

The Impact of Online Abuse: Hearing the Victims' Voice

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Acknowledgements

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The survey design was reviewed by a group of academics and analysts who work in criminal justice and we are grateful to them for their comments too.

Most of all, we would like to thank those people who responded to our request for information, for giving their time and their emotional effort to help us understand their views and experiences.

Glossary

Brigading - encouraging others to harass someone.

Cyber bullying - sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content to someone with the intent to embarrass or humiliate them.

Cyber flashing – being sent unsolicited obscene images.

Cyber stalking - a form of harassment which can involve persistent and frequent unwanted contact, or interference in someone's life.

Doxing - the publishing of private or identifying information about you without your consent.

Grooming - building an emotional connection with a child / vulnerable person to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation.

Intimate Image Abuse - the sharing of intimate images taken with or without someone's consent and shared without their consent or knowledge (often referred to as 'revenge porn' or image based sexual abuse).

Online coercive behaviour - monitoring someone via online communication tools or spyware.

Online harassment - repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications or contact in a manner that could be expected to cause distress or fear.

Online impersonation - where someone creates a fake profile pretending to be the victim, with the intent to cause then distress.

Fakeporn – where pornographic images are digitally manipulated so it looks like the films or images are of someone else.

Trolling - a form of baiting online which involves sending abusive and hurtful comments across all social media platforms.

Upskirting - an intrusive practice, which typically involves someone taking a picture under another person's clothing without their knowledge.

Virtual mobbing - when a number of individuals use social media or messaging to make comments to or about someone.

Executive Summary

The Online Safety Bill

- The Online Safety Bill represents the government's manifesto commitment to 'make the UK the safest place in the world to be online'.¹ The Bill will introduce regulation to online service providers, overseen by OFCOM. It will attempt to ensure these internet service providers protect the people using these sites.
- The Bill has been criticised for both being too complex and for not providing enough detail, as the powers of the Bill are heavily reliant on secondary legislation, making it difficult to be clear about the intent of the Bill.²
- Prior research has shown that women are more likely to be harassed online and that misogyny is now commonplace on the internet.³ Yet the Bill has been criticised for failing to fully address the issue of Violence Against Women and Girls in the legislation. This means that in its current format the Bill does not address these specific problems that many women encounter on a daily basis.

About the research

- This research has been undertaken to bring the victims' voice firmly into the centre of the debate around the Online Safety Bill. The voices and words of victims of online abuse are used liberally throughout this report to ensure that a vivid picture of their experience is painted. We hope that their words can present a clear vision of the abuse they suffer and the difficulties they face when attempting to get this abuse stopped.
- **Five hundred and thirty four people responded** to our request for information about their experience of online abuse, which was open for almost six weeks, commencing 20th January 2022. Participants were sought through the Victims' Commissioner website and social media, with further dissemination by victims' service agencies who kindly agreed to support this research.
- We cannot claim that this **self-selecting group of respondents** is representative of all people who have experienced online abuse and we know that **some groups were over and under-represented** in our data.

A note on terminology

- We are conscious that some victims dislike the negative connotations occasionally associated with the term 'victim'. Some victims and many non-statutory agencies prefer to use the word 'survivor' and we respect their view. For the purposes of this report, however, we have mostly used the term 'victim' because it's the term that most agencies use and understand when referring to someone who has experienced victimisation.
- In addition, the legislation which underpins the Victims' Commissioner's role makes clear the remit includes all victims, regardless of the type of crime committed against them, whether they report it to the police and whether or not anyone is convicted.

¹ [Online Safety Bill: factsheet - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/factsheets/online-safety-bill-factsheet)

² [Online Safety Bill: Second Reading Briefing - Carnegie UK Trust](https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/online-safety-bill-second-reading-briefing)

³ Amnesty International (2018) Troll Patrol Findings: Using Crowdsourcing, Data Science & Machine Learning to Measure Violence and Abuse against Women on Twitter <https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings>

Multiple abuses experienced

- Typically, people experienced multiple types of online abuse. **The average was 4.2 types of abuse.** Women reported experiencing higher numbers of abuse, with an average of **4.4 harms** for women vs **3.9 for men**.
- With some crime types victims reported higher numbers of harms experienced. Victims of **intimate image abuse** reported an **average of 7.9 harms** per person, while victims of **cyber stalking** were experiencing **on average 6.9 harms**.

Women more likely to experience online abuse

- **In 12 of the 21 categories of online abuse, women reported higher levels of victimisation.** Abuses such as intimate image abuse, cyber stalking and cyber flashing were significantly more likely to be experienced by women.

Abuse can occur for many years

- Victims were most likely to report that the abuse had occurred for either a short or long time. **26% said the abuse lasted less than one month, while 22% said it lasted more than two years.**
- Victims of cyber stalking reported the longest time frames with **40% of victims reporting experiencing the abuse for more than 2 years.**

Reporting of the abuse

- Reporting levels were high with **62% of respondents reporting to either the police or the internet companies.**
- Dissatisfaction with that reporting was also high, **with 65% of people who reported to the internet companies and 55% of people who reported to the police** telling us they were **dissatisfied** with their experience of reporting.

Impact of the abuse

- Almost all victims of online abuse reported experiencing some level of harm from the abuse, with only **9% of people telling us the abuse did not bother them.**
- Levels of harm varied depending upon the abuse people experienced. Victims of **intimate image abuse** and **cyber stalking** reported **higher levels of harm** than victims of other types of abuse.

What victims of online abuse want from the Online Safety Bill

- Online harm has real implications for the people who experience it and victims of online abuse want the Online Safety Bill to reflect those real harms. When people are experiencing online abuse, they want action. When they report the abuse, they want to be taken seriously. They want both the police and internet companies to listen to their concerns and to act swiftly. Inaction is not an option. Police must work hard to investigate these crimes and apply the law. The internet companies must work hard to remove the abusive content and to act against people on their sites perpetrating the abuse. Please turn to **section 9** for a fuller discussion of our overarching research findings and **section 3** for our recommendations.

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1. Foreword by Dame Vera Baird QC



We launched this research to contribute to the development of the Online Safety Bill currently going through Parliament and designed to 'make the UK the safest place in the world to be online'. It will regulate online service providers to protect people using these sites. However, a lot of abuse is currently committed on the internet and we wanted the voice of victims of that crime to be heard during consideration of the Bill.

We have worked to understand how online abuse impacts victims. Are online crimes as impactful as those which occur offline?

Our research shows clearly that that online crime can be deeply impactful. The more than 500 people who responded to our survey made clear that online abuse is highly intrusive and can have a traumatising impact, instilling fear, undermining self-esteem and, with the worst and most frequently committed crimes, filling the victim with so much guilt and shame that they sometimes withdraw from all social interaction.

We intend to bring the victims' voice firmly into the centre of the debate on online protections. The voices and words of victims of online abuse are used liberally throughout this report so that a vivid picture of their experiences is painted.

Earlier research has shown that women are more likely to be the victims of online harassment and that misogyny is commonplace on the internet.⁴ The most serious crimes, cyber stalking and the publication of intimate images, are more often committed against women. Men are subjected to other forms of online abuse and are often also deeply affected.

It is easiest to understand the impact of online crimes by reference to the posting of intimate images. Unless they are removed quickly, images can be reproduced, copied shared and viewed almost without limit. The victim cannot know how many times that has happened or who has seen them. It is easy to understand why they develop a fear that everyone they meet has seen these shameful images. This can leave people unable to face the social world. This research highlights, through the victims own words, the deep and lasting impact of this crime.

The impact of the other most serious online crime, cyber stalking can be long-lasting. 40% of the victims of cyber stalking who responded to our survey suffered this gruelling abuse for over 2 years, during which they were harassed and reduced to misery, leaving profound long term effects on their well-being and sense of security.

Victims seek help for these crimes from the police and from internet companies. On many occasions, victims found that the Police did not understand what was a crime and what was not, were not well-trained in internet skills, and were mainly of the view that the right answer was to block the abuser - a pointless exercise given how easy it is to set up a new identity online and start abusing the victim again. Victims felt that their experience was minimised and trivialised by police. There were a few who had received good and attentive service

⁴ Amnesty International (2018) Troll Patrol Findings: Using Crowdsourcing, Data Science & Machine Learning to Measure Violence and Abuse against Women on Twitter <https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings>

from individual officers and spoke highly of the restorative impact of their empathy and determination to help. But this should be the norm.

There is a clear need for more police training, preferably universal, but at least to provide a cohort of officers in every force who are internet savvy. These officers can supplement public protection units or support response officers by tackling the online aspects of abuse.

In respect of the internet companies it is difficult to make a complaint. There is invariably no human to speak to. The most usual response is an automatic reply that this abuse does not break the regulations and there is nothing to be done. Clearly, the current Bill should put an end to that glib response and we recommend that it goes further and provides that it should always be a person who deals with these complaints. More than that they need to take action. A repeated ask from victims, when they reported to the internet companies, was to have the material taken down immediately. That is obviously imperative with such crimes and it is shameful victims struggle to get this aim achieved. Victims also wanted the culprit removed from the site to prevent them doing the same to anyone else. This does not seem to be too much to ask for.

