely to reflect improvements in police recording and the overall increased confidence of victims in reporting sexual offences, as well as the potential effect of high-profile offences.

The [Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\)](#) provides a more accurate picture of the prevalence of crime (including where it isn't reported to the police) than reported crime data.

In [the year ending 31 March 2020, the CSEW estimates](#) that 618,000 women and 155,000 men between the ages of 16 and 74 experienced sexual assault (including attempted sexual assault). The [CSEW data for the year ending 31 March 2022](#) estimates (based on a limited data collection of six months) that 2.7 percent of adults aged 16 to 59 had experienced sexual assault. This isn't a significant change to the 2.2 percent estimate for the year ending 31 March 2020.

[Combined CSEW data](#) from the year ending 31 March 2018 to the year ending March 2020 shows that adults from Mixed, Black and Black British ethnic backgrounds were significantly more likely to have experienced sexual assaults within the past year compared to other ethnic groups. Adults from Mixed ethnic backgrounds were also significantly more likely to have experienced unwanted sexual touching and indecent exposure. There were no significant differences between ethnicities for rape

or sexual assault by penetration. The CSEW has indicated that individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds may experience sexual assaults more frequently than others.

Barriers to reporting sexual abuse

Although this wasn't a feature raised by TVIP, we have been mindful that not all crimes are reported to the police. Latest estimates from the CSEW for victims of rape or assault by penetration from the age of 16 show that fewer than one in six female victims (16 percent) and fewer than one in five male victims (19 percent) aged 16 to 59 years reported it to the police.

Whatever their ethnic background, victims of sexual abuse have experienced some of the most heinous offences against the person. They may be experiencing not only feelings of anger, hurt, shame and guilt, but those who do report face the continuing trauma of retelling their experience to several different people throughout the criminal justice process. The retraumatising process often prevents a victim from coming forward in the first place. This applies to all victims of sexual abuse, whether the abuse is recent or non-recent, and is irrespective of gender, age or ethnicity.

In [*A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape*](#) (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021) and [*Police response to violence against women and girls*](#) (HMICFRS, 2021), HMICFRS has acknowledged the difficulties all victims face when reporting sexual abuse.

In [*Safe to share? Report on Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' super-complaint on policing and immigration status*](#), we found that victims' concerns about their immigration status were also a factor in preventing some from reporting [domestic abuse](#) to the police.

In her [evidence](#) to the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#), Pragna Patel (former director of Southall Black Sisters), highlighted the cultural and religious dynamics that prevent victims from reporting offences to the police. She specifically said that for women from a South Asian background, "cultural and religious dynamics continue to operate in ways that silence and restrict women's access to outside support".

The Ministry of Justice publication [*Race and the criminal justice system statistics 2018*](#) shows that the barriers to reporting these crimes can be pronounced for some victims from ethnic minorities. Statistics from data sources across the [criminal justice system](#) show that in the year 2018/19, adults and children from an Asian background were half as likely to report victimisation when compared to the White ethnic group. The [*Report by Baroness Vivien Stern CBE of an independent review into how rape complaints are handled by public authorities in England and Wales*](#) (Government Equalities Office and Home Office, 2010) found: "Rape happens across cultures, and in some, shame and social pressures will prevent it being disclosed."

Investigation methodology

We used the following lines of enquiry to structure the investigation and then assess any evidence of harm:

- How do national and local police policies, guidance and training address the [safeguarding](#) of ethnic minority [victims](#) of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse? And how do forces implement them in practice?
- During the investigation process, how effectively do police support victims of these offences?
- When ethnic minority victims report these offences, how effective is the police response?
- How effectively do the police investigate these offences?
- Does the police response to victims of these offences fall short of acceptable standards?

The three decision-making authorities – HMICFRS, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) and the College of Policing – collaborated throughout the investigation.

Expert reference group and sector engagement

We discussed the issues and approach with expert reference groups convened for [The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions](#) (Ministry of Justice, 2021) and [A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape](#) (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021). These expert reference groups included representation from policing, the Government, and the charity and voluntary sector. A full list of the group members is in [Annex A](#).

Literature review and analysis of existing evidence

We carried out an extensive literature review and collated evidence and reviews from previous relevant HMICFRS inspections, including child protection programmes and thematic inspections focused on rape, honour-based abuse, harassment, modern slavery and human trafficking. We also considered data and findings from other reports and sources, including those published by the Home Office.

Victim case studies and interviews

Tees Valley Inclusion Project (TVIP) presented evidence from four victims and case studies featuring six victims. We then interviewed one further new victim and re-interviewed two of the victims who provided evidence for the super-complaint. We invited other victims to talk to us, but understandably not all were prepared to share their experiences with us. We appreciate that speaking about these experiences is very difficult for victims.

We have used victims' words to illustrate their experiences. We acknowledge these experiences may not be representative, but they give us insight into some of the issues that may affect ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

We have used this evidence to support our findings and recommendations. We would like to thank all who took part in interviews for their invaluable support in this investigation and for their courage in participating in the evidence-gathering sessions.

Independent Office for Police Conduct case file review work

The IOPC carried out a search of independent investigations, death or serious injury reviews and reviews/appeals. These were all completed between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2021. The aim was to identify cases relevant to the features of policing raised in the super-complaint. This included searching for cases identified as related to sexual assault or harassment and [domestic abuse](#).

We found multiple cases with subject matter relevant to the super-complaint, but the majority involved a White victim, or we weren't able to ascertain the ethnicity of the victim(s). The two relevant cases we found involving a victim from an ethnic minority background were subject to further investigation locally by the respective forces so we couldn't use them.

Interviews with national experts

We interviewed the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) leads for honour-based abuse, rape and serious sexual offences, domestic abuse and child abuse. They gave us the current guidance available to forces in their areas of expertise. We interviewed one of the contributors to the super-complaint to discuss in more detail their perceptions of the issues. We held discussions with academics and researchers to discuss the findings of their recent research activity and the potential links to the super-complaint.

We interviewed the Home Office officials who lead on honour-based abuse and violence against women and girls. This was to understand the strategic context in terms of policy and legislation.

Fieldwork

During this investigation, COVID-19 restrictions were in place, so we were unable to conduct fieldwork in person. All interviews and focus groups took place remotely.

To decide which forces to focus on in the fieldwork phase, we considered:

- demographics (areas with both high and low ethnic minority populations, to allow us to assess any differences in the approach, training or priority forces give to the types of offences under investigation);
- incident to crime ratio for honour-based abuse;¹
- honour-based abuse offences per 100,000 population; and
- rape and serious sexual offences per 100,000 population.

We also considered how the force had managed Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's recommendations from [*The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes – An inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation*](#) (2015). And we considered whether the force had been referred to in the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#).

HMICFRS crime file review

HMICFRS [police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy](#) inspections include a victim service assessment for each force. This assessment consists of a crime file review, assessing randomly selected crime files that have been investigated. A victim's journey is tracked from when they report a crime to the police through to the outcome, focusing on six areas: call handling, deployment and response, crime recording, crime screening and allocation, investigations, and outcomes.

We reviewed data from the 14 forces where HMICFRS had recently completed a victim service assessment at that point. Of the 277 crime files selected, 19 involved rape and or sexual assault [survivors](#) from an ethnic minority background.

We requested victim demographic information for cases of rape and other sexual offences that were examined. The super-complaint investigation didn't re-assess these cases. The data isn't statistically representative and may not be representative of all forces across England and Wales, so we didn't rely on it.

¹ If a person makes a report to the police, it is recorded on the command and control system as an incident or an occurrence. If the police identify that a crime has taken place in that incident, they record a crime, usually straight away. Therefore, we examined occasions in which forces recorded incidents of honour-based abuse but didn't record a crime.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

We didn't undertake a new review of cases because the data is poor. Therefore, we couldn't examine cases that involved victims from ethnic minorities in a way that would make their experience representative.

Data on sexual assault victims from ethnic minority backgrounds

Introduction

The paucity of police data on the ethnicity of [victims](#) is well known. At a force level, there are problems with data collection, which means that nationally the data is poor. This includes (but isn't exclusive to) victims of sexual abuse and violence. For instance, the recommendation from [A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape](#) (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021) said that police forces should immediately ensure accurate and consistent recording of the [protected characteristics](#) of rape victims. This recommendation was made because ethnicity wasn't recorded for rape victims in 167 of 502 cases reviewed. This was as well as a lack of recording of other protected characteristics.

Recording data accurately is important to ensure that policing is complying with the public sector equality duty. This is a duty imposed on all UK public bodies by [section 149 of the Equality Act 2010](#) to take equality considerations into account when exercising any of their functions and taking decisions. It is important for transparency and scrutiny of force performance.

In this investigation, we found that collection of ethnicity data, when victims contact the police and when forces record crime, is inconsistent. This isn't a new discovery.

The 2017 [Lammy Review](#), an independent review into the treatment of and outcomes for individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in the [criminal justice system](#) (CJS) across England and Wales, identified the disparity in the CJS in terms of what we know about the demographics of people accessing the system. The review found that: "A cross-CJS approach should be agreed to record data on ethnicity." The review's aim was to enable more scrutiny while reducing inefficiencies that can come from collecting the same data twice. A more consistent approach should also see the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts collect data on religion so the treatment and outcomes of different religious groups can be examined in more detail.

A very clear recommendation from the Lammy Review was:

"If CJS agencies cannot provide an evidence-based explanation for apparent disparities between ethnic groups then reforms should be introduced to address those disparities. This principle of 'explain or reform' should apply to every CJS institution."

