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Internal sexual harassment among police personnel: Insights from a Birmingham, UK cross-sectional survey

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ABSTRACT

Internal sexual harassment by and between police officers is understudied. We report on a perversive, damaging, and underreported phenomenon through an anonymous survey in Birmingham, UK. Overall, internal sexual harassment affects one in every five employees, with 8.3% of males and 43% of females victimized, particularly in small police units. More than two-thirds of officers who experience physical sexual harassment and half who experience non-physical sexual harassment are serial victims (three or more), indicating that some staff members are routinely targeted by their peers—especially female officers. Victims reported long-term adverse effects, including stress, anxiety, isolation, and anger, and a quarter considered leaving the organization. One in ten observe internal sexual harassment; however, bystanders refrain from reporting incidents due to the perception that such conduct constitutes banter or the desire to protect the harasser's reputation. In light of the responses, policy implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment continues to be a destructive feature of work life, including in policing (Taylor *et al.*, 2022). Most incidents of internal sexual harassment are unreported (Feldblum and Lipnic, 2016), resulting in victims suffering without justice behind the 'blue code of silence' (Sweeting *et al.,* 2022). Those who fall victim to sexual harassment experience increased psychological, physical, and work-related distress (Chan *et al.,* 2008; Willness *et al.,* 2007).

Sexism and misogyny, which go hand-in-hand with sexual harassment of women in the police, were recently underscored by Casey (2023), an independent review of the standard of behaviours and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service. The review concluded the following (p. 258):

> Sarah Everard's murder and other horrific crimes perpetrated by serving Met officers against women in London have shone a light on shocking treatment of and attitudes towards women in the Met. Despite improvements in gender representation and increasingly flexible working practices, women are not treated equally in the workforce, with new women recruits resigning at four times the rate of all probationers; and a third of Met women we surveyed reporting personally experiencing sexism at work, with 12% reporting directly

experiencing sexual harassment or assault. Despite signs of success in the volunteer-led Signa project, women in the Met are still reluctant to speak out for fear of the consequences on their working life and career.

Despite these common themes, scholastic attention on internal sexual harassment in UK policing is limited, and much of the evidence is recent and limited (Brown *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2023; Sweeting and Cole, 2022; Sweeting *et al.*, 2021, 2022). We aim to fill this void by sharing the results of an anonymous survey conducted in the Birmingham Local Policing Area (LPA) of the West Midlands Police. We report on both the prevalence and the frequency of internal sexual harassment across multiple dimensions, including the psychosocial ramifications of being a victim of sexual harassment by and between police officers and other employees of the police service.

While the literature thus far has focussed on the experiences of victims, this study sought to identify sexual harassment within policing through the lens of witnesses as well. Understanding their experiences and highlighting why they remain silent is critical to creating interventions designed to encourage reporting or even prevent internal sexual harassment. Their views can help their workplace assess whether the existing policies are fitting against this internal sexual harassment within policing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of sexual harassment vary across the literature. However, most include unwanted or unwelcomed sexual behaviors, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature which has the purpose or effect of being intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive (Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018; Lonsway et al., 2013; McDonald, 2012; Taylor et al., 2022).

A theoretical comprehension of the underlying factors that contribute to sexual harassment in law enforcement is imperative. The power-threat model, the vulnerable victim model, and police culture are some of the prevailing contemporary models.

First, the dynamics of sexual harassment can be explained through the lens of power-threat theories, suggesting that women in authority may be more frequent targets of harassment and that harassment serves as an 'equalizer' against women in power (see McLaughlin et al., 2012). According to this model, harassment directed at women in positions of authority could be perceived as an 'equalizer' intended to undermine women's authority. This explanation seems particularly valid when considering that harassment occurs primarily in male-dominated environments as a means of exerting dominance and control.

Second, the vulnerable victim model underscores the significance of personal vulnerabilities in instances of harassment. This model posits that specific individuals are more likely to become targets of harassment due to perceived vulnerabilities rather than simply power dynamics or their position within an organizational hierarchy. The model focuses on the characteristics that make specific individuals more susceptible to becoming victims of crime due to perceived vulnerabilities—for example, low-ranked officers or socially excluded individuals. This model suggests that harassers target individuals who appear more vulnerable or less likely to retaliate or report the harassment rather than or in addition to targeting those with whom they have a power imbalance. Recently, Taylor et al. (2022) conducted a nationally representative survey of law enforcement officers to assess the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment. Their findings suggest an alignment with the vulnerable victim model, highlighting how individual vulnerabilities may play a pivotal role in harassment occurrences.

Finally, policing culture could explain why internal sexual harassment is underreported. Lonsway et al. (2008) and others emphasize the significance of considering cultural and structural factors when addressing the issue in law enforcement agencies. The police profession is often described as aggressive, competitive, and predominantly masculine (Brown et al., 2018). Consequently, these types of organizational norms could downplay the need to deal with sexual harassment, as if 'tough guys' can endure the banter and the occasional insult by colleagues. However, we note that attributing non-reporting solely to policing culture is problematic because it oversimplifies the diverse beliefs and behaviours by and between police officers. Individual backgrounds, personalities, and experiences shape people's beliefs before and after joining the force (Demirkol and Nalla, 2020). Sweeting et al. (2022) reinforced this idea, arguing that some officers minimize misconduct due to societal norms or personal beliefs, like equating on-duty sex to a meal break, viewing it as people's private matter.