There is also a great need for specialist support in the victims' sector, where victims are given help with technological issues and appropriate support to cope with and recover from what has happened. However, there are relatively few victim support services which have the technical skillset to play that role and who focus on this area. They are poorly funded where they exist and one of our recommendations is that Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) should be resourced to provide this support.

Although 'upskirting', threatening to use intimate images and other online abuses have been criminalised in the past year or so, we have concerns about how practical these offences are to prosecute. To be proved each of them requires proof of a specific intent. For instance, a person who takes a photograph up a woman's skirt is not guilty of an offence unless he did so for sexual gratification or 'to cause humiliation, distress or alarm'. We see no need for long arguments in court as to the defendant's motivation. Upskirting or committing similar offences should be a crime without specific intent. We hope that this needless complexity can be removed as the Bill proceeds.

Victims suffer deeply when they are abused online. It is reassuring to see the government take such a strong stance towards internet safety in this Bill. It's essential that the government follows through and commits the same energy in driving criminal justice agencies to properly tackle online crime and elevate the status and treatment of victims. It is my hope that the development of the Online Safety Bill will centre the victims' voice and lived experience and rescue this cohort of victims from the relative neglect they suffer at present.



Dame Vera Baird QC

Victims' Commissioner – England and Wales

2. Overview of the Research and the Report

The internet is part of life for most people in the United Kingdom. Nearly nine in ten UK adults and 99% of 12 to 15 year olds are online.⁵ The proliferation of the internet has presented society with a new set of harms. Where the home was once before regarded as a safe haven, abuse can now be perpetrated against people whilst they are behind their front door. The reach of the internet and its pervasiveness in our lives means that new ways have to be sought to prevent people from experiencing harm.

Due to this internet safety has become an important topic for discussion in recent years. Governments around the world are struggling to find a way to regulate content and behaviour on the internet. 'Online harms' is a broad and wide ranging term that can include behaviour that is illegal and already covered within the current law, but also behaviour that is not illegal per se, such as bullying but can be detrimental to peoples wellbeing and mental health.

The aim of the Online Safety Bill is to increase user safety online, to improve the ability of law enforcement to tackle illegal content online, to improve people's ability to keep themselves safe online and to improve society's understanding of these harms.⁶ The Bill intends to do this by imposing regulation on the internet companies by [OFCOM](#).

There has been criticism of the Bill in its current form. It has been criticised for being both too wide ranging, by attempting to cover a multitude of online harms, and not being specific or robust enough to make a difference.⁷ Specifically, criticism has been levelled that the Bill does not address the harms that woman and girls face online.⁸ Research has shown that women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men,⁹ therefore it is vital that the bill addresses these harms.

As the Online Safety Bill makes its way through Parliament it is extremely important that victims experiences are considered. The Victims' Commissioner undertook this research to better understand the experiences of victims of online abuse as it is experienced by people every day. Consequently, this research will highlight and help to understand the issues that victims of online abuse think the Online Safety Bill should be addressing.

This report draws from 534 responses to a request for information about people's experiences of a range of online abuses, conducted between January and February 2022. We asked people to tell us about their experience of online abuse, if they reported the abuse to anyone and if they did we asked about their experience of that process. We also asked why people chose not to report, how they managed to cope with the abuse and what impact the abuse has had on them.

Throughout this report we refer to online abuse. In many cases these abuses are criminal actions which fall within my remit as Victims' Commissioner. However, the law has not yet fully caught up with the range of harms that can be perpetrated online and so we have looked more widely at a variety of abuses, some criminal, some not, in order to fully understand the landscape of online harm.

⁵ [Online Harms White Paper - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Have your say on the Online Safety Bill - UK Parliament](#)

⁷ [Online Safety Bill: Second Reading Briefing - Carnegie UK Trust](#)

⁸ [Online safety and online harms \(parliament.uk\)](#)

⁹ European Women's Lobby (2017) Her Net Her Rights – Mapping the state of online violence against women and girls in Europe

Respondents to our request for information

Because the sample was self-selecting, we cannot say that this group is representative of all people who have experienced online abuse. Of those responding, we had a good spread by most demographic factors,¹⁰ but there were dimensions which were over and under-represented: most notably, a high proportion of people who were over the age of 50, (228, 43% of our respondents). Of those who were over 50, 90 of them were male meaning that 53% of our male respondents were aged 50 or above. Additionally we had a low number of responses from people who were Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, limiting what we can conclude about these victims.

The structure of the report

This report will discuss the findings from this research. Chapter three will begin by presenting our recommendations. Chapter four presents a general view of the findings, looking at the types of abuse that are experienced, who they are from and how long these abuses tend to occur for. In chapter five the report will examine the experiences people have of reporting the abuse to both the police and the internet companies. Then in chapter six the report will explore the very real impact that this abuse has on the lives of the people who are experiencing it. These harms are not experienced equally by all victims of online abuse and in chapters seven and eight the report will look in detail at the experiences of people who reported the highest levels of harm: those people who experienced intimate image abuse and cyber stalking and lastly chapter nine presents the key findings of the research.

¹⁰ See Annex 1 for a more detailed demographic breakdown of respondents.

3. Recommendations

For internet providers

- Internet companies must have clear and easy to follow complaints procedures that can be readily accessed.
- Complaints need to be handled by people not algorithms or bots.
- Internet providers should be required to publish thematic records relating to the number and type of complaints they have received, and the outcome of those complaints.
- Abusive content should be removed immediately on request – prior to an investigation taking place.
- Providers should incorporate principles of safety by design.
- Given the extent of VAWG online and the high levels of harm tech companies should consider adopting the Code of practice created by Carnegie UK, The End Violence Against Women Coalition, Glitch, NSPCC, Refuge, 5Rights and academics Lorna Woods and Clare McGlynn.¹¹
- Moderators and complaints handlers should be trained to understand the intersecting nature of online harms based on personal characteristics.

For police

- Police need to have specialism to enable officers to deal with online crimes.
- Officers should be trained to better understand the technology required to investigate online crimes.
- They should be trained by experts on the nature of online abuse including specialist experts in sexual violence, domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG.
- They should be trained to understand patterns of behaviour in online abuse and how they can escalate.
- They should be trained to ensure they understand how to use the current laws that exist.
- They should be trained in cultural awareness / sensitivity
 - They should be aware of specialised requirements of particular groups of people (e.g. learning disabled people or minoritised groups).

Government, policy makers and commissioners

- Government should consider reform of the laws which relate to online abuse to ensure they are fit for purpose and future proofed, e.g. there should not be a requirement to allege the intention to cause distress for posting intimate images or the purpose for which someone is upskirting. Crimes of online abuse should be

¹¹ [VAWG-Code-of-Practice-16.05.22-Final.pdf \(endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk\)](#)

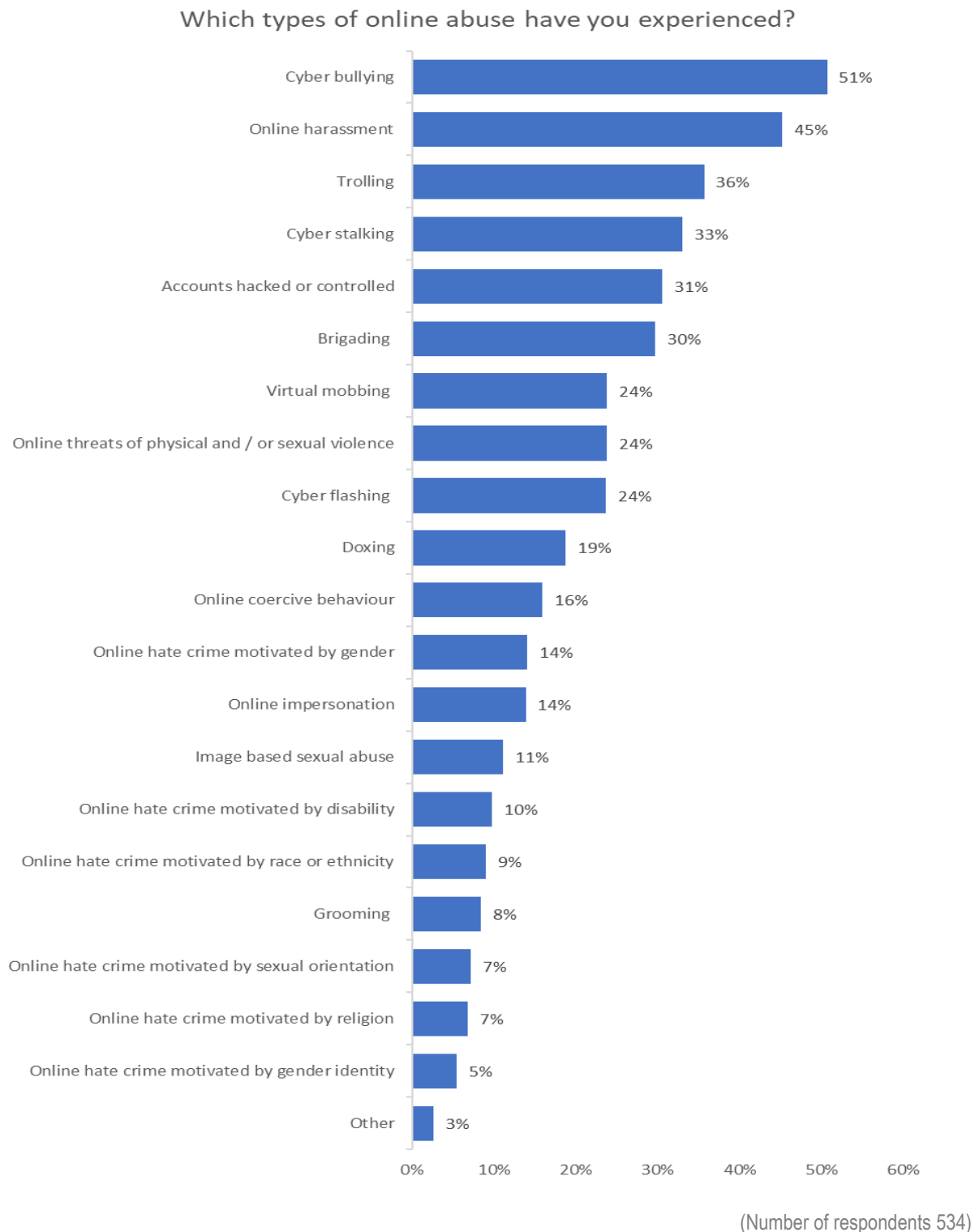
crimes of general not specific intent since the harm is caused by the simple act of posting the material.

