



Understanding early disengagement with police investigations – is this linked to the nature of the first response?

Who are EMPOWER?

EMPOWER is a network of stakeholders delivering services in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Northamptonshire. This includes statutory bodies including police, crown prosecution service (CPS), local government, as well as third sector organisations that support survivors and perpetrators of VAWG. EMPOWER is a 9-month project (concluding July 2023) identifying issues and co-producing projects to uncover and explore problems and potential solutions to VAWG. Next steps from these mini-projects will seek to ensure the sustainability of the network and undertake co-designed and co-produced research to develop effective solutions to VAWG-related issues.

What key issues have been identified by EMPOWER so far?

Five key issues were prioritised by stakeholders at the beginning of the project. These are:

1. Accessing and engaging in the criminal justice system
2. Multi-agency/Multi-systems working
3. Education (intervention and training)
4. What works (using best-practice/evidence-based working)
5. Culture in the criminal justice system

Each of these issues was explored via a workshop, which led to the identification of mini-projects designed to further explore the issue. This briefing summarises the *First Response to Victims/Survivors Project*, developed from workshop 1: Accessing and engaging in the criminal justice system.

What were the key aims of the First Response to Victims/Survivors Project?

1. Understand whether involving a specialist domestic abuse police officer in the early response to a grade 1 police call affects survivor engagement in criminal justice processes.
2. Understand how survivors' and police officers evaluate this new approach in relation to engagement.

What did we do for this project?

A new intervention approach to responding to grade 1 police incidents of domestic abuse was trialled within three policing areas in one police force. This was limited to Fridays and Saturdays between 8am and 8pm for two time periods. These time limits were chosen due to the high likelihood of calls meeting the grade 1 criterion, but also to ensure that staffing was available to respond to the calls. The intervention involved a complainant being offered an immediate video call with a specialist domestic abuse police officer to support the initial response by first responders. This was intended to be compared with standard practice response, which did not involve this specialist support at the initial response.

What did we find?

There were a number of additional criteria included to ensure that the complainant could engage in the intervention safely (e.g., arrest of alleged perpetrator at site) and this significantly limited the number of calls that met the criteria for receiving the intervention. In all, less than 10 calls were received that met the criteria, 5 of which received the intervention (due to staff capacity), with only a small number subsequently completing the survey. This has meant that it is not viable to draw rigorous conclusions from this mini-project.

However, it was noted that those who did receive the intervention were positive and supportive of engaging in the criminal justice process at the beginning of the intervention, and this level of engagement was maintained after the intervention was concluded. This suggests that, at a minimum, with these very small levels of data, that the intervention did not have an adverse effect.

Staffing levels were critical to the intervention success. Further trial periods were not carried out due to high levels of absence within the team supporting the intervention. This notes the additional resources needed to provide specialist responses to survivors.

What does this mean?

The nature of the EMPOWER project in relation to testing out questions that relate to practice issues means that it was anticipated that not all projects would result in successful conclusions. Based on this project, the key findings of this mini-project are limited, however our findings and recommendations are:

1. The implementation of a specialist officer intervention with the initial response did not create adverse outcomes on survivor engagement (i.e., reduced willingness to support the investigation), instead it maintained engagement. However, this was based on extremely limited data and so any firm conclusions on this data should not be drawn. Our recommendation is to hold a longer-term trial of this intervention so that more in-depth data can be gathered.
2. Resilient staffing is needed to support specialist interventions. Whilst there was a wish to continue to offer the intervention for a longer trial, this was ultimately hampered by the availability of specialist staff to deliver the intervention.

Thanks to all of our EMPOWER partners who contributed to this work.

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You can find out more about the EMPOWER project here: <https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/empower>.

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