Fitzgerald et al. (1997) suggested that the occurrence and perception of harassment significantly influence organizational climate and individual differences. Addressing the complexities of police culture and its implications for sexual harassment within the force, it becomes crucial to transcend traditional, monolithic conceptions of this culture. The literature increasingly recognizes police culture as a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon, significantly shaped by internal and external forces, individual agency, and the diverse backgrounds of police officers. Chan (1996) challenges the static view of police culture as a uniform and deterministic set of beliefs and behaviours, arguing instead for its fluidity and capacity to evolve in response to societal changes and internal dynamics. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of sexual harassment, suggesting that a more inclusive and diverse police culture could foster mechanisms that challenge and address such behaviours effectively. Inversely, a police department that shines away from a progressive composition of its rank and file and holds 'traditional' views of women and men is likely to have a culture that may find objectification accepted and sexual harassment nothing more than banter.

Contrastingly, Loftus (2009), while acknowledging the potential for cultural evolution, emphasizes the resilience of certain traditional elements within police culture. These elements, such as entrenched masculinity and a code of silence, can serve to perpetuate sexual harassment. This implies that changing societal norms take place independent of certain features of police culture, given the dynamics of policing: hyper stress, 'us versus them' mentality and physical strains (on social identify theory in the context of sexual harassment in the police, see Brown et al., 2018 and Charman, 2017 more broadly). They also explain the barriers to cultural change within police forces, the complex interplay between traditional cultural norms, and the limited potential for reform, even though the broader community in which the police department is located holds more equitable views of gender.

PREVALENCE AND RISK FACTORS
Gender

Gender studies in policing during the 1990s primarily focussed on female officers and their experiences of sexual harassment. Estimates varied widely, with reports of 50%–75% of female officers experiencing internal sexual harassment (Bartol et al., 1992; Christopher et al., 1991; Lonsway et al., 2013; Martin, 1994; Nichols, 1995; Robinson, 1994). More recent studies have expanded their focus to include both male and female officers' experiences with sexual harassment, as males can suffer from sexual harassment too, though studies often suggest that females tend to experience more harassment and more severe forms of victimization than male officers (Carter Collins, 2004; De Haas et al., 2009; Kobayashi, 2018; Lopez et al., 2017; Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2018; Stinson et al., 2015; Victorian Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Comission, 2019).

Lonsway et al. (2013) conducted a study with police officers in the USA using two waves of surveys. The first involved a survey of 69 female and 607 male officers, finding that 82.6% of males and 92.5% of females experienced at least one sexually harassing behaviour in the past year. However, only 0.7% of

them described themselves as victims. The second survey of 531 female officers nationwide revealed that 93.8% experienced at least one sexual harassment behaviour during their career, with only 27.2% labelling it as 'sexual harassment'. Verbal harassment was the most commonly reported form of sexual harassment in both surveys. Thus, research suggests that most victims who experience behaviours on the Sexual Experience Questionnaire do not describe themselves as being 'sexually harassed' (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Magley et al., 1999). Police officers may handle such situations informally, without filing formal complaints, and often lack awareness of their rights regarding a harassment-free workplace (Harrington and Lonsway, 2007).

Finally, Taylor et al.'s (2022) study categorized sexually harassing behaviours into physical and non-physical forms, expanding beyond previous studies that focussed solely on behaviours included in Fitzgerald et al.'s (1993) sexual experiences questionnaire. The study found that 70% of females and 40% of males experienced non-physical sexual harassment, while 8% of females and 2% of males experienced physical sexual harassment.

Rank

Some evidence suggests that perpetrators prey on vulnerable victims to express their structural power over less powerful victims, which is contextualized under the 'vulnerable victim model' (De Coster et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2022). This theory posits that low-ranking employees and those with fewer years of service will be targeted more frequently. Conversely, the 'power-threat model' (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2022) proposes that some men feel threatened by women who deviate from traditionally female roles to traditionally masculine roles (De Coster et al., 1999). Indeed, several studies found that senior officers prey on lower-ranking officers with less job tenure (Kobayashi, 2018; Lonsway et al., 2013; Sweeting et al., 2021; Timmins and Hainsworth, 1989).

EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON THE VICTIMS
Effect on victims

Research demonstrates that individuals who experience sexual harassment consequently suffer from adverse health effects. However, the literature on the outcomes of internal sexual harassment within policing is limited. Brown et al. (2018) addressed the harms arising from exposure to sexual harassment for police staff in the UK. Their survey asked police staff about their overall work-related stress. 32% of respondents stated that experiencing sexually harassing behaviours caused increased stress levels. However, the results of this critical study are constrained as it only focuses on police staff, not police officers, police community support officers (PCSOs), and special constables.