- Government should commit to long term funding for specialist support services for victims of online abuse, they should also encourage commissioners to map gaps in provision to ensure that appropriate support is available for those that need and want it. Support in this context includes both emotional support and support and assistance for people in getting content removed.
- Whilst our research had limited responses from people who experienced religious or racial hate crime online, what it did show is that those that do also experience very high harm. Other research also suggests that certain groups are more likely to experience online harassment and abuse, such as black and minoritised women; as such government should also ensure there is availability of appropriate by and for services.
- Given the findings in this research we would recommend that all PCC areas review the provision of victims' support services in their area to ensure victims of online abuse have access to specialist support services that might be required.
- Government should reinstate the digital safety/ digital citizenship education element to the Bill.
- Given the endemic nature of high harm caused by online VAWG government should name this as one of the harms on the face of the legislation and should amend Clause 37 of the bill to include a specific reference to a code of practice on online VAWG, which would enable OFCOM to pick up the reins of the code already created by the coalition of VAWG organisations (mentioned above) and make it a reality.

4. Overview of Experiences of Online Abuse

Types of abuse experienced

We asked respondents to indicate the type of abuse they experienced online (please see the glossary for an explanation of the terms used).



Respondents reported experiencing a range of online abuse. Cyber bullying was the most commonly experienced, with 51% of people reporting this. Online hate motivated by gender identity was the least reported. Below are a selection of the types of online abuse our respondents have told us about:

Mocking, racial abuse, calling me stupid and disparaging what I do.

I've had people tell me to kill myself, harm myself, tell me that I'm ugly, etc.

And of course the dick pics. Pictures of men's penises sent to me without asking. Often I won't even have interacted with that particular user in any way or have said anything explicit or sexual. They just see that I am a woman from my username or a comment I have written and they just send you one.

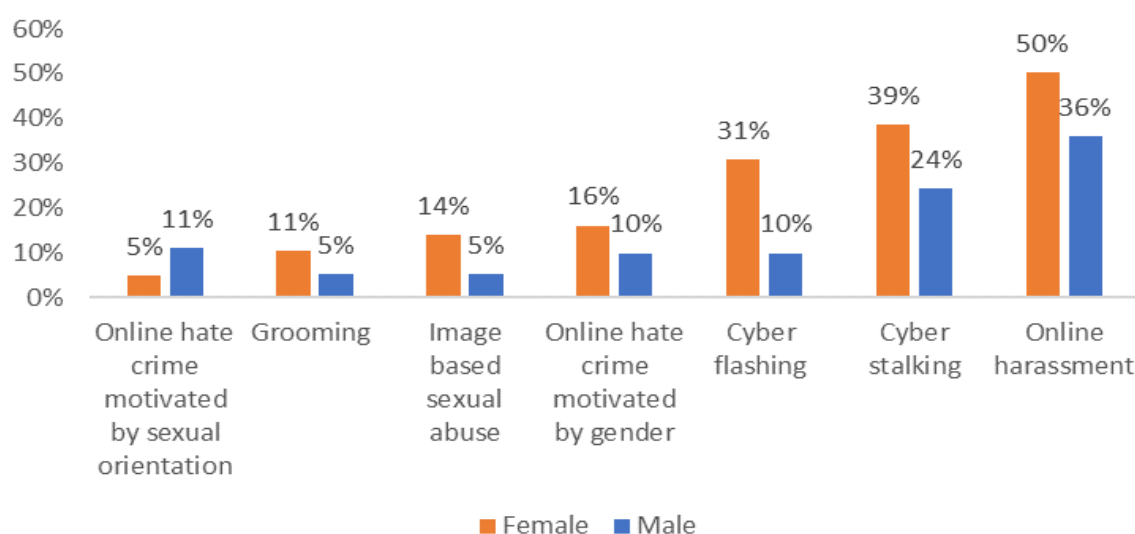
Typically, people had experienced multiple types of abuse with the average number of harms experienced being 4.2 per person.

I was harassed by a work colleague on WhatsApp. He would not take no for an answer, wouldn't accept that I didn't want to go out with him.

Most of the abuse takes place on social media with 60% of people reporting the abuse occurred on Facebook. Abuse is not fully contained in the online realm, with 40% of people reporting that the abuse also happened in person.

There was a difference in the types of abuse experienced by sex. In some categories women were significantly more likely to be the recipients of abuse than men.

Types of online abuse experienced by sex



(Number of respondents 534)

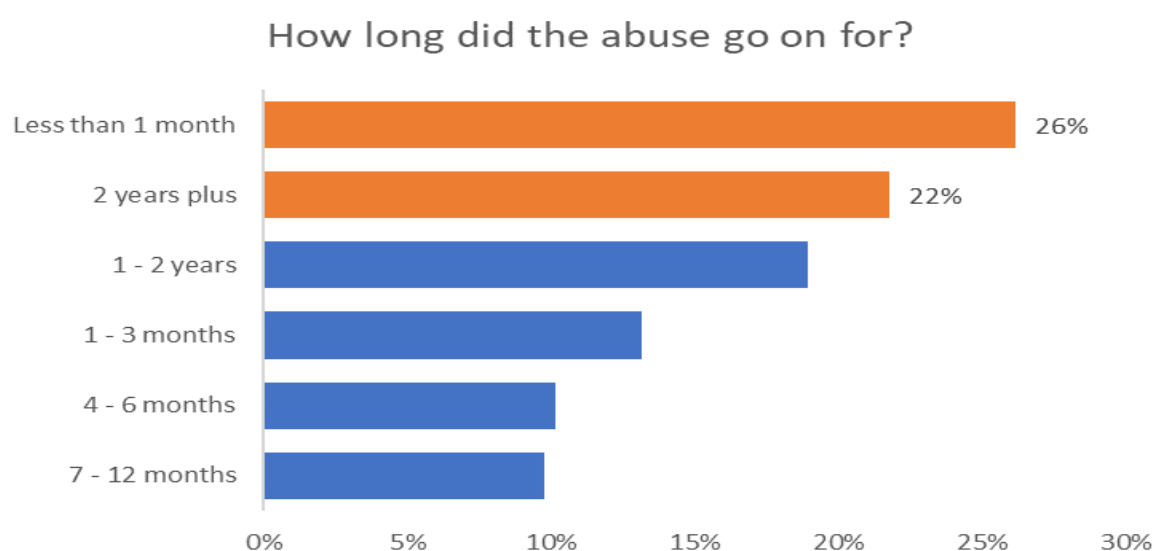
Women were 21 percentage points more likely to have reported experiencing cyber flashing, 15 percentage points more likely to have reported cyber stalking and 14 percentage points more likely to have reported experiencing online harassment. The voices of the victims below provide an insight into the types of abuse that women are experiencing.

I get unsolicited pictures online every now and again of men's penises. Why? I don't want or have invited that. If you report them sometimes they message you with a new account and name and harass you. It never seems to end and when you say something about it to people a lot of the response is, 'oh I know'. Like that is totally normal to experience indecent pictures at any age if you are online. It's disgusting!

The majority of the abuse has been unsolicited sexual images from males and unwanted descriptions of sexual acts, sexual comments. I have also been threatened, stalked, called names, (usually where a rejection has been involved).

Length of time the abuse was experienced

The abuse is likely to last either a very short time or continue on for some years. Almost half of the respondents (48%) reported the experience lasted either for less than one month or for more than two years.



(Number of respondents 501)

Of those 109 people who reported experiencing the online abuse for more than two years, 21% of those people said the abuse lasted for more than nine years.