In this section, we set out our findings in relation to the recording of ethnicity data for sexual offences. We have done this early in the report to explain the decisions we took on how to investigate the super-complaint in the absence of reliable data.

Force recording of victims' ethnicity data

During this investigation, we found that forces are still failing to record ethnicity data about victims accurately and consistently.

The Home Office Data Hub supplied us with data on how complete victim demographic data was for police-recorded sexual offences in 2019/20 and 2020/21. This information was available for 29 police forces in England and Wales. The completion rates for self-defined ethnicity (ranging from 0 percent to 100 percent completion) and police-defined ethnicity (ranging from 0 percent to 90+ percent completion) show that data quality varies between forces. It isn't a mandatory requirement for police forces to provide ethnicity data to the Home Office Data Hub database. Therefore, it is important to note that these completion rates may not represent the actual availability of self-defined or police-defined ethnicity in the police force recording system.

We also found a lack of recording of ethnicity data during our crime file review for this report. We found that 31 percent of sexual offence and rape files didn't have the victim's ethnicity information recorded. Additionally, in the [crime data integrity](#) audit data, 23 percent of recorded sexual offences, 20 percent of recorded rape offences and 14 percent of recorded [N100 reported incidents of rape](#) didn't include the ethnicity of the victims.

In the fieldwork, we found that officers or staff in most forces do ask for a victim's ethnicity when the victim calls the police. The details of calls are recorded on force systems, which are different to the crime recording systems. In some circumstances, it isn't appropriate to ask, such as in an emergency when a fast response is needed. Some officers and staff reported that some ethnic minority victims are reluctant to give the information.

All the forces in which we conducted fieldwork record ethnicity on their crime recording systems. They do this primarily by asking the victim, but officer-identified ethnicity can also be recorded if a person refuses to self-define it. Our investigation found that force practice varies. As an example, one force told us its crime recording system allows for an 'unknown' field for ethnicity. Ideally, officers will obtain this information, but they may use an 'unknown' field if for some reason they don't obtain the information. This can be problematic as it allows officers to enter incomplete data, which perpetuates that force's lack of understanding of its communities' demographics. Another force in which we conducted fieldwork had changed its crime recording system, which meant it now allowed for the ethnicity field to be left blank, although it has been encouraging officers to record ethnicity.

Officers and staff told us there are different reasons why they might not ask victims about their ethnicity. Some told us they feel uncomfortable asking this question for fear of offending the victim. And some said they are cautious about asking in case victims think they will get a lesser service. To manage difficulties in asking victims about their ethnicity, some experienced officers and staff said they tell victims their own self-defined ethnicity and ask victims to select theirs from a list.

We found examples of local processes to check the accuracy of crime recording. The [force control room](#) manager in one fieldwork force said the control room process involves a regular audit of crimes against the [national crime recording standard](#). They said a lack of ethnicity recording is raised if staff aren't recording on a regular basis.

Devon and Cornwall Police has carried out work on disproportionality using victims' self-defined and officer-identified ethnicity. The force has improved its demographic data, which then informs analysis and information. By focusing on this, the force has improved its recording of ethnicity. Using its internal audit and analysis function, the force makes recommendations for collecting data and what officers should ask to get the right detail. The force ensures its officers and staff understand the importance of collecting the right data, and it makes sure they have the tools to improve the recording of ethnicity data.

All forces we spoke to have the capability to break down datasets by ethnicity using their own internal systems. They regularly break down different crime types by ethnicity to understand the detail. But we know the recording of ethnicity is inconsistent and therefore may not be reliable. While we acknowledge that ethnicity may not always be recorded at the first point of call, there is no reason it can't be recorded later in the investigation process.

Summary

There are unacceptable gaps, differences and problems with the quality of ethnicity data collection. It isn't collected consistently at every stage of police interaction with a victim.

The lack of data means it is impossible for policing to assure itself that its data is recorded correctly. It also can't assure itself, us or the public that it treats ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse in the most appropriate way.

Every element of this super-complaint investigation was hampered by the lack of ethnicity data. As a result of the incomplete national picture, where possible, we used material from HMICFRS's inspection activity to gain a better understanding of the features being investigated.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

Our investigation recognises that there are outstanding recommendations from other inspection activities in this area. We also recognise that there is considerable attention, within forces and at a national level, to improve the police response to people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The Police Race Action Plan, for example, is bringing about a major, multifaceted programme of work.

The [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)'s diversity, equality and inclusion co-ordination committee is working on changes to the recording systems to improve the quality of ethnicity data (and data on other protected characteristics). This is a positive step. But more needs to be done, and changes need to be put in place without delay.

Feature 1. Overuse of voluntary suspect interviews

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- the rise in the police use of voluntary attendance benefits suspects and puts [victims](#) at risk;
- voluntary attendance gives suspects time to prepare and collude with others;
- voluntary attendance also gives suspects and possibly others in the community the opportunity to intimidate victims and/or witnesses, and it leaves victims [vulnerable](#) to this risk;
- the use of voluntary suspect interviews can damage investigations; and
- suspects may take the opportunity to destroy evidence, which could damage investigations.

What is voluntary attendance?

Police can use voluntary attendance (VA), also known as a voluntary interview, to interview a suspect who isn't under arrest. VA can be used for adults and young people and applies to interviews conducted at or away from police buildings. It is a formal interview to gather material about an allegation of crime and, as such, may have significant consequences for the suspect. A suspect in a VA interview has the same rights and entitlements as they would have in an interview conducted in police detention under arrest. The difference is that the suspect in a VA interview has the right to leave.

There is no specific [authorised professional practice \(APP\)](#) guidance to help officers decide when it is appropriate to use VA. There is guidance on conducting a VA interview within the APP on [investigative interviewing](#). There is also APP guidance on [response, arrest and detention](#), which helps officers decide when it is necessary to use their arrest powers to formally detain and question those who they suspect have committed a criminal offence. The guidance in the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, Codes of Practice, Code G](#) specifically identifies the necessity test for an arrest, which includes preventing loss of evidence, and [safeguarding](#) or protecting a child or other vulnerable person.

Our findings

Our investigation found some evidence to support the concerns outlined by Tees Valley Inclusion Project but only in relation to all victims of sexual abuse. There is no data or evidence that allowed us to assess whether this was better or worse for ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. We found that the fieldwork forces have processes in place that are in line with current guidance for the use of VA and ways for monitoring its use. But there is clearly a disconnect between this and some victims' experiences.

A victim's perspective

We spoke to a victim of sexual abuse who had experienced honour-based abuse, and support workers who had experience of working with ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who had been at risk of honour-based abuse. These interviewees raised concerns about the police using VA to investigate sexual offences and about this being detrimental to victims.

A victim who contributed to the super-complaint

Baz (not his real name) is a British Pakistani man who reported to the police that he had been sexually abused by his three cousins when he was a child. He reported these offences when he was an adult. He told us that the police assured him that the suspects would be arrested in the coming days. It wasn't until more than three months later that the suspects were interviewed, and this was by way of voluntary attendance. Baz feels that because there was such a long time between the suspects finding out about his report to the police and their subsequent interview, this allowed them to discuss and plan what they were going to say, seek legal advice and dispose of any evidence. Baz feels that they came in to be interviewed "on their terms". He feels the police didn't acknowledge the potential risks to him, such as pressure on him and his family to withdraw his statement.

Evidence on the use of voluntary attendance in sexual abuse cases in which there is a risk of honour-based abuse

There is no data that allows a comparison of the experiences of victims of these crimes with those of other victims. This is because the Home Office and forces are generally not collecting this data consistently.

Evidence on the use of voluntary attendance in all sexual abuse cases

Previous findings

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show there are known problems. For example, any delays in interviewing suspects may mean those suspects can prepare for interviews, and some victims may perceive suspects are treated preferentially. These findings are listed below:

Source(s)	Finding
<i>Police perpetrated domestic abuse: Report on the Centre for Women's Justice super-complaint</i> (HMICFRS, College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2022) and <i>A duty to protect: police use of protective measures in cases involving violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2022)	Police data on VA is limited.
<u><i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i></u> (HMICFRS and HMCPSP, 2021)	Victims perceive VA as giving preferential treatment to perpetrators.
Operation Soteria Bluestone	Early findings suggest that delaying arrest or inviting suspects in for VA potentially allows perpetrators to prepare, and in some cases, groom their victim.
Home Office data returns	The data collected by the Home Office on the police use of VA is from a limited number of forces. (It also doesn't include details on victims' and suspects' ethnicity.)

Fieldwork findings

All the fieldwork forces have policies and processes for the use of VA. We found that they are informative and give officers guidance for using VA. All allow VA for sexual offence investigations. In most cases, officers make decisions as to the appropriateness of VA.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

During our fieldwork, officers in focus groups told us that the ethnicity of a suspect wouldn't affect their decision on whether and when to arrest them. But we did find different approaches among officers in how they explore and manage potential adverse reactions from the community.

We also looked at the oversight and scrutiny mechanisms forces have in place for VA and found them to be comprehensive. In some forces, there is supervisory oversight of decisions. Other forces have positive action policies, meaning they generally support the arrest of suspects. In these forces, officers would need to justify any decision not to arrest a suspect to a supervisor. We also saw examples of forces monitoring the use of VA to make sure it is being used appropriately. These forces conduct case file reviews and identify learning to be shared force wide.