Effect on witnesses

Research on sexual harassment outcomes for bystanders or witnesses is limited, and we are aware of none in policing studies. Individuals who witness violent incidents may experience severe psychological outcomes (North et al., 1999; Warner and Weist,

1996), especially if they perceive the incident to be racially motivated (Gutierres et al., 1994), yet how transferrable this body of knowledge is to policing is presently unclear.

Glomb et al. (1997) hypothesized that sexual harassment witnesses may experience stress from being worried that they will become a target of sexual harassment, seeing an unsupportive response from the organization, or feeling powerless to stop the harassment. Therefore, working in an environment where sexual harassment is prevalent may also have adverse outcomes that diffuse to individuals who are indirectly exposed to the harassment. Again, though, we do not know whether police officers who witness internal sexual harassment behave in similar ways.

FACTORS THAT DISCOURAGE EMPLOYEES FROM CHALLENGING INTERNAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT
The blue code of silence

The 'blue code of silence' theory suggests police employees hesitate to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation or loyalty to wrongdoers (Westmarland and Conway, 2020; Maher, 2003; Westmarland and Wieslander, 2019). Policing's strong camaraderie fosters trust among officers (Alexander et al., 2012; Archer, 1999), which can boost motivation but also discourage reporting (Graeff and Kleinewiese, 2020; Kleinewiese, 2022). Kappeler et al. (2001) and Punch (2000) note officers backing each other up and avoiding 'ratting' on each other, maintaining collegial loyalty (Demirkol and Nalla, 2020), and averting isolation and retaliation (Karaca, 2013; Lonsway et al., 2013) to avoid troublemaker labels (Holgersson, 2019). Similarly, witnesses may not intervene in sexual harassment incidents as a result of shifting responsibility onto the victims themselves (Sweeting et al., 2022). However, there is very little published evidence on the matter.

Wright (2010) surveyed a Northern England police force to explore the prevalence of the code of silence regarding general misconduct, not sexual harassment, among police staff compared to officers. Findings showed officers preferred handling misconduct issues themselves through trusted colleagues or managers. Non-reporting stemmed from doubts about complaint confidentiality and outcome effectiveness, even though misconduct was believed to affect 50% of officers and 34% of staff. Police staff were less likely to report misconduct, especially in severe cases, which may result from power imbalances between non-warranted staff and warranted officers.

Additional blockers

Additional barriers exist beyond loyalty and fear regarding employees' challenging misconduct. Employees' decisions to challenge misconduct may hinge on their perception of the behaviour's seriousness. Westmarland and Rowe (2018) asked UK police officers to assess hypothetical misconduct scenarios. They found that less serious misconduct (e.g. accepting minor gratuities) was less likely to be reported compared to criminal behaviour (e.g. accepting bribes), a finding echoed by Hickman et al. (2016) and Klockars et al. (2007). Furthermore, Sweeting et al. (2022) surveyed 382 English police officers using fictional sexual misconduct scenarios. The study showed that female

officers were more likely to report sexual harassment than male officers. Sexually inappropriate language was perceived as the least serious and least likely to be reported, despite verbal sexual harassment being more prevalent than physical harassment. Non-reporting was often justified by minimizing the seriousness of the actions, claiming they were consensual or 'just banter'.

In addition, Lee *et al*. (2013) discovered that employees may not always recognize what constitutes misconduct, leading to a lack of challenges. Wright's (2010) study revealed that many officers and police staff were unaware of their organization's misconduct reporting policies. These findings suggest that officers are not always able to recognize internal sexual harassment and the adverse effects it may have on their fellow members of staff.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Unlike existing studies, which predominantly focus on police officers, this research expands its scope to include all types of employees within policing, including PCSOs, special constables, and police staff. We also go beyond prevalence measures and investigate the frequency of internal sexual harassment. Moreover, research on outcomes for witnesses rather than victims of sexual harassment, particularly within policing, has been sparse since the 1990s. We are keen to explore how these behaviours affect witnesses as well.

Furthermore, understanding the barriers to reporting and challenging sexual harassment is crucial. Existing research in this area is limited, with only one study investigating the code of silence for sexual harassment in UK policing. We, therefore, explore solutions and practical recommendations provided by the respondents in a 'bottom-up' approach to policymaking.

METHODS
Setting

The study takes place in the West Midlands's Birmingham LPA. All employees from this jurisdiction were invited to participate in an anonymous and voluntary external study conducted by the University of Cambridge. Birmingham LPA comprises 11 departments and has 2,137 employees, including 1,899 police officers, 114 PCSOs, 53 police staff, and 71 special constables. Overall, 35.6% are female officers, and 76.2% are white British. In total, 6.0% are employed in response policing, 8.6% in neighbourhood teams, and 18.3% in local offender management teams. Constables (n = 1,646) is the most common rank in the Birmingham LPA. In most baseline variables, the sample population is substantially similar to the Birmingham LPA population from which the sample was drawn (see Table 1).

Data collection

An online survey was distributed via secure internal police work email to all 2,137 employees across Birmingham LPA on 4 July 2023 and was live until 11 September 2023. Weekly email reminders were sent to each employee during this time. If the survey was sent out to personal email accounts or via social media, another person for whom it was not intended may complete it. However, only police employees should have access to their own secure police email account. In total, 417 respondents completed the survey (response rate = 19.5%).