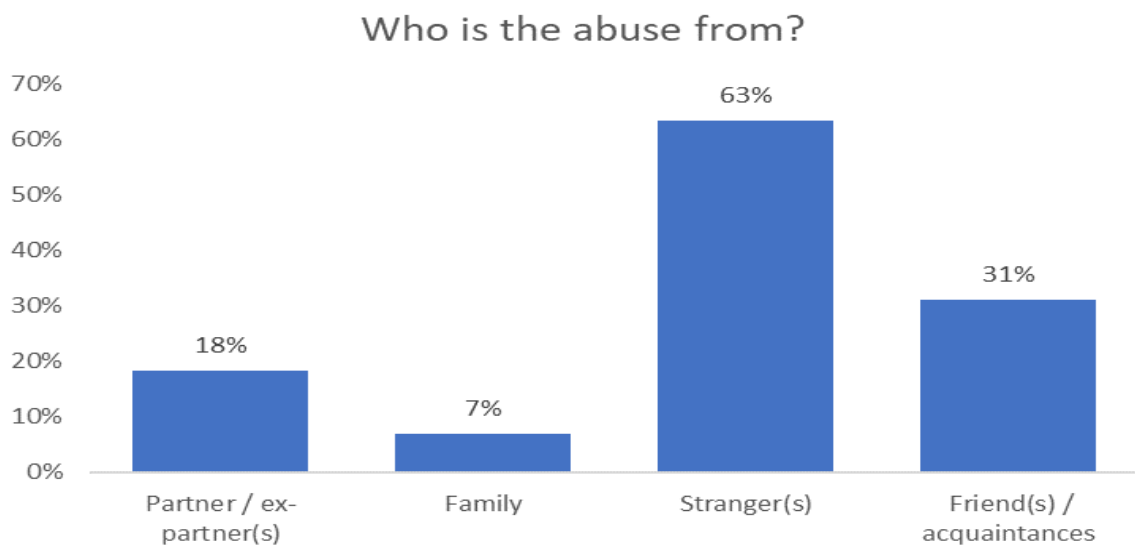
It has gone on for more than 6 years with absolutely no action by the police and CPS.

I have been harassed by at least 4 men and 3 women - it's a small gang - on line for the last 4 years.

The repeated and consistent abuse can be very difficult for people to endure, especially when the people committing the abuse continually generate new accounts to continue the harassment. As this victim tells us, they are waiting all the time for the next incident to occur.

A guy I never even met, who I spoke to in an online group, had seemed like he wanted support. I was friendly but when he made advances I rejected him. After that he kept harassing me for years. I never replied to the messages he'd send, I just blocked his account. He'd then make another and another. Every time I thought finally he won't contact me again, after months or a year had passed I'd get harassing messages again from another new account. I reported every account to Facebook and they did nothing.

Who was the abuse from?



(Number of respondents 534)

Most people, 63%, reported receiving the abuse from strangers. However, when broken down by sex men were 10 percentage points more likely to report their abuse was from strangers than women, at 70% vs 60%. Whereas women were more likely to experience abuse from their friends or acquaintances than men were, 34% vs 24%.

Being told to get out of my pit and get a fucking job on a neighbour's Facebook page as I can't work due to disability.

When a group of peers discovered I was transgender and was born female they started to harass me via multiple platforms. They made threats to me and used images of me without consent to expose me.

My ex-partner hacked my Facebook account, wrote slanderous messages about me on it, sent direct messages to my family and my boss at the time.

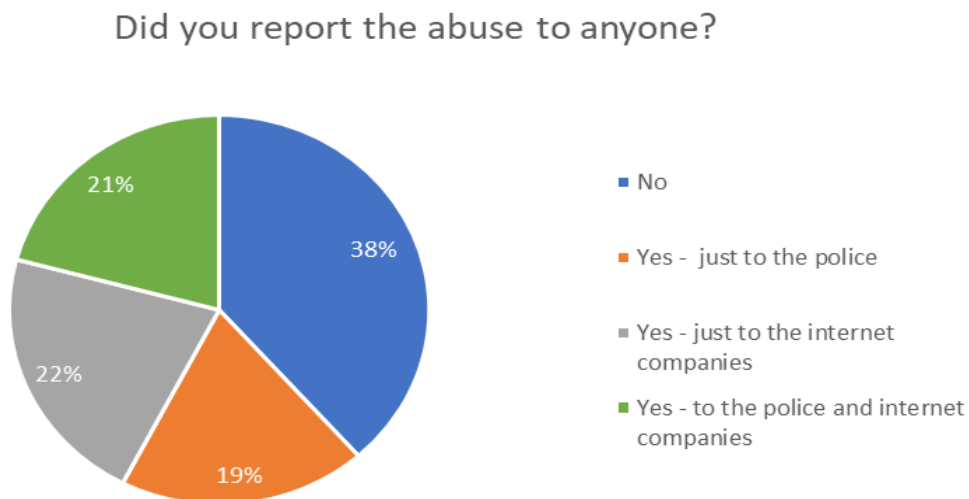
Conclusion to section 4: experiences of online abuse

The most common types of abuse reported are cyber bullying and online harassment. For the majority of the respondents, 77% reported experiencing more than one type of online abuse, with the average person experiencing 4.2 types of abuse. Social media was the most common platform for the abuse with 59% of people reporting they received abuse from multiple platforms. People were most likely to receive the abuse from strangers and reported that it lasted less than a month.

5. Reporting of Abuse

Reporting to the police

62% of respondents reported the abuse to either the police, the internet companies or both. For those that did not report the abuse a key reason for this was that people wanted to move on with their lives, 39%, or they thought the matter was too trivial, 35%.



(Number of respondents 534)

Of those that did report the abuse, 40% reported their abuse to the police. There were high levels of dissatisfaction with their experience of reporting, with 55% of people telling us they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the response they received from the police. Some respondents told us of a catalogue of errors that increased the levels of abuse they received.

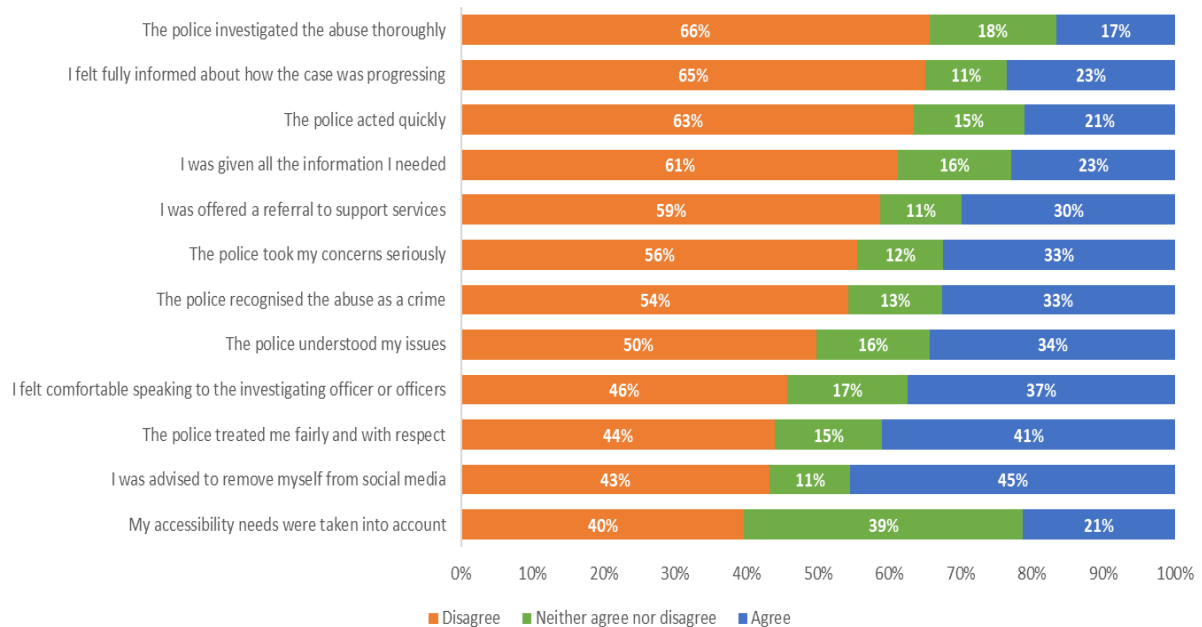
In the report I made to police they mixed up victim and perpetrator details and gave the person threatening me my personal details, as a result threats increased and I was at greater risk as they now knew my place of work and other personal details. Their motive to target me increased.

Whereas others felt that the police were blaming them for the abuse they were receiving and placing the onus on them, as the victim, to keep themselves safe, rather than acknowledge that the abuser was responsible.

When I went to the police about the hacking of my social media to stalk me, they said there was nothing they could do as he wasn't breaching his 'non-molestation

order'. I was told it was my own fault and I shouldn't have social media or tag when I go out.

The proportion of people who agreed / disagreed with the following statements regarding their experience of reporting to the police



(Number of respondents 169-200)

As the above graph shows, there was a high level of concern expressed around the speed of the police response, with 63% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that the police acted quickly. People also expressed dissatisfaction with the information they received from the police. Right 6 of the Victims' Code¹² states that victims have the right to be 'provided with information about the investigation and prosecution' of their case. However, despite this only 23% of people felt they were fully informed about their case progression or that they had all the information about it they required.

The initial police response was good and they took it seriously but they were slow to contact the alleged perpetrators and did very little to investigate.

Following confirmation that the individual had sent the messages, a community resolution order was really not the correct "disposal" for these crimes. Also the shift patterns of officers meaning it took weeks between calls and updates, and meant the officers was unable to understand the nuance of the abuse. Having to

¹² [The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales and supporting public information materials - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime-in-england-and-wales)

repeatedly self-advocate and repeat the abuse to the police, compounded its impact.