Feature 2. Failure to consider honour-based abuse as a concomitant safeguarding concern following sexual abuse reporting

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- the police fail to identify some behaviours as honour-based abuse and thus fail to appreciate the level of risk; and
- the police fail to act and adequately safeguard those at risk of honour-based abuse following reports of abuse.

Our findings

There are [victims](#) who feel that police, when responding to a report of sexual abuse, aren't appropriately considering the specific risks they face relating to honour-based abuse.

The fieldwork forces know that officers don't deal with honour-based abuse every day, so they provide a range of tools and specialist advisers to support them. Forces are also training officers and staff in how to approach honour-based abuse, but resourcing constraints sometimes make it challenging for forces to keep up to date.

We found evidence of frontline officers and staff having an inconsistent understanding of the potential risk of honour-based abuse when sexual offences are reported. Most of the officers and staff we spoke to didn't recognise the potential link between reports of sexual abuse and the risk of honour-based abuse for some victims.

In one fieldwork force, we identified routine over-flagging of honour-based abuse. For example, some members of the workforce assume a risk of honour-based abuse when a victim has a surname they believe is South Asian. This is concerning and may be due to over-cautiousness or a lack of cultural awareness.

When forces identify the risk of honour-based abuse, we found evidence of them taking adequate steps to safeguard victims. Forces told us about a range of methods they use to keep victims safe. Victim support workers also told us about forces using some good practice, such as using places of safety and making sure families don't know where victims are. Some support workers, however, did feel that the police could do more.

Overall, we have some concerns about how well forces identify that a victim may be at risk of honour-based abuse. But we found that when they identify that risk, they know to take appropriate steps to safeguard victims.

Context and prevalence of honour-based abuse

In the section on [honour-based abuse](#), we referred to the murder of Banaz Mahmood and the subsequent Independent Police Complaints Commission investigation. The Independent Police Complaints Commission report said that honour-based abuse is more prevalent than previously understood and that this type of crime crosses cultural boundaries. It said it isn't restricted to a single religion.

To better understand the prevalence of honour-based abuse, the report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) [Depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes – An inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation](#) (2015) included a recommendation to the Home Office that there should be a mandatory annual data requirement for police to submit details of cases that are flagged as honour-based abuse.

In 2019, the Home Office started collating [honour-based abuse crime statistics](#). In the year ending 31 March 2022, police in England and Wales recorded 2,887 offences related to honour-based abuse. This was an increase of 6 percent from the year ending 31 March 2021, when police in England and Wales recorded 2,725 offences related to honour-based abuse.

It isn't yet possible to identify trends or draw meaningful conclusions. And during the period for which data is available, COVID-19 and related restrictions may have affected the number of honour-based abuse offences recorded by the police. As with all police-recorded crime figures, data only covers crimes that were reported to and recorded by the police. We recognise that honour-based abuse is a hidden crime and victims can be reluctant to bring it to the attention of the police or other authorities. This data, therefore, is likely to represent only a small proportion of the actual honour-based abuse offences committed.

How well police identify and safeguard against the risk of honour-based abuse

It is critical that police can identify and assess risks to victims. This helps them manage those risks appropriately and refer victims to the right support services. But a 2017 [SafeLives](#) report, [Your choice: 'honour'-based violence, forced marriage and domestic abuse](#), found there had been little research on large sets of cases to identify the risk factors for honour-based abuse. The report contrasts this with [domestic abuse](#), concluding the dynamics and risk factors for domestic abuse are quite well understood. SafeLives assessed that honour-based abuse victims are more likely to be at high risk of serious harm or murder (68 percent) than other people accessing domestic abuse support (55 percent).

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

Forces use risk tools which draw on learning from victims and previous cases. They use these tools to identify common risk factors, which they can then use to develop a checklist of questions they can ask to identify the source and nature of risk.

In 2021, the College of Policing carried out a [rapid evidence assessment of how the police recognise and respond to vulnerability](#). It found there isn't enough evidence showing the effectiveness of [risk assessment](#) checklists and tools. The research also indicated these checklists and tools help risk identification, rather than risk assessment. Overall, the research indicated that forces lack understanding about vulnerability-related risk and that the police response is varied and inconsistent.

Not all honour-based abuse is domestic abuse, but domestic abuse risk-assessment tools often help forces identify honour-based abuse. Forces use tools such as the [Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence](#) checklist and the more recently developed [College of Policing Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment](#). Both these tools encourage officers to assess the risk of honour-based abuse by asking victims specific prompting questions, without asking directly if they are at risk of honour-based abuse. This is because some victims may not identify with the term 'honour'. Honour-based abuse charity [Karma Nirvana](#) has also developed an assessment tool, which some forces use.

In 2021, the College of Policing published [guidelines on recognising and responding to vulnerability-related risks](#). The guidelines help officers and staff better understand the vulnerabilities of all those they encounter, rather than thinking about risk in relation to individual forms of harm, such as honour-based abuse, in isolation. The guidelines help officers and staff to:

- be alert to and understand the [clues](#) that indicate vulnerability-related risk;
- develop and use advanced [communication](#) skills to establish trust quickly, build rapport and encourage individuals to be open about their potential risk or vulnerability, including any experience of abuse; and
- exercise [professional curiosity](#) to identify and investigate vulnerability-related risk.

The guidelines encourage officers and staff to apply these three aspects in combination. If they do this, these aspects should reinforce each other and help bring about effective decision making.

Forces should use the guidelines to underpin police training on vulnerability. They include information for chief officers on relevant professional development for officers and staff. They also explain how forces should embed professional development activities into their everyday practices.

The guidelines point to formal training products, such as the College of Policing's one-day and [continuing professional development](#) vulnerability training packages. And the guidelines encourage chief officers to use debriefing sessions, regular reviews of

[body-worn video](#) and multi-agency working to identify learning needs related to vulnerability. In this way, chief officers can give their officers and staff relevant professional development opportunities and make sure their force learns as an organisation.

The College of Policing has also published [advice for first responders on honour-based abuse](#). This includes non-exhaustive lists of honour-based abuse triggers, warning signs and high-risk indicators. This knowledge can help first responders discover honour-based abuse in line with the College of Policing's 2021 guidelines on recognising and responding to vulnerability-related risks. Understanding the common triggers, warning signs and high-risk indicators for honour-based abuse can help first responders to be alert to honour-based abuse clues.

Victims' perspectives

We spoke to victims and support workers as a part of our investigation. They told us that the police don't always understand the potential risk of honour-based abuse that some victims face when reporting sexual offences.

We held a focus group for victim support workers. Participants told us they feel most police officers don't have an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of cultural issues around honour-based abuse. They feel that the level of specialist officers' knowledge, such as those in rape and serious sexual offences teams, is better. But overall, they feel that the service from the police consistently fails to recognise the risks and that it can expose victims to increased risk.

We were given an example of a victim from an ethnic minority background attending a police station to complain about abuse from male family members. The police officers then took that victim back to the house where the abuse had occurred. A support worker said: "I feel sometimes they [some ethnic minority victims] need to be treated differently in terms of awareness and shame of sexual violence. Then after the disclosure, they [the police] have still got to consider the risk of honour-based abuse. Time after time, it's not considered."

One support worker told us that the police often don't seem to understand that "many" ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse don't see themselves as victims. This may be because of their culture and background. Some may just be reaching out for help, rather than wanting to report a crime. Several support workers told us that police need to look beyond victims' words. They said that to do this, police need to understand diversity and different cultures.

Victims and support workers gave us mixed examples of the steps police take to safeguard those victims who report sexual abuse and who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

A women's victim support worker, who has worked with South Wales Police, told us about what she described as good practice. The support worker said: "As soon as the police receive a report of honour-based abuse, they make sure the victim is safe. They order a taxi to get the victim out of the property and into a refuge [with her consent]. At that point, the victim's family members don't know where she has gone. They haven't seen a police car arrive, and they haven't seen her speaking to the police. When she is settled in a refuge, police will arrive to talk to her."

Fieldwork findings

Policies and guidance

The fieldwork forces all have separate policies on sexual abuse and honour-based abuse, which they regularly review. These policies give officers guidance on dealing with these offences. During our fieldwork, officers generally assured us that they have access to these policies and follow them.

But we found that, in many cases, sexual abuse policies don't make the link to the potential risk of honour-based abuse. When we spoke to the forces about this, they acknowledged that the link is lacking. But the forces explained that they make links to honour-based abuse in their domestic abuse policies. Although it is positive that domestic abuse policies include honour-based abuse, not all instances of sexual abuse are domestic abuse. Flagging this link in sexual abuse policies (as well as domestic abuse policies) would remind officers of the risks of honour-based abuse and help them identify those risks.

We found evidence that force leaders know officers don't deal with honour-based abuse every day. The fieldwork forces have developed a range of support systems to help overcome this. We found several examples of forces putting in place guidance, aide-mémoires and dedicated staff. These might include tactical advisers who have received additional training on honour-based abuse, and who can advise other officers.

In response to a recommendation in the 2015 HMIC thematic inspection, the College of Policing produced [guidance](#) and training for frontline officers. This was issued in January 2022. We found that all fieldwork forces had reviewed this guidance and used it to evaluate their current policies and procedures.

All officers we spoke to said they were very confident that if an explicit allegation of honour-based abuse was made, there would be an appropriate response. But when a sexual abuse offence is reported, officers focus on investigating that offence. They may not even consider honour-based abuse. This makes it even more important that sexual abuse policies, cultural awareness programmes and training highlight the potential links between sexual abuse and honour-based abuse.