The survey included questions that appear in Sweeting *et al*. (2022) as well as Brown *et al*. (2018). However, the instrument was updated based on limitations that exist in previous studies. We included questions aimed at bystanders, not only victims. We also asked direct questions about the consequences of being a victim or a witness of internal sexual harassment to underscore the impact such behaviours have on police staff. The instrument can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

Analysis

Given the size of the population, the total sample achieved, and the exploratory nature of many of the dimensions addressed in this survey, we focus on descriptive rather than inferential statistics. We provide frequency distributions for each group, thus focussing on the intersectionality of internal sexual harassment, and present the findings as rates of respondents to each survey item. We concentrate on four primary dimensions; first, we assess the prevalence of internal domestic abuse overall and then for each subcategory of employees (e.g. years of tenure, rank, and line of work). The rates are computed within each subcategory, as we are interested in exploring the risk of experiencing or witnessing incidents within strata, for example, the risk to female officers versus male officers, staff members versus constables versus PCSOs, etc. We did not limit the responses to any specific time period as we were interested in the cumulative lifetime risk of experiencing or witnessing incidents.

Second, within the group of participants who expressed that they either experienced or witnessed internal sexual harassment, we calculated the rates of identifiable patterns of repeat victimization, specifically in terms of 'serial victimization' (Bland and Ariel, 2020, p. 103) of three incidents or more. Third, we focus on the self-reported effects of internal sexual such as anxiety, anger, frustration, or isolation—again for both victims and witnesses (see dimensions in Supplementary Materials). Finally, we asked the participants to express their views on the available interventions within their agency to deal with internal sexual harassment. As we reviewed earlier, blockers to reporting could leave police officers without what they see as a proper response, so understanding how members of staff perceive the existing reporting channels and internal sexual harassment policies is paramount. We then asked them to offer policy recommendations.

FINDINGS
Overall prevalence of internal sexual harassment and within subgroups

As shown in Fig. 1, at least one in five Birmingham LPA employees experienced verbal sexual harassment and 5.5% experienced physical sexual harassment by and between officers. Moreover, 64.4% experienced non-physical sexual harassment and 48.0% experienced physical sexual harassment three times or more.

As detailed in Table 1, the rate of victimization for females (42.5%) is nearly five times greater than for males (8.3%).

Table 1: Baseline characteristics (local police population, n = 2,137 and survey sample, n = 417) and distribution of participants who answered 'Yes' to experiencing (n = 105) or witnessing (n = 77) internal sexual harassment

	Bham LPA (%)	Sample (%)	Police staff who experienced sexual harassment by police staff (%)	Police staff who witnessed sexual harassment by police staff (%)
Gender				
Male	64.4	57.7	8.3	10.0
Female	35.6	42.3	42.5	17.6
Ethnicity				
White	79.8	79.8	22.8	12.6
Non-White	20.2	20.2	17.8	11.9
Department				
Response	37.1	23.1	20.8	13.5
Crime investigation	10.8	23.1	16.6	9.3
Neighbourhood teams	30.0	29.7	16.1	14.5
Priority crime team	3.8	1.3	36.9	36.9
Offender managers	3.6	0.9	53.3	53.3
Organized crime and gangs	1.4	3.9	36.9	18.4
Senior leadership team	0.8	0.4	--	
Job role				
Police officer	88.9	87.9	22.9	13.4
PCSO	5.3	5.3	22.6	13.6
Police staff	2.5	5.7	33.7	16.8
Special constable	3.3	0.8	--	--
Rank				
Constable	86.70	78.80	19.8	11.60
Sergeant	10.80	14.80	25.9	13.00
Inspector	1.80	3.40	21.2	14.10
Chief inspector>	0.60	3.00	--	8.00
Mean years of service	8.1	10.7		
Job tenure				
0–3 years			16.2	15.60
3–6 years			22.9	16.90
6–10 years			1.0	6.50
10–15 years			7.6	6.50
15–25 years			24.8	15.60
25 years or more			14.3	9.10

Relatively small differences emerged in terms of ethnicity, as one in four members of staff who define themselves as white and about one in five who define themselves as non-white experienced internal sexual harassment.

Employees who experience victimization are more likely to work within smaller units in policing, such as offender managers (53.3%), priority crime teams (36.9%), or organized crime and gang units (36.9%)—which collectively are less than 10% of the employees in the LPA. In the larger departments, such as response policing, about one in five employees experienced internal sexual harassment.

Police staff are the most at risk of experiencing sexual harassment by fellow officers (33.7%), with rates for PCSOs and police officers fairly similar at 22.6% and 22.9%, respectively. Sergeants have reported victimization at greater rates than constables, but this is likely to be a function of how the question was worded—asking about lifetime risk rather than recent experiences (which can also be seen in terms of job tenure outcomes shown in Table 1). At the same time, inspectors and above are less likely to be victimized relative to constables, with none of the senior leadership team experiencing internal sexual harassment. Still, many victims can be found in groups of officers with up to 6 years of total job tenure.

