

## Crime and Criminal Justice

# The Interface between the Scottish Police Service and the Public as Victims of Crime: Victim Perceptions

Brian Williams, Gill McIvor, Mike Semenchuk, Maggie Valenti, Roy Bailey, Alison Brown and Margaret Malloch  
(De Montfort University and University of Stirling)

This study was commissioned as part of a thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary of crime management in the Scottish Police Service. The main purpose of the research was to gather information from members of the public who had reported volume crimes to the Police. There were two stages of interviewing: focus group interviews and individual interviews.

## Main Findings

- Overall, victims expressed satisfaction about the service they had received from the police. Repeat victims had lower expectations of police response than did first-time victims.
- Victims were generally satisfied with the response time when they reported an incident, though this varied across forces and according to the type of volume crime.
- Women reported being given less technical information than did men about how their case would be progressed.
- Corporate victims were more receptive towards crime prevention information and less likely to perceive this as 'victim blaming'.
- Most victims had not been informed of the outcome of their case. Victims were sometimes critical of the lack of information about the progress of their cases and more generally expressed frustration about the shortcomings of the wider criminal justice system.
- Victims mostly believed that the police had dealt with them professionally. 'Well trained' officers were perceived as more professional.

## Introduction and Background

This study was commissioned as part of a thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary of crime management in the Scottish police service. The main purpose of the research was to gather information from members of the public who had reported volume crimes in order to gain a greater understanding of levels of satisfaction or otherwise, with a view to identifying good practice and areas for improvement.

Research literature about the victims of crime has tended, over the past twenty years, to be dominated by a single major theme; it is the effect upon victims of the lack of information available to them about developments in their case from the police and the courts. For example, studies have shown that victims appear generally happy with their initial contacts with the police but, as their cases continued, they became increasingly frustrated with the opacity of the system.

## Methods

This research, although qualitative, was designed to include a sufficiently large number of participants so that the impact upon victims of crime of factors such as geographical location, offence type, age and gender could be explored. There were two stages of interviewing: focus group interviews, which allowed the main themes to be explored, and individual interviews, which allowed relevant issues to be discussed in greater depth. Focus group discussions were held across three police force areas with 12 individual victims (six male and six female) and in one force area with four corporate victims. Individual interviews were conducted across five force areas with 28 individual victims (16 female and 12 male) and across two force areas with eleven corporate victims.

## Focus Group Findings

Overall the participants in the focus groups gave generally positive feedback in relation to the services that they received from the police, both in terms of the response time and of the level of professionalism demonstrated by individual contact officers. However, the response times varied in different areas. There was also a difference in response times in relation to the type of crime, with victims of domestic housebreaking receiving the quickest response time. However, positive views were not universal, with two female participants complaining of having been dealt with insensitively and three victims of vehicle related car crime expressing the view that they had been subject to "victim blaming" from the police.

The majority of respondents were issued with either a named contact officer or with a crime report number to enable them to receive information about the progress of their case, with many victims of domestic housebreaking being issued with both options. The respondents who had been victims of domestic housebreaking were more likely to have been given further information about services that were available to victims of crime.

There was also a difference between the information that female victims received and the information that was given to the male victims. Female victims were more likely to have been given less technical information that may have been intended to offer some comfort, whereas the male victims were more likely to have been given much more formal and technical information with regards to police procedures.

With respect to closure of their case, many individual victims had no idea whether the case was ongoing or whether it had been closed and would have welcomed being kept informed about the outcome. The lack of communication with the police after the event, and the difficulties this created in terms of achieving a sense of closure, were the gaps in service most often identified. More commonly, however, participants expressed satisfaction with the levels of professionalism, response time or the individual personality traits of the attending officers. In general, victims of house breaking expressed a more positive image of the treatment that they had received, while participants who had been subjected to repeat victimisation had lower expectations about the services they would receive from the police. The majority of respondents expressed some frustration about the criminal justice system in general although even those who were more critical about their experiences often acknowledged the constraints under which the police were operating.

Corporate victims reported involving the police if they had detained the perpetrator or if they considered it a duty to alert them to a potentially wider problem. However some crimes would go unreported if there seemed little likelihood of them being solved. Response times were reported to have varied, the speed of the response being determined by several factors including the time of day, the geographical location of the premises where the crime was committed, the seriousness of the situation, and whether anyone was in any immediate danger. There was a general agreement that the police responded professionally and appropriately. What some individual victims of crime had perceived as 'victim blaming' or unsolicited advice from uniformed officers was, in the case of the corporate victims, often interpreted as helpful advice on crime prevention or crime deterrence.