Training

Since the 2015 HMIC *Depths of dishonour* inspection, officers have told us that training on the features of honour-based abuse has improved. All the fieldwork forces have specific training programmes for both honour-based abuse and sexual offences. Forces' guidance refers to the 'one chance' rule, helping officers and staff understand that they may only have one chance to save the life of someone at risk of honour-based abuse. The College of Policing guidance refers to this rule.

Most police forces have used external providers such as charities to support the training they give officers and staff.

Risk flagging

During our investigation we assessed whether forces had systems in place to flag incidents and crimes related to honour-based abuse. Flagging has several purposes, such as:

- ensuring easy access to relevant incidents for those in forces who need it;
- allowing for relevant checks and oversight; and
- improving understanding of crime patterns.

For this investigation, we used flagging as an indicator of how well forces can identify honour-based abuse.

As of 31 March 2022, 34 forces reported to HMICFRS that they have an honour-based abuse flag on their command and control system. This is where forces record all reported incidents.² Of the nine remaining forces that don't have a flag in their command and control system, three forces stated that they can't identify honour-based abuse incidents via another method. This means that some forces currently can't identify incidents related to honour-based abuse.

In relation to the reporting of crime, as of 31 March 2022, all 43 forces reported to HMICFRS that they have an honour-based abuse flag on their crime recording system. This means all forces can identify crimes related to honour-based abuse.

A senior officer in one fieldwork force spoke of "cultural confidence" in policing. They told us that although there have been improvements in understanding, the force still has a long way to go to ensure that frontline staff are comfortable talking about risks of honour-based abuse. They told us some officers may feel concerned about upsetting victims and would want to avoid being accused of discrimination by asking probing questions about culture.

² If a person makes a report to the police, it is recorded on the command and control system as an incident or an occurrence. If the police identify that a crime has taken place in that incident, they record a crime, usually straight away.

Senior representatives from a force and from a [police and crime commissioner's](#) office in Wales said that often it is officers with less experience who initially respond to and deal with reports of sexual offences. They felt that forces need to do more to ensure they equip these officers with the tools to deal with sexual abuse investigations and identify and respond appropriately to the risk of honour-based abuse.

All the fieldwork forces acknowledged that there wouldn't be an automatic link between a report of sexual abuse and a potential honour-based abuse risk, no matter the ethnic background of the victim.

We found some positive examples of forces identifying the potential risk of honour-based abuse when other crimes are reported.

A victim we learned about as part of our fieldwork

Maryam (not her real name), aged ten, contacted West Midlands Police to report that her religious teacher had touched her inappropriately. When Maryam was video interviewed, she detailed several sexual assaults and being hit with a stick.

Maryam told the police that her mother didn't want her to call the police, and that her mother said she didn't believe her.

During the interview, Maryam also disclosed that she had been assaulted by her mother and that she was scared to go home. She didn't want to have to talk to her mother about what she had said in the interview.

Officers were concerned about Maryam's safety. She'd had to call the police without her mother knowing. They were also concerned about the mother's denial of her daughter's account and her disapproval of reporting the matter to the police.

The interviewing officer was concerned about potential repercussions for Maryam from her family. They considered the shame that might be perceived as a result of Maryam speaking out, particularly as the report was sexual in nature and the suspect was a religious teacher. They knew how this may be seen by some people in some communities. Maryam was put into police protection measures to allow an assessment of the risk of harm to her.

Feature 3. Failure to keep victims informed following the report of sexual abuse

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- police are failing to take seriously their statutory obligation under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales \(VCOP\)](#) to keep [victims/survivors](#) informed during their investigations;
- victims/survivors report that they are constantly having to chase the police for updates; and
- this causes victims significant and additional distress and the impression that their cases aren't being taken seriously.

Keeping victims informed

Under the VCOP, victims have certain rights when a crime has been reported to the police, including:

- to be provided with information when reporting the crime;
- to be referred to victim support services and have services and support tailored to their needs;
- to be provided with information about compensation; and
- to be provided with information about the investigation and prosecution.

Our findings

In our fieldwork, we found some evidence supporting the concerns raised. But this was in terms of victim updates for sexual offences generally, not specifically for ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. This is because there is no data to enable us to form a view about the service these victims receive.

All officers we spoke to have a good understanding of their role in keeping victims updated. But evidence from victims and support workers in the super-complaint investigation, and evidence from previous HMICFRS inspections, shows that some victims feel police don't always keep them informed.

We found that police don't always provide updates, and this is primarily due to officers' shift patterns and workloads. Not keeping victims updated may affect their willingness to stay engaged in the investigation and prosecution process. And it may mean they continue to be at risk.

A victim's perspective

A victim support worker we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

A victim support worker explained to us why it is important for the police to keep victims informed.

"Communication is important because if they [police] don't communicate with the victim to tell them what is going to happen, the 'what next' question will always be there: Am I going to be safe? What will happen to the perpetrator?"

"There are instances where women have had to go back [home] because of threats to themselves, family and children. And when they don't get that communication, they may become anxious and withdraw from the process."

We held a focus group with four support workers. All of them were critical of the police for not keeping victims updated on the progress of their cases. They gave examples where they had to "chase" police officers for updates.

One support worker said: "Our experience is: we struggle for updates, trying to communicate with the officer. But often they have gone off duty. 'It's with someone else...' 'Leave a message...' 'It's now with a different unit...' There is always frustration for us, and this causes distress for clients."

The support workers said this is their experience for all victims, irrespective of ethnicity. But they did say that for many people from ethnic minority backgrounds they had worked with, this problem could be aggravated due to their different circumstances, particularly if language is a barrier.

The March 2022 report [Language barriers in the criminal justice system](#) states that language barriers can limit a victim's access to general help and information. It also says some victims have been denied interpretation and translation services for their testimonies when they needed them to report crime and to understand and navigate the [criminal justice system](#).

The support workers said that victim advocates have to take a more proactive role with some victims from ethnic minority backgrounds. They described the difficulty of getting updates due to officers' shift patterns and location. One support worker said: "How would a victim or survivor be able to do this themselves, especially with the additional culture and language barriers?"

Evidence on keeping victims updated in sexual abuse cases in which the victim may be at risk of honour-based abuse

There is no data that allows a comparison of these victims' experiences with those of other victims. This is because the Home Office and forces aren't routinely collecting this data.

Evidence on keeping victims updated in all sexual abuse cases

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show that not all victims receive updates when they should. They also show that when advocate services support victims, those victims are better supported throughout the criminal justice system and are more likely to stay engaged. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Source	Finding
<u>Police response to violence against women and girls</u> (HMICFRS, 2021)	Advocate services play an important role in keeping victims updated, providing a link between victims and the police.
<u>Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic</u> (HMICFRS, 2021)	Forces should ensure they have sufficient resources to maintain contact with victims, keeping them up to date with the progress of their cases.
Operation Soteria Bluestone	Early findings suggest victims can feel left out in the cold. Pilot forces have adopted an approach based on the principles of procedural justice, involving 'engagement officers'. Part of their role is to be a single point of contact with the victim, but they also engage more widely with law enforcement and other agencies, and develop longer-term options for disrupting offending.

Fieldwork findings

The fieldwork forces have various methods of keeping victims updated. They have policies and procedures in place that detail officers' responsibilities under the VCOP.

In our conversations with officers and staff, it was clear they knew their roles in keeping victims updated. But they told us that because of shift patterns and workloads, there are occasions when victims don't always receive updates when they should.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

In our fieldwork, we assessed how forces make sure they are complying with the VCOP. We found forces have various ways of ensuring compliance. All the fieldwork forces use their internal management systems to manage and supervise compliance. Inspectors in these forces carry out regular dip samples and give feedback to officers, and the forces break down performance in this area to individual officer level.

Feature 4. Failure to provide information during the prosecution process

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- there is a lack of information being provided to [victims/survivors](#) during the prosecution process;
- victims/survivors are left feeling isolated, anxious, uninformed and unsupported;
- there is a general lack of information regarding trial progress, including why and when a trial is adjourned and when the next hearing date will be; and
- those from ethnic minority backgrounds can face language barriers. And where interpreters are provided, no regard is given to exploring if the victim knows the interpreter or not.

Assessing a victim's needs

Every investigation should have a victim needs assessment and contact plan.

The [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) says victims who may not understand English must be offered an interpreter free of charge. A College of Policing [briefing note](#) says that forces must use language professionals, and it gives advice on vetting them. It says: "An interpreter is not part of the investigation team, nor are they an interviewer, witness statement taker, investigator, legal adviser, advocate, representative, appropriate adult, confidante, social worker, coordinator, chaperone or friend."

Our findings

Through our fieldwork, we found some evidence supporting the concerns raised about keeping all victims updated. All sexual abuse victims have complex needs. Research shows that for victims who don't have English as their first language, and for those who need to keep interactions with the police secret, receiving updates about cases can be particularly difficult. And this difficulty continues throughout their experience of the [criminal justice system](#).

Often, victims are [vulnerable](#). This means multiple partner agencies, including health and local authorities, should carefully co-ordinate to help give them the tailored support they need.

The way services are commissioned for victims varies across different areas in England and Wales. In our fieldwork, we spoke to support workers who said this variation affects

interpretation services as well as other bespoke services to support victims who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

We found that officers and staff have a good awareness of the need to engage with independent and regulated interpreter services when victims don't have English as their first language. But support workers told us that some victims feel they don't get the interpreters they need to be able to properly engage with police.