Witnessing internal sexual harassment

This study has found that just under one in ten Birmingham LPA employees witness verbal sexual harassment and 3.8% have
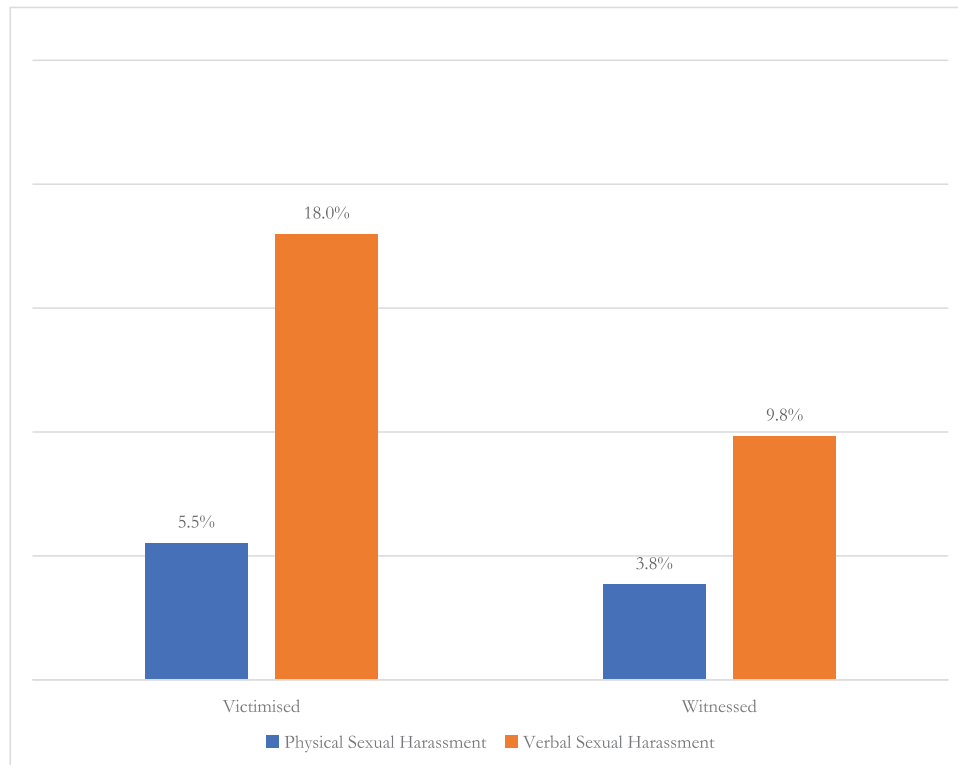
Figure 1 : Physical and verbal internal sexual harassment: victimization and witnessing prevalence—Birmingham local police area survey respondents (n = 417)

witnessed physical sexual harassment by and between fellow police employees (Fig. 1).

Witnessing within police staff roles is more likely, with police officers with up to 6 years of experience being the most common job tenure group. Staff are more likely to witness victimization of females (17.6%) than males (10.0%). A similar trend emerged in terms of where participants work, as witnessing these incidents is most likely to occur within small units such as crime priority teams or offender managers—though this may be a function of the number of employees in these roles.

Repeat victimization of internal sexual harassment

Within the group of participants who reported being victimized or who witnessed internal sexual harassment, we detected substantial repeated victimization. As shown in Table 2, more than 60.9% of female officers reported three or more physical incidents of harassment, compared to 21.7% of male officers and 46.7% and 12.0% 3+ verbal sexual harassment, respectively. Curiously, witnessing 3+ incidents of physical harassment was greater for male victims compared to female victims, but the same female-prone serial victimization trend was detected for verbal sexual harassment.

Within specific departments, crime investigations and neighbourhood teams are the most susceptible to repeated victimization as well as witnessing, except in terms of witnessing verbal sexual harassment, which has not been reported at all for crime investigation teams. In both, officers, and particularly constables, are the most at risk of being serially victimized both physically and verbally. Given the distribution of responses, the longer

members of staff are in the police, the more likely they are to experience and to witness internal sexual harassment.

The effects sexual harassment has on victims and witnesses

Being a victim of internal sexual harassment has adverse effects on victims across a range of psychosocial and professional adverse outcomes. As shown in Table 3, nearly half of the police staff who experienced victimization felt anxiety, stress, and feelings of frustration at even greater rates. A third considered changing professional roles, and one out of four expressed a desire to leave the organization. In addition, several reported feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, shocked, isolated, and angry. At the same time, some expressed that sexual harassment is not taken seriously by West Midlands Police, mainly when the victim is male.

Interestingly, witnessing internal sexual harassment also carries adverse effects (Table 3), though not at a similar rate as those who experienced victimization first-hand—except where 68.8% of respondents expressed frustration (compared to 56.6% of victims). Twenty-five per cent experienced increased stress and about 30% experienced increased anxiety. Similar rates emerged in terms of experiencing decreased job satisfaction, with nearly half expressing decreased confidence in the police.