Although a third of people told us they felt their concerns were taken seriously, less than 20%, 1 in five people, felt their case had been thoroughly investigated. And only four people told us their case had been successfully prosecuted. Often victims were required to monitor the abuse themselves and report it on to the police. This served to deepen the impact of the abuse on them.

The inability of the police to investigate a crime and work with the platforms is also incredibly frustrating, leaving the victim needing to monitor the perpetrators' channels or receive screenshots from friends to use as evidence. This too compounds the abuse and makes it hard to leave the arena of distress.

When reporting, what the victims most wanted was that the abuse would stop, 49% and that the abuser would be prevented from continuing the abuse, 45%. Thirty-seven per cent of people who were in this situation seriously wanted someone to believe them and help them with the problem.

When people had a good experience with the police it could be transformative. Time and time again victims tell us that their primary aim is to be believed and not to be dismissed or belittled. In this respect victims of online abuse are no different to all other victims of crime. The two quotes below, from the same victim, shows the impact that an engaged and knowledgeable officer can have but how that positive experience can be vastly different from officer to officer.

The first officer in charge of my case was amazing. A thoughtful, empathetic and empowering approach to my 'victimhood'. He took action, kept me informed and didn't for a second blame me for the situation.

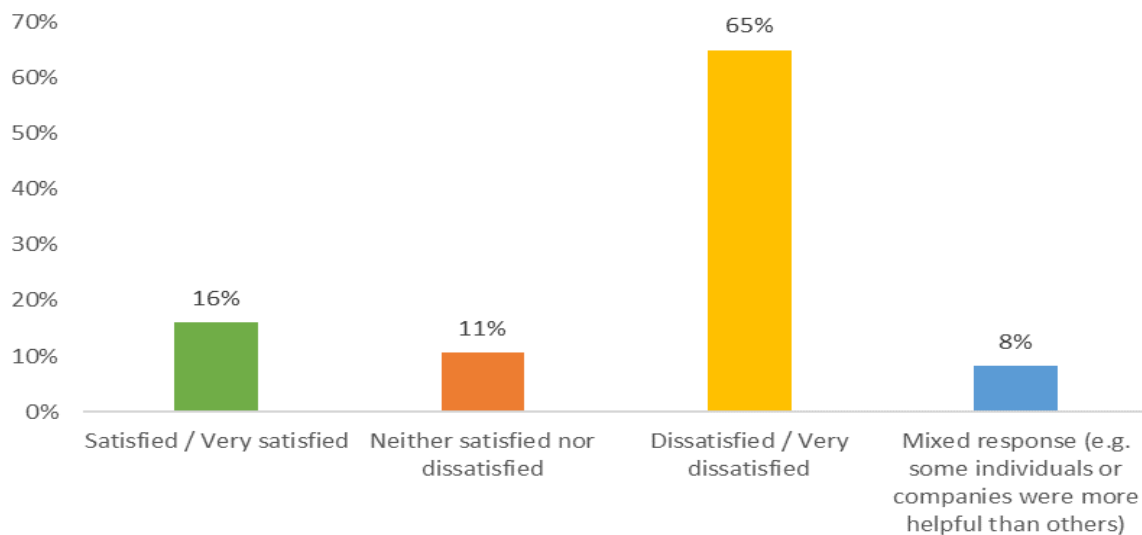
Another officer, who has since taken over the case, was totally insensitive, triggering and inappropriate. He called my stalker "a clown that's obsessed with you" and asked me what relationship I had with him in a completely unnecessary context - with a clear overtone of "what did you do to cause this". He was awful and I considered writing a letter of complaint but didn't feel it would be taken seriously if I did.

Reporting to the internet companies

Forty-three per cent of respondents reported the abuse they experienced to the internet companies. There were even higher levels of dissatisfaction expressed with the internet companies than with the police, with 65% of people telling us they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the response they received from them.

The company gave absolutely no response to my reporting this at all. I have since deleted my account as there is too much abuse on this particular site.

Satisfaction with response of reporting to internet companies



(Number of respondents 206)

Generally victims expressed frustration about the complaint process and their inability to speak to a person about the abuse, with 83% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement 'I was able to speak to someone', and 76% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their only method of contacting the internet companies was via a form. These victims expressed their frustration at a lack of human interaction or response:

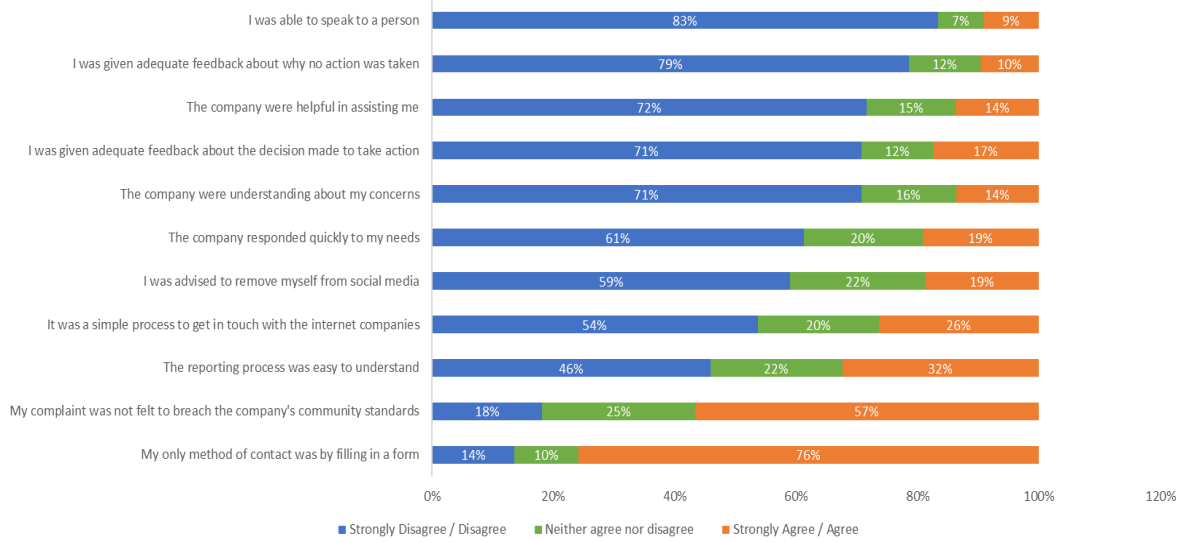
Completely automated responses, lack of human interaction, no personal contact with a decision maker, no continuity.

Facebook does not respond to anyone. It is only guess work if they have taken any action.

Only 14% of people agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'The company were understanding about my concerns' and only 14% agreed that the company were helpful in assisting them. Many respondents told us that if they did receive a response from the internet companies it was only to tell them that their complaint did not breach the company's guidelines. Their advice was often for the users to block the people perpetrating the abuse which did not resolve the issue as it is easy for people to quickly make multiple different accounts, as this quote from a respondent shows.

I've not had any reply back about my report at all, so I don't know what has been done if anything at all. They said it didn't go against their community standards. They just tell you to block them which doesn't help as they make another account.

The proportion of people who agreed / disagreed with the following statements regarding their experience of reporting to the internet companies



(Number of respondents 166 - 207)

As with those that reported to the police, what most victims wanted was the internet companies to step in and prevent the abuse from happening. The most important outcome for our respondents was that the abuse would stop, 48%, the abuser would be prevented from continuing, 57% and the abuser would be removed from social media 44%.

They told me to block the user, which I did, but their account remained active online afterwards so they could do it again to other people I'm sure.

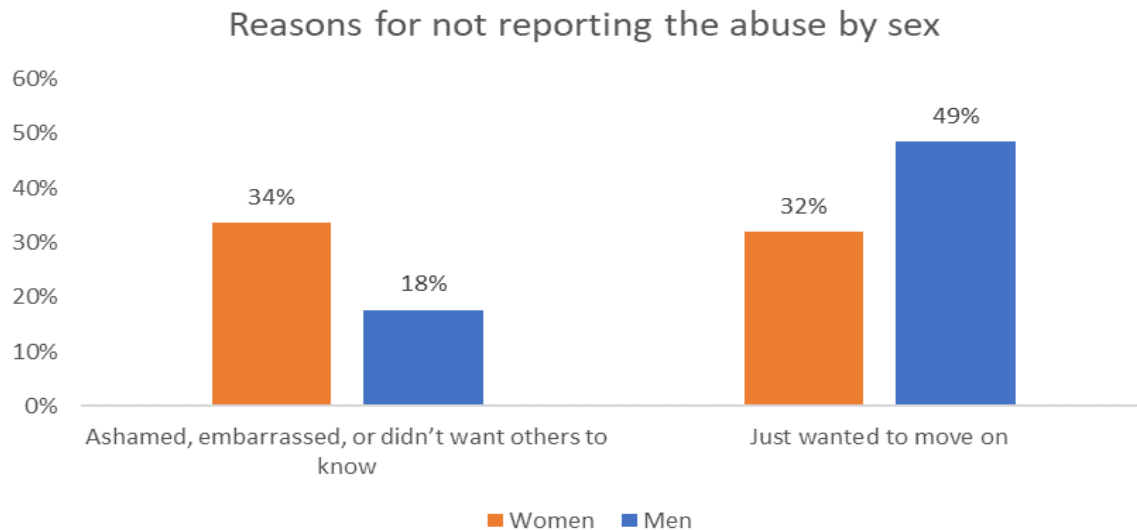
They initially sent an automated response which said the posts did not meet their threshold for harassment but I could request a 'human' review, I then responded to ask for a 'human' review'. This still said the posts did not meet their threshold for action and advised me to block the individuals.

