

Powerful Perpetrators

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and European Research Council (ERC) funded project looking at sexual misconduct and abuse perpetrated by professionals, and the mechanisms used to investigate and sanction their behaviour.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Bristol
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Police region	South West
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	November 2023
Date due for completion	October 2028

Research context

This study explores the nature and prevalence of sexual misconduct and abuse perpetrated by UK professionals. It also seeks to evaluate the disciplinary mechanisms used to investigate and sanction their behaviour.

It focuses on a specific group of high status or high trust professionals, including:

- doctors and psychiatrists
- religious leaders
- police

- military
- judges and barristers
- politicians

It looks at where these professionals harm:

- adults who seek their expertise, authority, protection, or care
- colleagues or employees in the workplace
- intimate partners and family members
- individuals outside the workplace, whom the professional leverages their trusted status to access

We refer to the work of regulators and internal disciplinary tribunals as 'administrative justice'. This work could deliver important accountability and redress for people who are harmed by professionals, and can be particularly important where criminal justice routes are not available, not wanted or fail.

Research questions

The research questions are:

1. What is the nature and extent of sexual misconduct and abuse by [profession type] in the UK and internationally?
2. What administrative justice mechanisms do [professional bodies] currently have in place to respond to sexual misconduct and abuse by their members?
3. How do (a) perpetrator characteristics (b) victim characteristics and (c) context of sexual misconduct and abuse, compare across [profession type]?
4. How do social relations of power operate and intersect with context and opportunity at the (a) individual (b) organisational-professional and (c) socio-cultural level, to account for the perpetration of sexual misconduct and abuse?
5. How effectively do current administrative justice mechanisms (a) sanction past sexual misconduct and abuse and (b) seek to deter future sexual misconduct and abuse?

Research methodology

From 2024 to 2026, we will map existing evidence (Stage 1) and start data collection. Stages 2, 3, 4 and 5 will to some extent overlap.

Stage 1: Establishing a benchmark

A review of international evidence to understand existing knowledge and examples of good practice.

Stage 2: Regulatory and case data

This involves engaging with UK professional regulators to build retrospective datasets of fitness-to-practice cases and other data related to how sexual misconduct cases are identified and managed within professional organisations. We will also pull together data already in the public domain.

Stage 3: Interviews

A third element of the project will be to interview:

- staff working for regulators, tribunals and professional bodies
- individuals who act as legal counsel in such cases
- journalists who report on sexual misconduct, particularly for 'trade' journals or investigative outlets

Stage 4: Survey and consultation

In addition, we want to hear from individuals who have experienced and witnessed abuse. While the focus of this project is on perpetrators and institutional processes, the voices of those who have experienced and witnessed abuse are central to understanding whether and how justice processes work in practice. For this reason, the team will be circulating an anonymous online survey from late 2024 to early 2025 and speaking to individuals, advocacy and support groups.

Stage 5: Analysis and synthesis

Work to analyse and synthesise the insights from the different datasets will be ongoing. As a team, we are interested in using visual methods to analyse, represent and disseminate findings. Through this project, we hope to build and test those skills. We expect to develop our theoretical frameworks inductively, based on our knowledge of existing work and depending on the data that emerges.

Ethical review and approval for all work is provided by a University of Bristol ethics committee.

Interim reports or publications

Interim reports, interactive tools and data dashboards are available on the [Powerful Perpetrators publication page](#)

Research participation

Find out how to participate by visiting the project's [Get Involved page](#)

The project team is looking to interview any professional (or former professional) who has experience of the police misconduct process. Further information and interview questions are available on the [Powerful Perpetrators website](#)