Factors that prevent employees from challenging sexual harassment

Those who would challenge the behaviour would confront the perpetrator directly because they believe that their complaint will not remain confidential and that the force will not deal with

Table 2: Serial victimization: breakdown of participants who experienced or witnessed 3+ incidents of internal sexual harassment[a]

	Experienced 3+ incidents		Witnessed 3+ incidents	
	Physical sexual harassment (%)	Verbal sexual harassment (%)	Physical sexual harassment (%)	Verbal sexual harassment (%)
Gender				
Male	21.7	12.0	43.8	39.0
Female	60.9	46.7	31.3	46.3
Ethnicity				
White	60.9	46.7	62.5	68.3
Non-White	13.0	9.3	12.5	22.0
Department				
Response	13.0	9.3	12.5	9.8
Crime investigation	21.7	12.0	18.8	--
Neighbourhood teams	21.7	13.3	25.0	26.8
Priority crime team	--	1.3	--	2.4
Offender managers	--	1.3	--	2.4
Organized crime and gangs	4.3	5.3	6.3	
Senior leadership team				
Job role				
Police officer	69.6	52.0	56.3	46.0
PCSO	8.7	4.0	--	4.9
Police staff	8.7	4.0	18.8	9.8
Special constable				
Rank				
Constable	39.1	40.0	37.5	51.2
Sergeant	26.1	10.7	6.3	17.1
Inspector	4.3	1.3	12.5	4.9
Chief inspector>	--	--	--	--
Mean years of service				
Job tenure				
0–3 years	8.7	9.3	6.3	12.2
3–6 years	4.3	14.7	12.5	14.6
6–10 years	--	--	6.3	7.3
10–15 years	13.0	5.3	6.3	12.2
15–25 years	30.4	18.7	12.5	24.4
25 years or more	21.7	8.0	25.0	14.6

[a]Percentages out of the pool of victims/witnesses.

Table 3: Internal sexual harassment: reported effects on victims and witnesses

Reported impact	Victims	Witnesses
N Respondents[a]	76	64
Increased stress	47.4%	25.0%
Increased anxiety	47.4%	29.7%
Increased frustration	56.6%	68.8%
Feeling low and demoralized	38.2%	23.4%
Decreased job satisfaction	38.2%	31.3%
Decreased confidence in the force	47.4%	48.4%
Considered a change in role/department	32.9%	21.9%
Considered leaving the force	25.0%	17.2%

[a]More than one response was allowed.

the incident effectively. However, only a handful of respondents would do that. Filing a formal complaint was the least chosen option selected by participants.

Those who would not challenge the behaviour are discouraged because (a) they do not want to be labelled as a troublemaker, (b) they do not think the behaviour is severe enough to challenge, (c) they find challenging sexual harassment too stressful, (d) they do not know whom to speak to initially or what the complaints procedure entails and the available outcomes, (e) they do not feel it is their place to challenge sexual harassment if it is not directed towards them, and (f) they would not want to jeopardize the perpetrator's career. In addition, employees with lower job tenure lack the confidence to challenge sexual harassment, especially when the perpetrator is a higher-ranking employee.

Policy considerations (as expressed by the participants)

Over 45.7% of Birmingham LPA employees want the force to provide enhanced training that clearly explains what sexual harassment means, its effects on individuals, and how employees can challenge it when it occurs. Respondents expressed that the current training tools, such as online self-taught learning packages, are 'ineffective'.

Interestingly, 43.9% of Birmingham LPA employees think the force should provide an option for the parties to engage in restorative justice conferencing. More than half of all employees reported that the force needs to implement a proactive and rigorous complaints policy that will be enforced and taken seriously. Finally, 70.6% of respondents wanted to be reassured that the organization would protect them and their identities during the complaint process.

DISCUSSION

A closer look at the dynamics of sexual harassment

There is evidence that internal sexual harassment is common and perversive within the Birmingham LPA, with a notable recurrence of harassment among specific employees who experience serial victimization. Further research is needed to understand perpetrator profiles and the dynamics of senior officers targeting subordinates (Kobayashi, 2018); while the evidence shows that a majority of perpetrators are male, our focus on victimization, not offending, limits our conclusions. Still, when more than 60% of female officers who experience physical sexual harassment are subjected to so many incidents, there is a clear need for interventions.

Victims are often employed in small policing units, indicating that intradepartmental culture might influence harassment incidence. Organizational norms, emphasizing traits like hypermasculinity, may subject some employees to a greater risk of harassment (Loftus, 2010). Nevertheless, this generalization may overlook individual officer differences, necessitating more research through interviews or observations to understand these dynamics (Demirkol and Nalla, 2020). What is clear, however, is that the concentration of internal sexual harassment in such positions provides the organization with evidence of where the phenomenon concentrates. Future studies should explore whether the same patterns emerge in other police departments to verify whether this trend is unique to the Birmingham LPA or a ubiquitous circumstance.