Non-reporting

Not all of our respondents reported the abuse to the police or to the internet companies, 38% decided not to report, the most common reason being that people just wanted to move on with their lives, 39% and feeling that the abuse was too trivial, 35%.

It happens constantly. If I went to the police every time someone was abusive online I'd be there every other day.

Men were significantly more likely to feel this way than women were, with 49% of men stating they wanted to move on vs 32% of women. The key reason why women did not report was that they were embarrassed or ashamed about the abuse they were receiving.



(Number of respondents 205)

There was an air of resignation from those who chose not to report and 25% of people told us they felt that there was no point in reporting the abuse as nothing would come from the complaint. One respondent told us.

The sad truth is women don't expect anything to be done about it. "Well, don't go online/to that site" is the usual response, along with "boys will be boys." I'd report it if I felt anything would be done.

Conclusion to section 5: reporting to the police and internet companies

Generally, there was dissatisfaction with the responses people received when they reported the abuse to the police or the internet companies. Although 33% of respondents said the police recognised the abuse as a crime, 33% also told us the police did not investigate these offences and a further 16% said that no action was taken after an investigation took place. The overriding message from people who have experienced these abuses is that they wanted either the police or the internet companies to step in to stop the abuse from continuing. The response from the internet companies was particularly disappointing with people continually being told the abuse did not breach their guidelines and the only advice given was to block the abusers, an action that seemed futile given the ease in people opening up new accounts. This air of futility carried on into people's reasonings for not reporting as 25% of people did not report the abuse because they felt that nothing would be done.

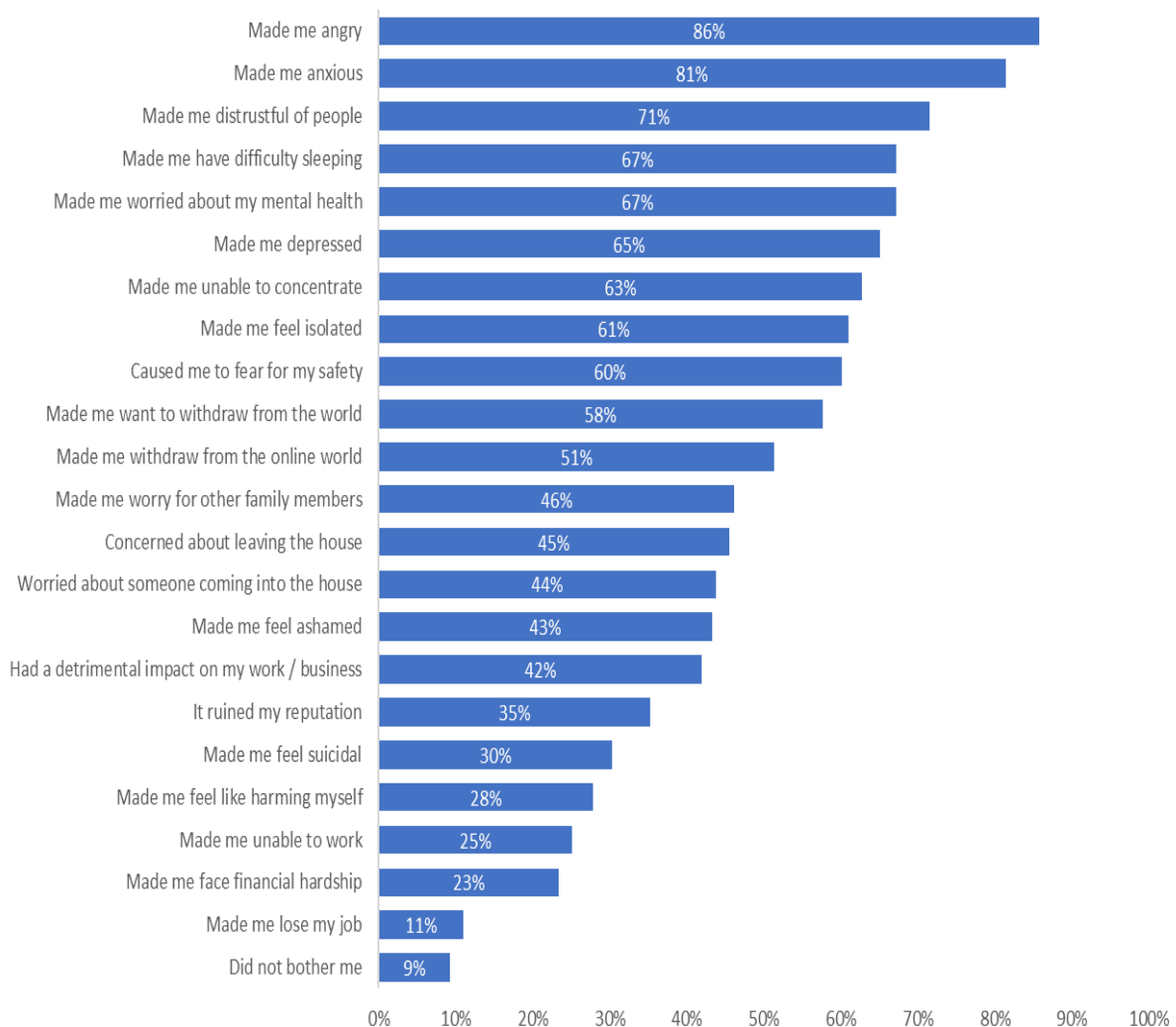
6. Impact of the Abuse

Introduction

Respondents were given a range of responses to select than described the impact of the abuse on them. Most people reported feeling angry, 86% and anxious 81%. Only 9% of people felt the abuse did not bother them.

It just made me want to withdraw from the outside world and feel very alone and depressed.

Percentage of respondents who agreed / strongly agreed with the following statements relating to the impact of the abuse



(Number of respondents 534)

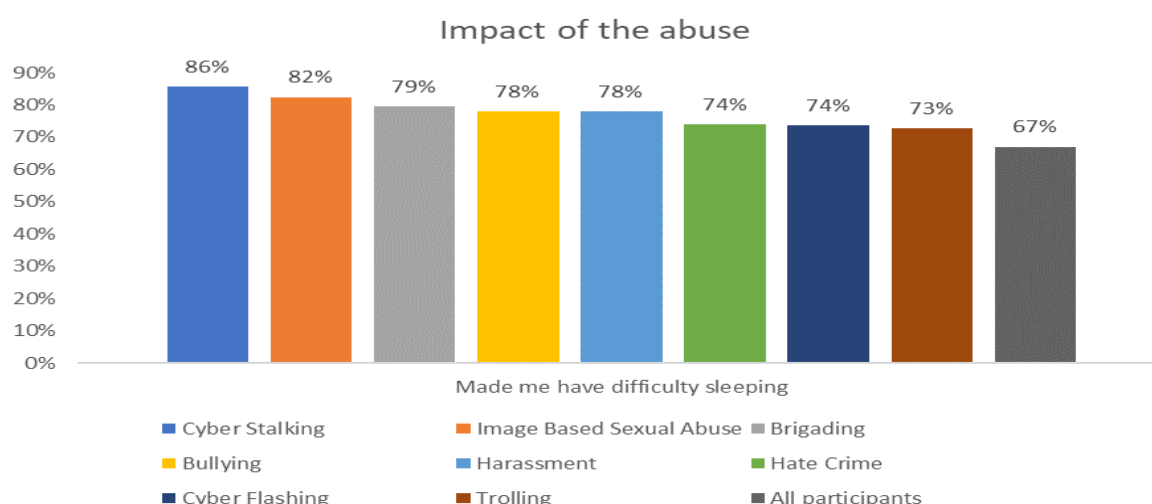
However, there were differences in these responses based on the sex of the respondent with only 3% of women stating they were not bothered by the abuse as opposed to 17% of men. Women were more likely to say that the abuse made them feel ashamed, 49% vs 35% of men.

My reactions and moods impacted my reaction and tolerance to them but also I felt isolated and felt embarrassed to mention it given the abuse was about me.

Women were also more likely to report that the abuse made them feel isolated 65% vs 54%.