A victim's perspective

A victim we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

One victim said she struggled to communicate with the police because of a language barrier. She got the impression that the police didn't think it was a priority to get her an interpreter. An interpreter was available to take statements and go to court but not for general communication. She believed officers gave her a lesser service because of the language barrier. And she wasn't referred to any support organisations that could have properly supported her with help to understand the language and processes. When she was eventually referred to a support service, it helped by allocating a support worker. The victim felt the police were trying to avoid telling her what she was entitled to, for example, a referral to support organisations.

The experiences reported by the support workers and the victim show that some victims feel they aren't being given the interpreters they need so they can be properly supported to engage with the police.

The need for bespoke support services

We interviewed a support worker who represents clients from a range of backgrounds and cultures. They told us each victim has their own specific needs and circumstances and that the police, criminal justice system and support services need to consider them. [Imkaan](#), a UK-wide charitable organisation dedicated to addressing violence against women and girls from ethnic minority backgrounds, says:

“The onus is too often placed on survivors from minoritised ethnic groups to navigate a system that has not been designed to take account of their needs, rather than addressing structural barriers that prevent their access to support.”

In September 2022, the [domestic abuse](#) commissioner told the Home Affairs Select Committee of her work to understand support service provision for domestic abuse victims. Her early findings indicate that specialist support services for ethnic minority victims are less likely to receive statutory funding. She has also found that regional imbalances may make it harder for ethnic minority victims in some areas to access the support they need. She found that almost half of the specialist services for ethnic minority victims of domestic abuse are in London or the South East. This relates to the findings in the super-complaint

that some victims may need bespoke support services and why it is important that commissioning takes account of all victims' needs.

Other evidence on keeping victims informed in sexual abuse cases in which the victim may be at risk of honour-based abuse

There is no data that allows a comparison of the experiences of these victims to those of other victims. This is because the Home Office and forces aren't routinely collecting this data consistently.

Existing evidence on keeping victims informed in all sexual abuse cases

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show that some victims have specific needs and not all generic services can offer that support. Some victims who don't have English as their first language face additional difficulties when navigating the support available to them. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Source	Finding
<u><i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i></u> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021)	Victims have their own specific (and sometimes complex) needs. Police officers, understandably, aren't always best placed to give the support victims need, and this leads to inconsistency. The Ministry of Justice should complete a full mapping exercise of demand for and provision of specialist sexual violence victim services across England and Wales. It should also make sure there is adequate and effective provision of specialist and bespoke support to all victims of rape, with long-term funding in place.
<u><i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i></u> (HMICFRS, 2021)	This inspection found examples of the police getting victim support right. Unfortunately, there were also examples of inconsistent support, and officers lacked awareness of the need to tailor support to a victim's specific needs.

Source	Finding
<i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i> (Ministry of Justice, 2021)	The reasons for the decline in the number of rape cases reaching court are complex and wide-ranging, including a lack of specialist resources and inconsistent support for victims. The findings state that victims should get the support they need and that police should communicate with victims while gathering digital evidence.
Operation Soteria Bluestone	Delays in investigative processes can mean that victims disengage from the investigation.

Fieldwork findings

Most police officers and staff in the fieldwork forces know about local and national support agencies to which they can refer victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

In some of these forces, officers told us they refer victims to [independent sexual violence advisers](#) for support during the investigation into a sexual offence.

And in some forces, witness care units are responsible for keeping victims informed and updated. Witness care units offer victims and witnesses support and updates throughout the criminal justice process, acting as a single point of contact for all victims and witnesses involved in a case.

The fieldwork forces all have access to appropriate language professionals, who are available to support victims through the investigation process and can provide independent interpreting services.

For all victims of sexual abuse, wanting to maintain privacy and anonymity can be a reason for not reporting and for being afraid to engage with services. However, one force told us about a case in which a victim refused to access support from their local support service because they were afraid information from their case would get back to the community and put them at risk.

Feature 5: Failure to discuss special measures and other protective measures with victims/survivors

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- the police and Crown Prosecution Service are repeatedly failing to discuss protective [special measures](#) with [victims/survivors](#);
- victims aren't made aware of their [safeguarding](#) entitlements, or they are communicated with poorly or too late to be of use.

We only review the actions of the police in this chapter as we are only able to investigate the police in super-complaint investigations.

What are special measures?

Special measures are a series of provisions that help [vulnerable](#) and intimidated witnesses give their best evidence in court and help to relieve some of the stress associated with giving evidence. They are subject to the discretion of the court.

Special measures include:

- giving evidence in court from behind a screen;
- giving evidence from outside the courtroom via live video link;
- video-recording a witness statement to be played in court;
- judges and lawyers removing wigs and gowns;
- using a registered intermediary to help witnesses understand the questions being asked and to give answers accurately, either during a police interview or in court; and
- giving evidence in private by having the public gallery cleared.

The [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) states that a victim is eligible for enhanced rights as an intimidated victim if the service provider considers that the quality of a victim's evidence will be affected because of fear about testifying in court. It states that victims of sexual offences will be considered to be intimidated.

Therefore, special measures should be discussed and considered for all sexual abuse victims.

Our findings

There was a good understanding of the appropriate special measures in place at each stage of an investigation. The officers we spoke to could identify at what points they would discuss special measures with victims.

We did, however, find limited evidence to support what victims and their support workers told us. That is, some ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse might not be receiving the information they need on special measures at the right time.

Evidence on the provision of special measures to ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse

As data about the use of special measures isn't routinely collected and reviewed, it is difficult to assess the full extent of this issue, and it isn't possible to compare the experiences of these victims to those of other victims. This is because the Home Office and forces are generally not collecting this data consistently.

Evidence on the provision of special measures to all victims of sexual abuse

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show that the offer of special measures is inconsistent or in some cases not carried out. They also show the use of special measures sometimes lacks monitoring and oversight. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service are carrying out ongoing work to improve communication with victims of rape. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Not all victims find that special and other supportive measures are considered and applied where appropriate, but some are receiving the right support.

A victim's positive experience we learned about as part of our fieldwork

A victim explained that during the court process, she received good support from the police. Through an interpreter, she was offered special measures. We also spoke to her through an interpreter, who said: "During the [court] process itself, that was fine. Even at court, when she went, they did offer to put the screens up. She was made aware of that."

Source	Finding
<p><u><i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i></u> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021)</p>	<p>The use of all special measures is inconsistent. The victim doesn't always receive an explanation of special measures, meetings to discuss which measures are available don't always happen, and <u>section 28 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999</u> isn't always considered for vulnerable rape victims. There was little evidence of how effective the use of special measures is. There is limited national or local data being collected.</p> <p>The inspection found that in nearly all cases, the police had made the victim aware of special measures, and this was usually done in a timely way. But the quality and thoroughness with which special measures are offered and explained to victims aren't recorded.</p>
<p><u><i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i></u> (HMICFRS, 2021)</p>	<p>The report suggests special measures should be used right at the start of an investigation.</p>
<p><u><i>Next steps for special measures: A review of the provision of special measures to vulnerable and intimidated witnesses</i></u> (Victims Commissioner, 2021)</p>	<p>Officers sometimes overlook or are inconsistent with their assessment of the need for special measures.</p>
<p><u><i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i></u> (Ministry of Justice, 2021)</p>	<p>Ongoing work from the police and Crown Prosecution Service is focusing on improving communication with victims, working with <u>independent sexual violence advisers</u> and considering making better use of special measures.</p>

Fieldwork findings

As referred to in the Victims Commissioner's report, *Next steps for special measures: A review of the provision of special measures to vulnerable and intimidated witnesses* (2021), we know that forces apply special measures inconsistently for all victims.

When we conducted fieldwork in forces, we found that most officers we spoke to have a good understanding of the special measures available to all sexual abuse victims. Most officers also understood the need to constantly assess the use of special measures for victims of sexual abuse.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

However, one officer told us that if a case is coming up to a court trial, some victims won't have received an explanation of special measures, and they won't know the options available to them. The officer also told us offers of special measures can be "hit or miss", that they can be given too late to have any effect and that they sometimes only take place when a directive comes from the Crown Prosecution Service. This is more reflective of our crime file review and of the experiences reported by victims in the surveys carried out as part of [Police response to violence against women and girls](#) (HMICFRS, 2021) and *The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions* (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

The College of Policing [specialist sexual assault investigation development programme](#), and courses related to the Ministry of Justice [achieving best evidence](#) guidance, contain material on the use of special measures.

Feature 6: Lack of empathy from the police

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- there is a lack of empathy, understanding and sensitivity from the police.

Our findings

Some ethnic minority [victims](#) of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse feel that the police don't treat them with empathy and respect. In our fieldwork, we found that all officers we spoke to recognise the importance of empathy. But we found that empathy may not always be shown as clearly as it should be.

Some forces are specifically reviewing and auditing their processes for evidence of empathy. Although some officers are getting it right under difficult circumstances, some told us there is a risk of "compassion fatigue" (the physical, emotional and psychological effects of overexposure to stress or trauma). They said this is due to officer workloads.

Victims' perspectives

The support workers we spoke with told us they thought some officers lack empathy towards victims. They thought this could be linked to cultural awareness because often their actions showed a lack of understanding of cultural issues.

Although support workers recognised that some police staff are empathetic, they felt it is inconsistent. One said: "You can sometimes become desensitised to it. But sometimes police forget to see the victim in front of them who is [vulnerable](#) – the courage it takes to come forward, the disclosure... And then for you to talk about her genitalia – the empathy is forgotten." If victims aren't shown empathy, they may disengage from the process.