This study, like previous ones by Lonsway et al. (2013) and Taylor et al. (2022), found that non-physical sexual harassment is more common than physical harassment, indicating a prevalence of verbal or gestural harassment. To ensure clarity, respondents were given a definition and examples of sexual harassment, enhancing response reliability. This is important as not everyone recognizes certain behaviours as harassment, which can lead to underreporting (Fitzgerald et al., 1999). Simply asking if someone has experienced harassment does not capture the range of specific behaviours, suggesting a need for detailed questionnaires to understand the most common types of harassment, such as sexual jokes or coercion.

No one leading theory emerged as ubiquitous

In our study, the findings do not conclusively support a single theory of sexual harassment—be it the vulnerable victim model, the power-threat model, or cultural influences. Instead, evidence partially supports different aspects of each model. Notably, sexual harassment was prevalent in smaller units and among staff members with fewer years of experience, yet leaders within this police jurisdiction also reported high rates of lifetime victimization. The fact that some officers and members of staff are repeatedly targeted may support the vulnerable victim model, but the prevailing police culture, which often views remarks on a sexual level as banter, along with the atmosphere were frequently cited as conducive to sexual harassment. Given the nuanced findings of our study, it becomes evident that a singular theoretical framework may not fully encapsulate the dynamics of sexual harassment within police departments. The interplay between individual vulnerabilities, power dynamics, and organizational culture suggests a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be sufficiently explained by any model alone. Thus, our research advocates for a more integrated approach, combining elements of the different theories to develop a more comprehensive understanding of sexual harassment in policing contexts. This integrated perspective necessitates further empirical exploration to discern these factors' relative influence and interrelation, guiding future interventions and policy reforms.

Blockers to challenging sexual harassment

The 'blue code of silence' suggests police employees often do not report misconduct due to fear of retaliation and loyalty to colleagues (Maher, 2003; Westmarland and Conway, 2020; Wieslander, 2019). This study confirms its presence in Birmingham LPA, where employees avoid labelling sexual harassment so as not to be seen as snitches or harm the perpetrator's reputation. Policing's camaraderie, like the military, fosters this silence (Alexander et al., 2012; Archer, 1999). High-risk situations requiring trust among police staff further reinforce this loyalty, leading to a culture that inadvertently tolerates sexual harassment (Kappeler et al., 2001; Punch, 2000).

Furthermore, police employees seem to expect different thresholds of behaviour internally, viewing sexual harassment as an incident that 'tough guys' should be able to endure. This mentality has adverse effects, including increased stress and job dissatisfaction (Deirkol and Nalla, 2020; Graeff and Kleinwiese, 2020). Significantly, it fortifies the unwillingness of people to deal with problems they perceive as causing 'lesser harm' or being light banter, especially given their line of work where developing a thick skin is part and parcel of the job description. Yet, as the evidence of this study suggests, these 'lesser harm' events are causing great strains even to people already exposed to external threats and challenging situations, and being unable to report them causes even more psychological problems.

Lastly, employees prefer confronting harassers directly or via a trusted colleague rather than formal complaints due to mistrust in the complaint process—even though the likelihood of a confrontation is not high, especially when the harasser is a commanding officer. This mistrust, especially if the perpetrator is superior, can leave victims feeling trapped and lead to increased stress, anxiety, and intentions to leave the job (Chan et al., 2008; Glomb et al., 1997; Hickman et al., 2016; Sweeting et al., 2022; Wright, 2010). Some alternatives were raised by the participants, as discussed below.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Future research should consider replicating this study to the entire force and possibly beyond, as research on this topic is sparse within UK policing. Beyond the need for more evidence more broadly, the present study did not identify the specific types of sexually harassing behaviour individuals experienced and witnessed. Granularity is needed, for example, by using the Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1993; Lonsway *et al.*, 2013), which can identify the types of physical and non-physical behaviours committed by perpetrators.

To identify which types of employees experience sexual harassment the most, prior research has focussed on identifying the total number of victims from a specific group (i.e. prevalence measures). For example, Taylor *et al.* (2022) found that 70.3% of female employees experienced non-physical sexual harassment compared to 40% of males. Therefore, they concluded that females experienced more sexual harassment than their male colleagues. We found similar trends. However, the present study has learned that counting the number of victims alone does not provide a complete picture of which individuals suffer from sexual harassment the most. To gain a more precise understanding, research also needs to count the individual sexual harassment incidents each subgroup of employees experiences—that is, frequencies and intersectionality. For example, the present study found that 19.8% of all constables experience sexual harassment compared to 25.9% of sergeants and 21.2% of inspectors (i.e. prevalence). However, constables experience almost 50% as many repeated physical and sexual harassment incidents than sergeants and ten times more than inspectors (i.e. frequency). Therefore, this demonstrates that while the population of constable victims is only marginally more likely to experience *an* incident than higher-ranking officers, constables experience significantly *more* sexual habitual harassment incidents.

Future research should investigate whether the same or different harassers cause repeated victimization. In domestic abuse research, Bland and Ariel (2020) consider the question of serial perpetrators who victimize multiple partners throughout a lifetime. The same likely emerges with sexual harassers. However, without evidence, this argument is speculative because there may be a culture of sexual harassment with multiple harassers operating in the same unit, as some of our respondents argued (e.g. viewing this behaviour as banter amongst colleagues), which would suggest that a different intervention is needed at a group rather than individual-base level.