Among corporate victims there was a degree of sophisticated realism regarding the police follow-up, with the majority of respondents having little or no expectations of

continued communication or liaison between themselves and the police. There was unanimous acknowledgement that the police offer the best possible service under the circumstances. However, there was also unanimous agreement that services could be improved by a larger police presence and by improvements elsewhere in the criminal justice system.

### **Individual Victims**

Respondents had generally reported the incident to the police by telephone, stating that this was most convenient for them. However few had used the 999 service which they regarded as being for emergencies. The majority of victims were unconcerned about the speed of response, having relatively low expectations in this respect. Most were satisfied with or ambivalent towards the initial response of the police, with only a few expressing some degree of dissatisfaction.

Some interviewees reported having been informed how the case would be progressed while others had received no information of this kind. However most were unconcerned about this, with only one third indicating that they would have found it useful to have received more information at that stage. Repeat victims reported that they had received very different treatment on different occasions and procedures and been generally inconsistent between cases.

The financial costs of the crime were often viewed by victims as easier to cope with than the loss of items of emotional value which were viewed as irreplaceable. In addition, several victims reported a loss of the previous sense of security that they had experienced and said that they had become fearful of repeat offending.

Three-quarters of victims reported not having been provided with information about the progress of their case even though two-fifths had a named officer who would deal with their case throughout the enquiry. Just under one half of the interviewees indicated that they had been made aware of other potential sources of support, such as Victim Support.

Nine respondents had initially stated that the crimes that had been committed against them had been solved but many of them did not really know about the final outcome of their individual cases. There was even more confusion about the cases that were not solved. Many respondents had made assumptions that the case was closed because they had never been given information from the police about the enquiry. Similarly, many respondents assumed that the case was ongoing because they had never been given information to the contrary.

Most respondents believed that the police had dealt with them professionally and were satisfied with the overall treatment they had received from the police. Reference was made to friendly, sensitive and reassuring officers and the response time was generally considered good. That said, perceptions of professionalism were coloured, to some extent, by the individual's prior expectations of the services that they would receive from the police. Repeat victims had lower expectations in terms of service provision. There was a common complaint about lack of follow up communication between victim and police.

### **Corporate Victims**

There was a variety of reasons why corporate victims chose to report crimes to the police. Some reported that they did so as a matter of company policy while others were more concerned that a crime had been committed and that therefore attempts should be made to apprehend the offender. All had chosen to report the incidents by telephone, with most contacting their local police station.

In the majority of cases respondents reported satisfaction with response times by the police to initial reports, and the actual response in terms of officers attending and procedures observed was generally viewed positively. There were differences between force areas at this stage with respect to whether or not victims were apprised as to how the case would be progressed and, likewise, differences with respect to whether they were provided with information about support services and crime prevention.

Around one half of corporate victims believed that they had received all the help they needed from the police, though this was not always followed up beyond the initial stages of the case. Several also believed that the public and police were let down by the justice system, when suspects were apprehended and either returned to the community or prosecutions failed to achieve convictions.

In the majority of cases respondents commented that they had never been officially informed about the outcome of the case. However they also considered this to be a worthless endeavour which would simply put a further drain on limited police resources.

Most of the corporate victims reported that the police had always acted professionally in their dealings with them and most were happy overall with the treatment they had received. Many expressed sympathy for the police whom they perceived to be doing the best job possible with very limited resources, while the criminal justice system was perceived by some as taking a very lenient stance against criminals.

## Conclusions

Overall, victims expressed satisfaction about the service they had received from the police. Where they had complaints, they often indicated that they had nevertheless received the best possible response given the perceived limitations upon the police in terms of resources. Many respondents expressed frustration about the wider criminal justice system, and blamed agencies other than the police for the problems they experienced.

The general presentation of police officers was important to victims: they frequently commented upon the level of friendliness, courtesy, attentiveness, reassurance and the amount of time officers spent on interviewing them. In a number of cases, approval of officers' professionalism was linked by respondents to their perceived high levels of training. 'Well trained' officers were perceived as more professional.

The research confirmed a number of the findings of the existing literature (most of which does not separate volume crime out from other types of offences) and provided rich data on the attitudes and experiences of victims in urban, suburban and rural Scotland. Overall, it shows high levels of general satisfaction with the service received from the police, but it also highlights a number of specific areas where improvements could be made, particularly in relation to keeping victims informed of the progress of cases. Interestingly, it also demonstrates the extent to which members of the public understand the constraints under which the police work, and the willingness of victims of volume crime to make allowances in the light of other more pressing commitments with which the police may have to deal.

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