Evidence on the empathy police show to all victims of sexual abuse

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show that some victims say that the police investigation makes them feel like they are being investigated and that officers lack empathy and understanding of their particular needs. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Source	Finding
<u><i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service’s response to rape</i></u> (HMICFRS and HMCPPI, 2021)	Too often, rape victims feel that they are the ones being investigated and they don’t feel believed. This inspection sought to assess any differences in victim experience based on ethnicity but was unable to do so because of poor-quality data.
<u><i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i></u> (HMICFRS, 2021)	Victims described having a poor experience due to staff members’ and/or officers’ lack of empathy and understanding.
<u><i>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</i></u> (Ministry of Justice, 2021)	This report states that victims and the public need these crimes to be investigated and prosecuted professionally, diligently and with empathy. Victims need to get the support they deserve.
Operation Soteria Bluestone	This operation recognises the pressures on officers dealing with rape and serious sexual offences. It also recognises the high turnover of officers and staff and the need to be sensitive to the wellbeing of the workforce.

Fieldwork findings

When we spoke to officers in focus groups, they told us that they felt levels of empathy varied, depending on individual officers’ skills. They accepted that some officers aren’t empathetic. Officers we spoke to said there is no difference in the empathy the police give to victims from different ethnic backgrounds.

One officer told us: “Some of us are more empathetic than others. We need to get the right people in the right roles and look after officers, staff... all have different skills.”

Another officer told us that compassion fatigue is an issue for some officers. Police officers attend many incidents and some of those are distressing. The officer said: “For this victim in front of them, it was the biggest day of their lives. But for officers it’s another workday. And perhaps they don’t show the empathy that is expected or needed.”

All the fieldwork forces have processes in place for overseeing and monitoring staff empathy. This is through physical staff observation or listening to calls. They manage any lapse of empathy through staff development.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

All the forces have access to the [Domestic Abuse Matters training programme](#), developed by the College of Policing and charities that work with domestic abuse victims and survivors. The training explains subjects such as:

- coercive and controlling behaviours;
- barriers people face when attempting to leave an abuser;
- legislation; and
- how to gather evidence.

It also aims to help responders better recognise and tackle compassion fatigue. First responders receive this training, and there is extra training for designated force 'Domestic Abuse Matters Champions'. Senior managers take part in 'sustaining the change' workshops so they can consider how to make sure the changes brought about by training are long-lasting.

This training is delivered in forces as a licensed product by , Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid. At the time of our investigation, it had been carried out in 30 forces. Exact attendance figures weren't available, but all participating forces are expected to make sure that three quarters of their frontline responders attend. In some forces, 90 percent of frontline responders have already attended.

A 2017 SafeLives evaluation, [Domestic Abuse Matters: Police responders and Champions training](#), reports that police responders said that having done the training, "they would be more open-minded, empathetic and considerate towards victims, and that they would give more time to investigations and to the gathering of a broader range of more in-depth evidence and information".

Feature 7: Ineffective and inadequate use of police resources

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- sexual abuse investigations are blighted by understaffing, little personnel continuity and a marked lack of resource commitment.

Our findings

There is some evidence to support this allegation but it generally applies to all sexual abuse investigations for all [victims](#), regardless of ethnicity. It isn't specific to investigations involving ethnic minority victims who may be at risk of honour-based abuse.

We couldn't gather substantial evidence from the victims' perspectives, but the evidence we found from fieldwork and other sources indicates there are issues with the way police use resources for sexual abuse investigations. Forces manage these cases (both the initial response and the subsequent investigation) in different ways. But in the fieldwork forces, the following features are common:

- Inexperienced and untrained response officers often provide the initial response to these incidents.
- The number of appropriately trained specialist officers in forces isn't keeping pace with the increase in the number of rape and serious sexual offences reported.

A victim's perspective

A victim we spoke to as part of our fieldwork, who also contributed to the super-complaint

The victim told us the officer initially working on his case was transferred to another station, leaving one detective constable working on his case. Because of childcare commitments, that detective often had to cut short appointments to review statements and evidence. This left the victim thinking he wasn't important and that the investigation was under-resourced.

The victim claimed police didn't follow up several lines of enquiry. These became important when the case went to court.

Evidence on the use of police resources for all victims of sexual abuse

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show there has been an increase in reported sexual offences, and this has led to an increase in investigative workloads. Where officers are specialist trained, there are better investigations. Not all officers have the necessary skills and training to investigate sexual offences. Working in this area of policing is highly pressured, so forces may find it difficult to recruit the right officers for the roles. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Source	Finding
<p><u><i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape</i></u> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021)</p>	<p>Training about rape and sexual abuse is inconsistent in England and Wales. Some forces couldn't say who had been trained, whether any training updates were available, or whether the training had been effective.</p>
<p><u><i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i></u> (HMICFRS, 2021)</p>	<p>Specialist investigators carry out better investigations than non-specialists. This shows the importance of having specially-trained officers.</p> <p>Forces are still too often allocating high-risk cases, such as those involving serious sexual offences and high-risk <u>domestic abuse</u>, to response officers without the right training and experience to deal with them.</p>
<p>Operation Soteria Bluestone</p>	<p>Early findings show the benefits of specialist-informed rape and serious sexual offences investigators. This includes training on how to understand sexual offending.</p> <p>Findings also show there are too many changes in ownership of investigations, which can mean a loss of rapport with the victim. This is the reason for the recommendation of a specific point of contact for victims (also a recommendation in <i>Police response to violence against women and girls</i> (HMICFRS, 2021)).</p> <p>Effective learning, continuous development, reflective practice and supervision are fundamental to ensuring investigation strategies are informed through specialist knowledge and practice.</p>

Source	Finding
<p><u>The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions</u> (Ministry of Justice, 2021)</p>	<p>There is a lack of specialist resources, which is one of the reasons for the decline in rape cases reaching court.</p>

Fieldwork findings

All the fieldwork forces have a system for allocating investigations based on the threat, harm and risk of the incident, and the crime type. These forces, however, have different protocols for deploying officers to incidents, depending on how they are structured. Some forces deploy response officers to provide the initial response, in line with their crime allocation policy, and some forces deploy a specialist resource if one is available.

All the fieldwork forces said that any officer despatched to an incident, who then needs to seek advice, can contact a specialist team or supervisor for support.

All the fieldwork forces expressed concerns about the significant increase in rape and serious sexual offences reported to the police. Focus group attendees from all the forces told us some officers experience significant stress from the volume and type of work. Senior leaders in forces recognise this. Supervisors give support through welfare interventions.

All the fieldwork forces have specially-trained officers who support response officers in the early investigation of these offences. Specially-trained officers are also mainly response officers, with their own workloads, who have had additional sexual abuse training. Their role is to gather evidence, interview the victim and liaise with the investigator who takes on the case.

Most forces have a specialist team dealing with rape and serious sexual offences. Forces told us it is difficult to attract officers to these teams and there is a high turnover of officers. All expressed concerns about the inexperienced workforce. Not all officers in specialist teams have completed the [specialist sexual assault investigation](#) development programme. This is despite some officers having an investigation workload of 20 to 25 rape or sexual offence crimes.

Feature 8: Disproportionate focus on community impact

TVIP is concerned that:

- Victims have reported that the ethnicity of the perpetrators in their cases significantly and adversely affected how the police investigated their cases.
- The police seemed more concerned about the impact of their actions on the community than safeguarding and supporting the victims.
- A lack of cultural awareness seems to lead to delays to police action.

Our findings

There were conflicting views from victims, support workers and police. The fieldwork forces clearly said investigations don't focus disproportionately on community impact. But some victims felt the police place community impact over the investigation.

The support workers we spoke to believe a lack of cultural awareness is the main reason why victims from some ethnic minority backgrounds don't receive an appropriate level of service or support from the police. Although forces have processes for understanding and engaging with their communities, we heard concerns about some of these processes. We were unable to definitively establish the extent to which concern about community impact influences force decision-making.

We heard concerns from some officers and [independent advisory group \(IAG\)](#) members about some methods forces use to engage with their communities. This indicates forces need to review these methods more regularly. This is so they continue to be confident that any methods they use to identify community views are representative and promote diversity.

Both police and crime commissioners and community safety partnerships include a consultation process as part of their work to identify their priorities. Early analysis from the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and College of Policing work on tackling violence against women and girls suggests that it is unclear if the groups involved in consultations represent the diversity of the people in the community.

Together, these findings support the view that forces need to do more to equip their frontline officers with the knowledge and confidence to appropriately work with all local communities, particularly those that include people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Forces also need to make sure victims from ethnic minority backgrounds receive an

appropriate level of service and support, and that police can take appropriate action without being distracted or delayed by concerns about adverse community impact.

Victims' perspectives

A victim we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

The victim explained that after reporting the crime, "elders in the local Asian community" consistently contacted him, putting him under pressure to retract the complaint. They spoke about "forgiveness" and he was offered payment to retract his allegations. Some showed a very detailed knowledge of the case, allegedly through seeing statements. He said one person was also a member of the police independent advisory group. The victim said he reported all of this to the investigating officer, who didn't take any action. The victim believes no action was taken because the police feared it would have a negative community impact.

As part of our fieldwork, we conducted a focus group with support workers. They were consistent in their view that police don't treat victims from ethnic minority backgrounds appropriately. It is their perception that this is due to their ethnicity. They spoke about the lack of officers' cultural awareness, in that the investigation's progress is secondary to maintaining community relations. As a result, the police don't adequately support or protect victims.

