

Forensic marking to protect victims of domestic abuse

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Piloting a new approach to using forensic marking

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The use of forensic marking to deter crime and help convict perpetrators is not new to policing. When implemented correctly, we have seen that initiatives using forensic marking to target serious acquisitive crime have seen reductions in reported crime, as well as increased satisfaction and confidence in the communities protected. But what about using this approach to protect victims of domestic abuse (DA)?

The principles should be the same.

- Target-harden the victim.
- Ensure that the perpetrator is aware through warnings.
- Educate officers and staff that are working in that area of the initiative.

Using these principles, I tested whether using focused forensic marking – for example, on door handles or car doors – could help protect DA victims by deterring perpetrators. I sought advice from local authority DA leads and from a survivor of DA, then shaped the approach based on their views and experiences. I created a pilot that allowed an incremental approach to protecting victims, through creating a ‘safe space’ by deterring perpetrators of DA. Although not a central element of the initiative, it can be used to reinforce bail conditions, Domestic Violence Protection Notices/Orders and other court orders. This approach also strengthens protective measures and presents opportunities for introducing evidence-led prosecutions, by linking a perpetrator to a location or person.

The level of protection offered to victims varies, based on risk and perpetrator behaviour. To ensure consistency and proportionality, a detective inspector authority is required for each level of protection. If the risk of further victimisation is assessed as ‘low’, a forensic home protection kit can be used to help reassure the victim. The kit includes stickers that are displayed in windows to

clearly state that the property is protected by forensic marking. In addition to this, items are marked within the property with a unique forensic solution to help prevent theft or prove ownership at a later date.

If the risk assessment considers that there is the likelihood of revictimisation, additional protective measures include the following.

- The issuing of a handheld forensic spray. This spray can be carried by the victim around their property or while out in public. The canister sprays a directional forensic solution with a coverage of up to 10m in distance.
- Forensic greases can also be used to mark door handles or window frames. If touched by the perpetrator, they will then be forensically linked to where the grease was deployed.
- Finally, where the risk of repeat victimisation is high, and where potential harm caused is assessed as high, a domestic abuse spray system can be used. This unit is a multifunctional forensic spray unit that also activates a panic alarm to the police communications centre and sounds a loud audible alarm.

With each tactic used, the perpetrator must be warned that the victim is protected. However, the messaging must be clear enough to deter, without informing the perpetrator exactly how the victim is protected.

Initial small-scale findings in West Yorkshire with 33 victims surveyed has shown that after protection:

- 87% would recommend to others
- 81% state it has had a positive impact on them
- 67% state no further perpetrator contact
- 65% report more confidence in the police
- 64% report feeling safer
- 55% state that satisfaction in police has increased
- 50% state they trust the police more

Victim's comments have included:

- 'It has allowed me to go back to work.'

- 'I would have been scared to leave the house without it.'
- 'It's given me peace of mind.'

South Yorkshire and Staffordshire Police have replicated similar survey results after piloting this initiative. This approach has also been reinforced with a recent conviction for a breach of a non-molestation order after a perpetrator was forensically marked by the victim.

You can watch an overview of the [Domestic Violence SmartWater Initiative](#) on the YouTube channel of South Yorkshire Police's Violence Reduction Unit.

For more information see [SmartWater: The forensic spray helping keep women safe](#) on BBC News.

- This article was peer reviewed by Inspector Sharath Ranjan, Hampshire Constabulary.

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