

Policing for the protection of women

Published on 21 March 2021 Written by Bernie O'Reilly, CEO of the College of Policing

Horrific death of Sarah Everard brings into sharp focus the abuse faced by women – and the public are rightly asking police about what we do to protect them

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Earlier this month the names of 118 women and girls who have been killed in the UK in the last year – where a man has been charged or convicted as the perpetrator – were read out in Parliament. While stranger attacks are thankfully rare, it is also true that violence against women by men who they know occurs far too frequently.

In addition to serious violence, we know women face other kinds of abuse and harassment, whether it be on the street, on public transport or simply going about their daily lives.

Women look to the police for protection and want to know what measures are already in place and what is being done now to strengthen that support. Reviews and learning lessons are constant and essential parts of policing, and it's important we tell the public about the changes made in the service from lessons of the past.

Much of the work police do to protect women has been happening in the background without headlines or fanfare and continues to get stronger. The domestic abuse charity SafeLives, for example, was heavily involved in creating training for officers, to begin a cultural change in policing when responding to controlling and coercive behaviour by putting the voice of the victim at the centre.

The College of Policing and the wider service have listened to concerns about conviction rates for domestic abuse and we looked at how officers can capture better evidence to convict abusers and confront the reality of women who do not want to bring charges against an abuser.

We carried out a randomised controlled trial – a gold standard in research aimed at eliminating bias – to examine what would happen if officers routinely worn body-worn video when attending calls of abuse. It was found it could be effective at increasing the proportion of detections that resulted in a criminal charge and officers who used the equipment frequently mentioned the evidence gathering

benefits – particularly for capturing context, comments and emotion accurately. This was carried out in 2018 and body-worn cameras are now routine for officers.

This type of evidence gathering means the Crown Prosecution Service can more easily charge someone without requiring evidence from a victim of abuse, which is a groundbreaking change from where we were.

As well as attending 999 calls, police are trained to spot people who are vulnerable and prevent the abuse of women before it happens. Training in this area focuses on adults and children who may be exploited and teaches officers about abusive relationships, vulnerable adults, issues in the family and missing people.

Similarly, in cases of rape there is very detailed training for officers on the reality of rape for victims, and some of the myths, as well as how they should initially respond. More recently the training includes revenge porn and upskirting.

Figures by the Office for National Statistics for sexual offences in England and Wales reported that, as of the end of March 2020, four in 10 victims were too embarrassed to formally report the offence, while 38% did not think the police could help and a third feared that the experience would be humiliating. These are sobering statistics which all of us in policing must reflect on.

I want to make clear that we are here to help victims. Once officers initially respond to an incident it is then over to investigators to examine the case and they too have very specialist training which is designed to support victims. Other police dedicate themselves to become sexual offence liaison officers and have their own dedicated training to support victims through the process.

At every stage of policing, from the initial call, to the first officer on the scene and throughout an investigation, officers are trained to spot the signs, gather evidence, protect women and bring cases before the Crown Prosecution Service for charge.

We know from experience too that the abuse of women is similar to other crime types and evolves over time, including abuse that has now moved online.

The digital footprint left behind by abusers can amount to significant evidence that could be collated by police to help convict an offender. A wifi router, for example, can serve as evidence that a

domestic abuser has been at the victim's house, despite them denying it. Similarly, spyware applications hidden on phones or incessant social media messages, texts and calls can be used by police to demonstrate that an abuser is stalking their victim, allowing them to seek a stalking protection order.

All new officers joining the police in England and Wales are now taught the basics of digital investigation.

Most of our guidance for protecting women is publicly available online and demonstrates the depth of knowledge and training that officers undergo to keep women safe. We will continue to review it, use the evidence base to inform training and listen to women and charities who continue to work with us to keep people safe.

Policing cannot solve these issues alone and many of the experiences that have been shared by women speak to a need for better education of boys, and wider societal change to address misogyny. We must all work together. If this is combined with our efforts, and those across the criminal justice system, we can protect women today.

Resources for policing

A list of our resources for police forces in England and Wales to help them when responding to incidents of male violence against women.

- [Training, guidance and research](#)

Tags

Vulnerable people Operational policing Response policing Domestic violence