One of the support workers we interviewed called the level of police diversity training a "postcode lottery". Another support worker explained that computer-based training, which several forces use, is – in their view – not sufficient to help police properly respond to and support victims. All said a lack of awareness and knowledge are due to poor training. And they said this directly affects the service some victims from ethnic minority backgrounds receive from the police.

Fieldwork findings

As part of our fieldwork, we explored considerations of community impact by asking officers if this affected their decision whether or not to arrest a suspect. Officers in focus groups told us a suspect's ethnicity would not affect their decision whether and when to arrest a suspect. We did, however, find differences in how forces explore and manage potential adverse reactions from the community.

One force told us it wouldn't alter its response when dealing with an arrest of a suspect from an ethnic minority background. Other forces told us they would do so. For example, these forces said they might:

- speak to the victim and their family, and seek their views about their safety after an arrest; and/or

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint

- speak to the IAG, community representatives or others to find out about any potential community tensions.

The forces told us they see these enquiries as safeguarding and protective measures. They said they wouldn't prevent an arrest but would help them put appropriate safeguarding measures in place for the victim.

Another force told us it deals with investigations on a case-by-case basis. It said it would normally advise officers to investigate without thinking about community impact as the force could address this after the arrest.

In some fieldwork forces, senior officers hold a [gold group](#) meeting if, for example, a suspect is a prominent member of the community. These meetings support the police response, helping to resolve or prevent the escalation of any confidence issues the victim, their family and/or the community may have. Those forces told us that holding a gold group meeting wouldn't necessarily delay the investigation as the process can run concurrently.

One academic we spoke to has carried out research on gender-based violence. She said she has seen a nervousness in the way some officers manage certain incidents involving offenders from ethnic minority backgrounds. She said police considerations about "community tensions" overwhelm those about protecting the victim. She described the nervousness of police as "race anxiety". In the academic's view, this creates a "stop-start" approach to the investigation, which can lead to delays. She said that ultimately, it leads to a lack of confidence in policing for victims.

The super-complaint refers to the former Victims' Commissioner, Louise Casey, who talks about "the race issue" in the [Report of Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council](#). This report was commissioned by the Government following the sexual exploitation of children in Rotherham by men who were mostly of Pakistani heritage. The report found that Rotherham Borough Council was failing in its duty to protect young, [vulnerable](#) people from harm. It says: "The issue of race is contentious, with staff and Members [of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council] lacking the confidence to tackle difficult issues for fear of being seen as racist or upsetting community cohesion."

About the reluctance to investigate suspects, the report says: "Rotherham's suppression of these uncomfortable issues and its fear of being branded racist has done a disservice to the Pakistani heritage community as well as the wider community. It has prevented discussion and effective action to tackle the problem."

Similarly, in the [independent report into grooming gangs in Telford, Shropshire](#), the inquiry chair, Tom Crowther QC, said: "I have heard a great deal of evidence that there was a nervousness about race in Telford and Wellington in particular, bordering on a reluctance to investigate crimes committed by what was described as the 'Asian' community."

He also said: "I am quite satisfied on the evidence that in the 1990s and early 2000s – and even beyond – West Mercia Police (WMP) allowed a nervousness about race to become prevalent among officers, and that this led to a reluctance to police parts of Wellington."

He went on to say: "I have no doubt that concern about racism, and being seen to be racist, permeated the mind of WMP, and indeed of the Council and the minds of some of its employees, given the apparent tensions at the time. That is not a bad thing: there should be a culture of equality of treatment and fairness in delivery in government. But I am satisfied that this nervousness led to a reluctance to act."

The [NPCC diversity, equality and inclusion strategy 2018–2025](#) identifies the need for police to understand communities, emphasising that there isn't a "one size fits all" approach to doing this.

And in [Police response to violence against women and girls](#) (HMICFRS, 2021), HMICFRS highlights the importance of the police understanding the communities they serve. It says they should do this by consulting women and girls directly or through groups and individuals who represent their interests. The report encourages the police to identify ways to understand where and why women and girls feel unsafe. At the time of that inspection, only one force had a specific IAG for women.

As part of the [Police Race Action Plan](#), the NPCC and the College of Policing will work with the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and Black communities to test existing formal arrangements (such as IAGs and scrutiny panels) that seek to enable Black communities to have a voice and influence policing governance. Although this is focused on Black communities, developments that increase inclusivity and representation should benefit people of all ethnicities.

Understanding and working with communities

[Section 34 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011](#) requires chief constables to make arrangements for people to receive information about, and comment on, policing in their area. Most forces meet this requirement by conducting beat meetings, during which residents can engage with local policing teams. They also operate IAGs, which allow local people, often those from under-represented groups, to advise on how their policing is affecting them.

[The College of Policing authorised professional practice](#) contains [guidance on the use, value and recruitment of IAGs](#). The guidance doesn't advise forces on how they should use IAGs in investigations. Although all forces are responsible for seeking the views of the communities they serve, they don't have to do this through IAGs. Some forces use different approaches, such as consulting with other groups or advisers from the community. The fieldwork forces that have IAGs told us they sometimes struggle to get diverse membership.

As part of our fieldwork, we spoke to IAG members. They told us that even when the membership of the group is diverse, members sometimes feel inhibited from engaging in the process. In one of our focus groups, a female member said that had there been men from her community in the focus group, she wouldn't have spoken up. This shows the deep-seated cultural issues faced by women in some communities. Another IAG member said he thought some members use IAGs to promote their own self-interest.

All forces we spoke to assured us that IAG members had been vetted and some had signed agreements about confidentiality. One IAG member told us that although checks are carried out on prospective members, some people don't disclose conflicts of interest. He thought there should be more checks to make sure the right people are on IAGs for the right reasons.

Officers told us they wouldn't disclose personal details about a case to IAG members. But they said they may discuss the scenario of the case. For example, they may ask for generic cultural and religious advice. This would be in line with force information management protocols. All the fieldwork forces have a senior lawyer to advise on data-sharing principles.

An IAG member told us they had seen examples like those reported in the super-complaint many times. They said: "From being young, we are told to keep quiet and there is big shame if a police car turns up at your house. There is shame on the community. The man is considered the boss of the family. If a victim says something has happened in the house, the man of the house is perceived as not man enough to deal with it, so he stops things from being reported. Victims are coerced into not reporting. 'Shhh, don't say anything'."

Although IAGs represent a significant opportunity for police to understand communities better and gain insight into the needs of under-represented groups, we heard concerns that IAGs may not always have the right members in them and may not always focus on the right issues. Forces must keep the membership of IAGs under review and make sure they involve a representative group that can contribute freely.

An IAG member we spoke to as part of our fieldwork

Our interviews with IAG members and support workers revealed concerns about cultural issues masking criminal behaviour. An IAG member who took part in one of our focus groups told us:

"There is a culturally embedded mindset. For example, as soon as a murder happens, there is community sympathy with the victim. And as soon as the suspect is arrested, the emphasis is on: what can we do to forgive the offender? If there is sexual abuse on children from a member of the mosque, then it should be down to the suspect to defend the behaviour and not up to the mosque to defend the behaviour, which is what happens – calling on mosque attendees to forgive the suspect.

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

"The police need to be trained more wisely and deeply. And a change programme needs to be done to understand what culture is. It's the same in Pakistan – people in power will try and defend the suspect.

"Police are often blamed for being racist. [But] where there is any crime in the ethnic minority community, we defend the perpetrator, and that is what scares police when they go to the community. Officers need to be confident. Police need to act as they would across all ethnicities."

In the evidence that Pragna Patel, former director of Southall Black Sisters, gave the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#), she described Southall Black Sisters as having had to "confront religious institutions for shielding perpetrators of violence and/or failing to condemn violence against women and children, thereby legitimising the abuse".

West Midlands Police told us they have done some work with local Imams to break down cultural issues. They said this has been received positively. They said the message focused on where culture stops and criminality starts. An officer told us: "The Imams have been forthright in that and have given lectures and sermons on British law and what is right."

We are reassured by the work currently taking place under the Police Race Action Plan, which aims to "give officers the tools they need to build trust and confidence with Black communities" so that they are better equipped to "identify and address any ingrained cultural biases that may be fuelling racial disparities across policing".

It builds on the [commitment from all chief constables in June 2020](#) to "act on issues of diversity and inclusion and concerns about racial inequalities, including the experiences of Black people, in policing and the [criminal justice system](#)". And it reaffirms the commitment "to tackle the wrongs of racism, bias and discrimination wherever they are found in policing". We believe the tools and activity will support relationships between the police and all local communities, particularly those that include people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Feature 9: Failure to understand the retraumatising effect of the prosecution process

Tees Valley Inclusion Project is concerned that:

- [victims](#) from ethnic minority backgrounds face additional challenges and pressures that the police fail to understand, allow for or seek to alleviate; and
- this significantly adds to the retraumatising effect of the prosecution process.

In this investigation, we only considered the role of the police in the prosecution process.

Our findings

There is a dichotomy in policing between:

- recognising that some ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse may need to be supported differently; and
- the view that everyone should be treated equally to avoid discrimination.

We know that the investigation and prosecution process is retraumatising for all victims of sexual abuse. Steps need to be taken to reduce the effect of this. For ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse, this includes taking steps to prevent additional trauma that could be caused by that potential risk.

There are positive moves within policing to shift the emphasis of investigations from victim to offender, thereby reducing the retraumatising effect of investigations for all victims.

Support services are often generic and not tailored to the needs of an individual. But there is a lack of cultural competence in policing. Improving this would help victims get the individualised support they need.