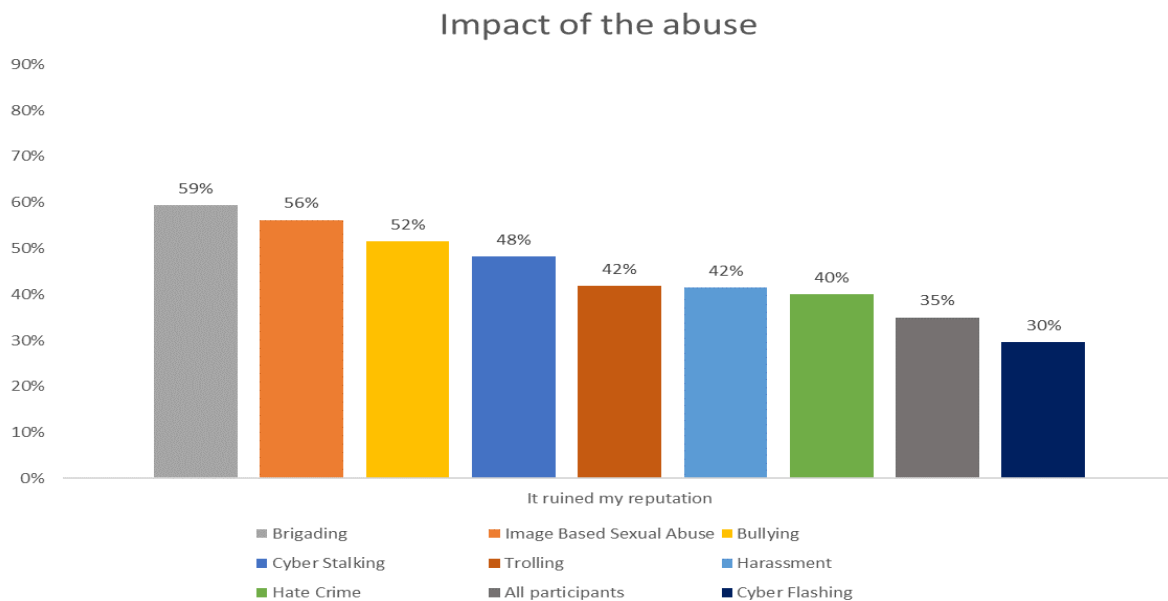
I cannot enjoy everyday life anymore as I'm stuck in fright mode, I just struggle to get through each day, cannot work, cannot do any of the craft work I once used to enjoy, I feel I've been robbed of my life.

So although there were some differences discerned by sex the type of abuse experienced also impacted on the level of harms that were experienced.



(Number of respondents 56-255)

The chart above shows that people experienced trouble sleeping because of the abuse. Across all participants 67% of people reported having trouble sleeping but that varied depending on the abuse they were subjected too. This ranged from 86% for people who were victims of cyber stalking to 73% for people who had been trolled.



(Number of respondents 56-255)

When the results are disaggregated by crime type we can see that 35% of all participants reported that the abuse ruined their reputation, but again that varied from 59%, for people who had experienced brigading feeling that their reputation was ruined, to 30% for victims of cyber flashing, who were significantly less likely to feel their reputation was damaged by the abuse.

Conclusion to section 6: the impact of the abuse

The majority of respondents have suffered an emotional impact from the abuse they have experienced. Only 9% of people felt the abuse did not have any impact on them. However, we have already seen that some types of crime can result in higher levels of harm. The following chapters will look at case studies of people who have reported suffering more severe impacts from the abuse they were subjected to. These are victims of intimate image abuse and victims of cyber stalking. By looking at these victims' experiences in more detail it will be possible to understand, from their words, the impact this abuse has had on them, their lives and families. And to explore, if or how they have managed to cope with the abuse.

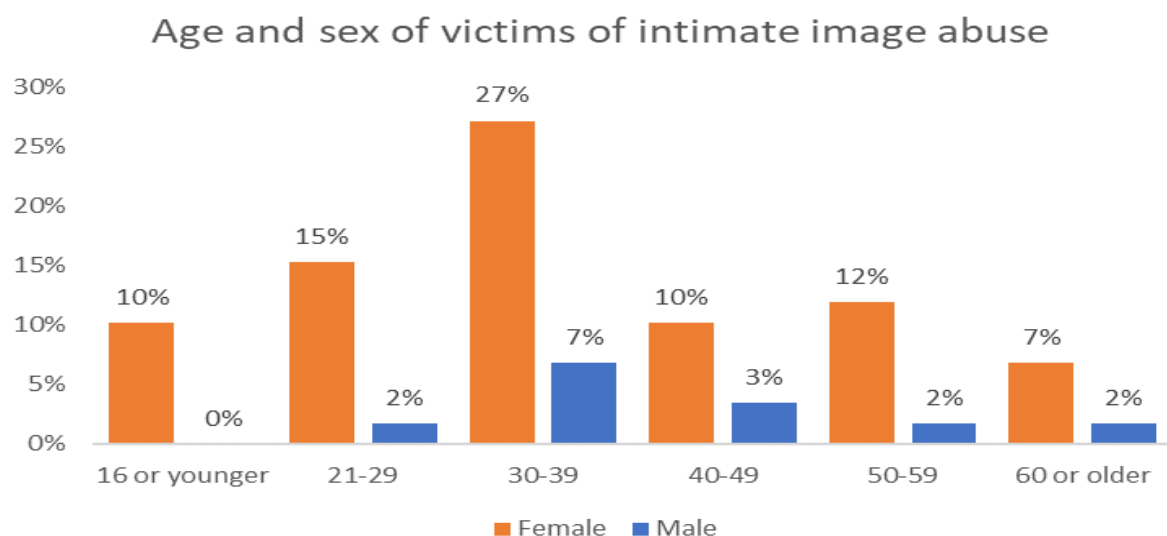
7. Intimate Image Abuse

Introduction

This section examines the impact of intimate image abuse, sometimes referred to as image based sexual abuse or revenge porn. This is the creation, sharing or distribution of intimate images without consent. This section will highlight, in detail, the experiences of the victims of this type of online abuse and show the harms that they suffer as a result of this abuse.

Who are the victims of intimate image abuse?

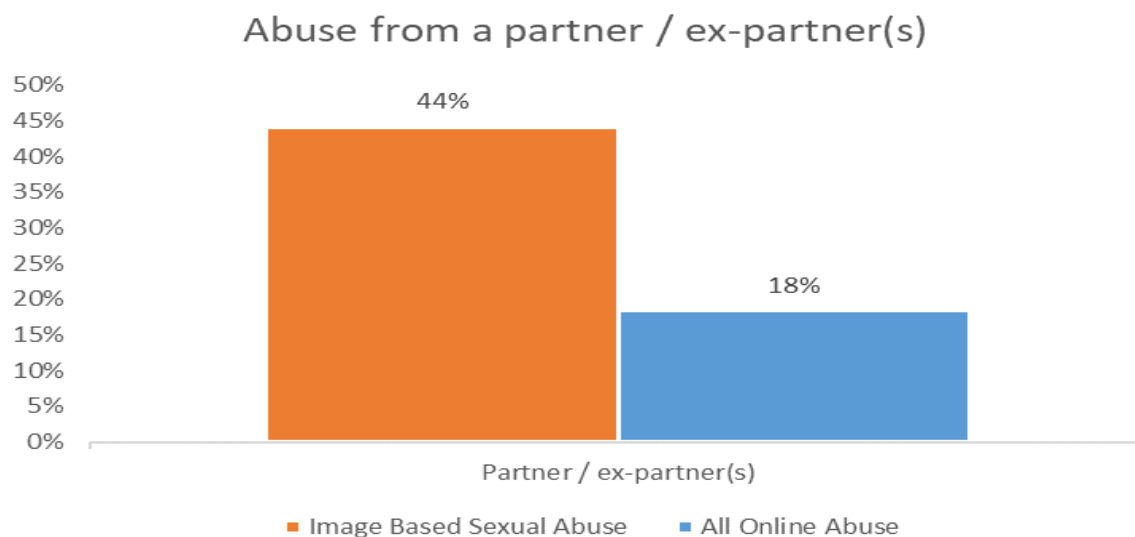
Fifty nine people told us about their experiences of intimate image abuse, 11% of all respondents. Of those people who had experienced this abuse the highest proportion were women and aged between 30 – 39.



(Number of respondents 59)

Of those 59 respondents half of them, 51% had experienced this type of abuse for longer than one year. The images were distributed via a number of different social media platforms, with Facebook being the most common. Some were on specialist adult websites or on dating platforms. The people who were experiencing intimate image abuse reportedly suffered multiple other online abuses, with an average of 7.9 different types of abuse experienced per person, against an average of 4.2 types of abuse for all respondents. For half of the victims, 49%, the abuse they experienced was not confined to the internet and some forms of abuse were also being experienced in their everyday lives.

People who reported being a victim of intimate image abuse were more likely to experience that abuse from a partner or ex-partner than people reporting other types of online abuse.



(Number of respondents 59)

How the abuse was experienced

The sharing of intimate images is not a new phenomenon but it is one that has proliferated with the rise of the internet. Partners or ex-partners can take intimate images and upload the images onto websites. These photos may have been taken consensually, or in some cases covertly. The dissemination of these images is done without the consent or the knowledge of the victims. Additionally, the victims' details are also sometimes disclosed, allowing them to be harassed by additional unknown people. One survivor described her experience at the hands of her partner.

He took intimate photographs of me while I slept. He took videos of us having sex without my knowledge or consent. He took photos of me in the shower without my knowledge or consent. He then distributed these images and videos [...] sharing my whereabouts and private information.

Other times the victims have never met the perpetrator but have only had communications online. In these cases the victims can be convinced that they have entered a relationship with someone and are persuaded to share intimate images with the other person. This person then uses these images to blackmail the victim, threatening to send the images to their contacts on social media if they do not pay.