Finally, future studies should entertain more sophisticated modelling and attempts to predict the likelihood of sexual harassment in the workforce rather than rely on a descriptive methodology. While outside the scope of the present article, our research has indeed the potential for deeper statistical examination through multivariate analyses, such as regression, to solidify our findings. The scholarly discourse, as exemplified by studies like Brown *et al.* (2019) and Charman (2017), along with the present study, indicates a readiness to transition from descriptive accounts of sexual harassment occurrences in police forces to more nuanced understandings of underlying causes. This move towards sophisticated statistical modelling underpinned by a robust theoretical framework that accounts for the complexities of police occupational culture and identity formation is warranted—which can potentially then provide evidence on the relative strength of the existing theories of sexual harassment.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research highlights significant policy implications on internal sexual harassment. The prevailing culture that tolerates harassment and the code of silence can lead to psychological and job-related issues among employees, affecting their performance and trust in the force. Failure to address sexual harassment could harm the force's reputation, employee morale, and recruitment, particularly of women. The participants offered several solutions.

Enhanced sexual harassment policy

Adopting McDonald *et al.*'s (2015) prevention and response framework could be beneficial. This includes primary prevention (e.g. training, 'call it out' forums), secondary intervention (e.g. confidential complaint channels, restorative justice conferencing), and tertiary intervention (e.g. protecting victims during grievances). Using real-life examples, a 'call it out' section on the intranet could effectively address the issue via peer shaming.

Training

Many respondents perceive internal sexual harassment as banter, so enhanced training is needed to clarify what constitutes harassment and its profound implications (Holgersson, 2019; Kobayashi, 2018; Lonsway *et al.*, 2013). Training should cover the complaints process, emphasizing transparency and confidentiality to build trust and encourage formal reporting. Bystander training is also essential, teaching employees to challenge misconduct instead of expecting victims to handle it alone. Case studies demonstrating successful handling of misconduct can motivate bystanders to intervene. However, training should be in-person, especially for junior employees, as online training was often considered ineffective.

Restorative justice conferencing

This study is the first to show bottom-up evidence in favour of restorative justice conferencing for low-level sexual harassment in policing. About half of the Birmingham LPA employees see it as a viable option for addressing harm caused by harassment. Restorative justice conferencing, involving dialogue between victim and perpetrator, can increase victim satisfaction, reduce stress, and deter repeat offences (Sherman *et al.*, 2015; Strang *et al.*, 2013). It allows perpetrators to understand the impact of their actions and apologize, which is especially useful when harassment is not intended as malicious. However, for restorative justice to work, perpetrators must acknowledge their behaviour, which should be framed not as an admission of guilt but as recognizing the impact of their actions (Mills *et al.*, 2019). First, however, a controlled test of restorative justice conferencing for internal sexual harassment is needed before it can be recommended as policy.

LIMITATIONS

Future research should aim to extend this study across broader and more diverse populations of police officers. While the current study offers insightful findings, they are limited to one police jurisdiction. Further research is essential to ascertain whether the identified prevalence of sexual harassment is indicative of broader trends in UK policing. Subsequent studies should also delve deeper into the specific manifestations of sexually harassing behaviour, utilizing instruments such as the sexual harassment questionnaire (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1993; Lonsway *et al.*, 2013).

Additionally, it is imperative to investigate the profiles and motivations of individuals who perpetrate sexual harassment. Alternative data collection methodologies, such as anonymous interviews, should be considered to elicit self-reported harassment and capture the intricate details of employees' experiences.

Finally, the present research measured prevalence rates for sexual harassment throughout an employee's career. In that case, the last incident may have been over ten years ago when work and societal culture/norms were different. Given the relative novelty of this line of inquiry, we were interested in the broader perspective of internal sexual harassment within policing. However, future research should also measure estimates of sexual harassment within a recent specific time frame (Lonsway *et al.*, 2013), such as within the last 2 years.

CONCLUSIONS

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive and destructive element in police workforces. Approximately one in five police employees in Birmingham, UK, have experienced verbal sexual harassment, with one in ten witnessing similar conduct. Notably, the incidence of female victims is over five times higher than that of male victims. Most victims and bystanders work in small police units within the force.

A significant finding is the pervasive influence of the 'blue code of silence' and other deterrent factors, which disincentivize employees from confronting or reporting sexual harassment. This phenomenon contributes to adverse psychological and work-related outcomes, with a notable proportion of victims (25%) contemplating resignation from the force. The study underscores a prevailing belief among employees that challenging sexual harassment is more likely to incur negative repercussions rather than favourable resolutions. This necessitates an immediate and effective response to implement strategies aimed at managing internal sexual harassment—for example, using piloting restorative justice conferences—and fostering a culture where employees feel empowered to address misconduct.

A consolidated and committed approach from police leadership and all ranks is essential. Recognizing sexual misconduct as a systemic issue rather than a problem experienced by a small number of officers is crucial. Effectively addressing sexual harassment is a step towards fostering an organizational culture marked by inclusivity and equality, which is fundamental in creating a safer workplace.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material is available at *Policing* online.

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