Victims’ perspectives

We know from the detailed work carried out in [A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service’s response to rape](#) (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021) and [The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions](#) (Ministry of Justice, 2021) that some victims of sexual offences have been treated poorly. Victims who have reported rapes are frequently told their cases won’t be taken any further, often without any detail or explanation of the reasons why. Many are left feeling unable to deal with the stress and psychological toll of this. Many victims feel their recovery is at odds with continuing to pursue their case through the [criminal justice system](#).

As previously shown in this report, some ethnic minority victims may also have the additional risk of honour-based abuse. We have also considered in [Feature 4](#) the additional language barriers faced by some ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. These are significant additional challenges.

Evidence on understanding the retraumatising process for all victims of sexual abuse

This investigation involved examining the evidence in the super-complaint submission, and carrying out fieldwork, after gathering and analysing evidence from previous inspection activity.

These previous inspections show that victims may feel they have to make a choice between receiving support, healing and getting justice. Those officers who are better trained and supported by their supervisors provide victims with better support and understanding. This reduces the additional trauma that sexual offence investigations can bring. These findings are listed below:

Previous findings

Source	Finding
<i>A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service’s response to rape</i> (HMICFRS and HMCPSI, 2021)	It isn’t acceptable for victims to feel they must make a choice between getting justice or being able to heal from their experience. The report advocates better support for victims.
Police response to violence against women and girls (HMICFRS, 2021)	The most effective services are those that offer end-to-end support, consider the entirety of the victim’s situation and are informed by their trauma. Police forces can give some support, but this is often generic and isn’t the specific support each victim needs, based on their individual situation.

Source	Finding
Operation Soteria Bluestone	<p>There is a need to refocus on suspects in rape investigations, informed through a better understanding of sexual offending.</p> <p>Lack of specialist knowledge, large workloads, high demand and understaffing are having a direct effect on the quality and outcome of investigations as well as on victim engagement.</p> <p>There is a direct link between officer burnout, a lack of learning and development for officers, and officers' confidence to use the right strategies when carrying out investigations.</p> <p>Embedding officer learning and wellbeing helps officers use the right investigative strategies and engage better with victims.</p>

Fieldwork investigation

The College of Policing's [specialist sexual assault investigation development programme](#) includes applying measures to address vicarious trauma and using strategies to address trauma. It also covers the [emergency services trauma intervention programme](#). It doesn't specifically use the term 'trauma informed'.

Some fieldwork forces told us that to lessen the retraumatisation effect, they have created structures so that victims don't have to speak to different people in an investigation, reducing the need for further questioning.

We spoke to senior police and police and crime commissioners in Wales who have carried out trauma-based practice and are reviewing that practice to make it more culturally specific. In Wales, 6,000 to 7,000 officers have been trained, and Public Health Wales has planned more work to further develop the trauma impact study among people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Conclusions and recommendations

When [victims](#) report sexual offences to the police, they are already [vulnerable](#). To then not provide empathy, support or appropriate and timely information is unacceptable. Failing to do this adds to the trauma some victims already face when they are at risk of honour-based abuse.

We know there are situations in which pressure from family and communities stops victims reporting crime. It can also lead them to drop allegations or not further pursue a report. Tees Valley Inclusion Project describes this as the “labyrinth of familial connections and pressures”.

Although we found that forces do consider the effect on communities, policing needs to better understand the pressures some victims face. And it needs to do more to equip officers with a better understanding of local cultures and practices.

We accept that there are inadequate specialist and detective resources available to manage the increased demand for sexual offence investigations.

But if the police don't improve their understanding of potential risks and pressures, victims could go unprotected and unsupported. Forces must work with communities to make sure their officers and staff have the cultural awareness and resources they need to support victims. This will help forces give those victims a better service. All processes, policies and training must support this better understanding. And resources must be in place to help officers and staff consider, absorb and take full advantage of these awareness-raising products.

Although we did find that there have been positive developments in police training on honour-based abuse, the problem remains that not all officers and staff fully understand their local communities' cultures. This means they don't have the knowledge to identify when victims of sexual abuse may be at risk of honour-based abuse. This is unacceptable and may put victims at further risk.

Through this investigation, we have found evidence that not all victims get the individualised support they need. Generic support services may not recognise the potential risks of honour-based abuse. As a result, they may fail to give effective support. It is unacceptable that victims aren't receiving the support they need to navigate police investigations and the wider [criminal justice system](#).

This investigation found that police recording of ethnicity is inconsistent and unreliable. This meant we couldn't establish whether ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse receive an appropriate service.

Forces need to robustly address this failure to record ethnicity data, so they can assure the public that they treat everyone fairly. This will also help bring about focused commissioning of specialist victim services, which can support victims through the criminal justice process.

The [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)'s diversity, equality and inclusion coordination committee is working on changes to the recording systems to improve the quality of ethnicity data (and data on other protected characteristics). This is a positive step. There also needs to be guidance on the best ways to collect this data so officers and staff can avoid unintended consequences, such as undermining rapport-building with victims and raising anxieties about why they are collecting the data.

To address all these findings, we have made the recommendations below.

We are grateful to TVIP for raising this super-complaint. It is now the responsibility of all those involved in policing and the wider criminal justice system to recognise and respond to the extra vulnerabilities some victims of sexual abuse may face, and to assure them they will be treated appropriately in every interaction.

Recommendations

1. The risk of honour-based abuse

We found forces generally only include the risk of honour-based abuse in their [domestic abuse](#) policies, so we recommend that chief constables update their forces' sexual abuse policies to include the risk of honour-based abuse.

The College of Policing will update its existing sexual abuse [authorised professional practice](#) to include the risk of honour-based abuse.

Recommendations

2. Cultural awareness

During our investigation, we found forces generally lack awareness and understanding of different cultures and religions. This means some officers are unlikely to recognise the wider risks of honour-based abuse after some victims report sexual abuse.

Chief constables should make sure that:

- a. officers and staff are aware of the demographics of the communities they police so they can understand the nuances of different cultures and have time to learn about those communities;
- b. [independent advisory groups](#) or equivalent groups reflect these demographics;
- c. forces work with the local communities they police to prepare up-to-date information on culture and religion and ensure officers have access to it; and
- d. investigations consider any extra factors that might be relevant because of the culture and background of the victim or suspect.

The information in the third point must include:

- the potential risks of honour-based abuse that some victims of sexual abuse face; and
- any additional challenges and pressures relating to re-traumatisation that victims of sexual abuse from different ethnic minority backgrounds may experience.

Recommendations

3. Data

As part of the Government's [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#) (2021), forces are working on understanding crime data in relation to sexual abuse and honour-based abuse. Chief constables must prioritise this work. Tackling violence against women and girls is to become a strategic policing requirement in 2023. Forces should pay due regard to all elements of violence against women and girls, including honour-based abuse.

We are aware of the recently commissioned work taking place through the NPCC's diversity, equality and inclusion co-ordination committee. This involves a working group with the College of Policing developing data standards for recording all protected characteristics. HMICFRS will also cover race and policing in its inspection programme, with the first two reports due to be published in early 2023.

We recommend that the NPCC and the College of Policing consider the findings from this investigation so they can be satisfied that the proposed changes and standards they are working on address the lack of recorded ethnicity data, including:

- data on voluntary attendance;
- data on the use of interpreters; and
- data on offering and providing special measures.

We recommend this work includes how officers and staff collect data, and their confidence and capability to ask the right questions.

4. Victim support

Both police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and community safety partnerships include a consultation process as part of their work to identify their priorities. PCCs should make sure this consultation process is inclusive and representative of the whole community before commissioning services for victims.

PCCs should then work with local police, [safeguarding](#) partners and specialist support organisations to understand the needs of ethnic minority victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk of honour-based abuse. PCCs should consider these needs when commissioning local support services. The aim of this is to give victims the confidence to report incidents, to feel safe and empowered, and to stay involved in any investigation and prosecution.

Recommendations

5. To all those subject to recommendations

Advise HMICFRS, the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) within 56 days of the date of publication of this report whether they accept the recommendations made to them. Chief constables should direct their responses to the NPCC, and police and crime commissioners should direct their responses to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. The NPCC and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners will then share the collated responses with the College of Policing, IOPC and HMICFRS.

Annex A – People and organisations consulted

People and organisations we consulted and/or sought information from either directly or as part of the expert reference groups during the investigation:

- Claire Waxman, London Victims' Commissioner
- Eleri Thomas, Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner, Gwent
- Emma Wools, Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner, South Wales
- Janaya Walker, End Violence Against Women
- Nazir Afzal OBE, Former Chief Crown Prosecutor, North West England
- Professor Geetanjali Gangoli, Department of Sociology, Durham University
- Professor Aisha K Gill, PhD CBE, Professor of Criminology, University of Bristol
- Attorney General's Office
- Bawso
- Citizens Advice
- Crown Prosecution Service
- Fieldwork forces: Cleveland Police, Devon & Cornwall Police, Gwent Police, Merseyside Police, Suffolk Constabulary and West Midlands Police
- [Halo Project](#)
- His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service
- His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate
- Home Office
- Imkaan
- LimeCulture
- Male Survivors Partnership
- Ministry of Justice
- National Police Chiefs' Council
- Operation Soteria Bluestone
- Rape Crisis England and Wales
- Refuge

UNDER EMBARGO

How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees Valley Inclusion Project's super complaint

- Respect
- SafeLives
- Stonewall
- Tees Valley Inclusion Project
- The Office of the Victims' Commissioner
- The Survivors Trust
- Welsh Women's Aid

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