I was talking to a woman. She wanted to share naked pictures and I said yes. Then she asked for my Facebook information. She said she would show my pictures to my Facebook friends if I didn't pay her. I suspended my account and blocked her on the app I met her.

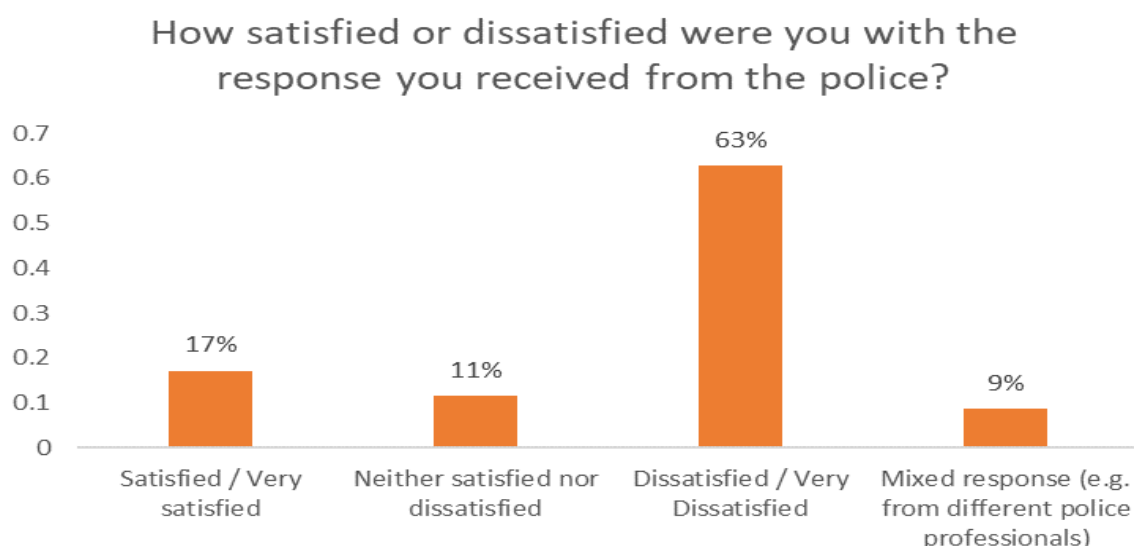
Another way the abuse can occur is via 'fakeporn' where accounts are set up claiming to be the victim. The victims face can be superimposed upon other people who are performing sexual acts or photographed intimately. These websites can contain the victims' contact details, allowing multiple strangers to contact them. Here again a survivor tells us their experience.

Last night I was alerted to a new Instagram account pretending to be me. It was my name. It was my pictures. But it was intermixed on Instagram Stories with closeup explicit videos of a vagina (not mine). It promised a website with something 'a little more personal for the real supporters' and 'naughty content'. The creator of that account was following men that followed my actual account, including my father. Having a conversation with my dad and explaining that the porn being publicly shared wasn't of me was just as humiliating as you can imagine.

The creation of an account showing intimate images, that are purporting to be of the victim, have as great an impact on people as the sharing of genuine intimate images. The impact is not lessened because the images are not of them but because the images are not of them, they have less ability to get the sites removed or taken down.

Reporting to the police

Victims of intimate image abuse were more likely to report these abuses to the police with 59% of victims telling us they had reported these offences opposed to 40% of people experiencing all types of online abuse.



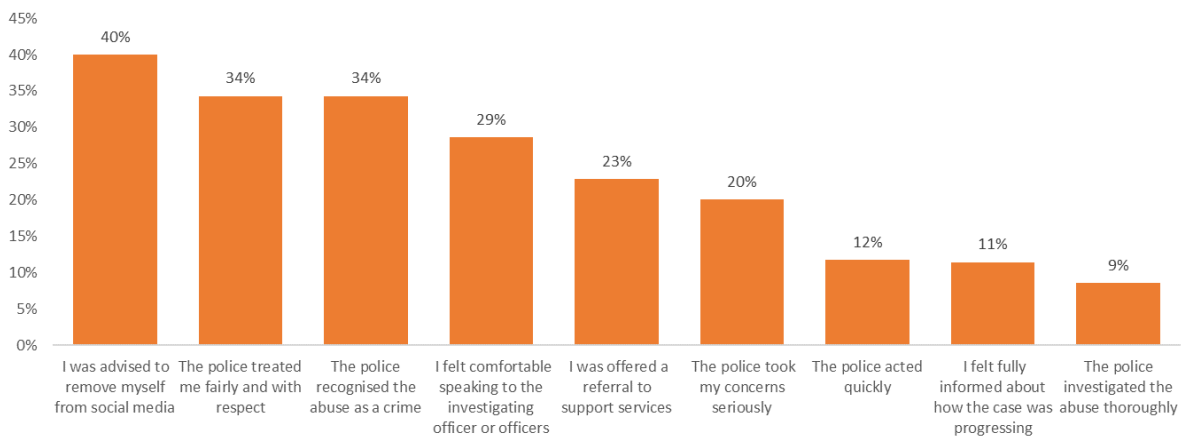
(Number of respondents 35)

Overall, the victims were dissatisfied with the response they received from the police, with 63% of people stating they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the police response.

It wasn't dealt with quickly enough and was dismissed by others as nonsense and not something to take seriously. I was made to feel stupid and just a time waster.

The police response is consistently dreadful - the issue takes complex investigation and they cannot see obvious immediate threats.

Proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about their interactions with the police



(Number of respondents 35)

Investigation

Many of the respondents told us there were concerns surrounding the investigation of their abuse by the police. Only 9% of people felt their case had been investigated fully and only 12% felt that the police acted quickly.

Many respondents felt that when they reported their offences nothing seemed to happen. When asked about the outcome of reporting the offences to the police, 40% of victims of intimate image abuse said that the police had not investigated their allegations while a further 17% said an investigation had happened but no further action was taken. The perception of respondents was often that 'nothing happened [...] no investigation seemed to take place' One survivor remarked on how the police's response can be slow to materialise.

I was told that the local police to me would be in touch....but they never were. I attended the local police station as I needed to "get it reported and out of my head" but was told to go home and someone would be in touch. Nobody was. It took a police officer associated with my workplace to agree to take my statement when my manager had asked for help. I felt the response to me when I was at my most vulnerable was very poor. It was almost 3 days after discovering the crime that I successfully reported it.

This lack of urgency by the police can lead to victims feeling frustrated and result in them deciding not to report any further incidences to the police as the lack of action only made them feel unimportant and that their concerns were disregarded.

Everything was unclear and I didn't know what they actually did. I thought I didn't want to live like this and keep reporting when the actual experience of reporting seemed more stressful and re-traumatising than the abuse itself. I just wanted to move on with my life and realised the best option was to just ignore my ex and accept it.

Lack of understanding

Other victims often felt the police did not really understand that what they were experiencing was a crime, nor did they fully understand the impact that these abuses were having on them. Only 20% of victims of intimate image abuse felt that their concerns were taken seriously by the police and only 34% felt that the offences committed against them were recognised as a crime. Some victims felt the police were simply not adequately trained to understand the nature of this abuse and what the implications of it could be. As this survivor explains:

Initially they did not understand what I was trying to explain to them, but when they did understand the nature of the offence they did not know how to deal with it as they hadn't come across it before.

While 34% of respondents felt they were treated fairly and respectfully by the police, others relayed instances which underscored how some police officers can display a complete lack of empathy and understanding for the impact that these crimes have on people and their lives. The following quotes from two victims highlight the way in which some people are dealt with in an insensitive way, at what can often be a time of acute distress.

I was told by the lone male investigating officer that I could have a successful career within the escort genre.

The initial response by the police was poor. The officer had no real understanding of revenge porn and I felt exposed and humiliated whilst giving my report.

The outcome most victims wanted from the police was to be believed and they wanted the police to stop the abuse. Some of our respondents have shown how this lack of understanding can make what is a very traumatic time for victims more difficult as the severity of the crimes against them are minimised and they often feel blamed for the offence.

Benefits of specialist policing

Conversely, the survey showed that when victims encounter officers who are supportive and knowledgeable about these crimes, this can help to make this difficult time slightly more bearable, as this quote from a survivor shows:

However due to the seriousness of the abuse I was receiving from my ex-partner the case was handed over to the domestic violence team of CID. This team were absolutely incredible and dealt with me professionally and treated me with the upmost dignity. It was clear they had a proper understanding of the crime and how to deal with victims.

Legal loopholes

The laws for many online offences are relatively new, such as the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 which makes ‘upskirting’ an offence and for the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 which made intimate image abuse an offence. However, there are issues with these laws that can make it difficult for victims to gain justice. Both kinds of offence require a specific intent. For intimate image abuse it must be proved that there was an intent to cause distress. For upskirting the offenders motive must be shown to be either to gain sexual gratification or to cause humiliation, distress or alarm to the victim.¹³ Another complicating factor is with fakeporn. If a victims’ image and name are photoshopped onto a pornographic image of someone else that is not currently a crime. The Law Commission¹⁴ is currently conducting a review of the laws on taking, making and sharing intimate images without consent which should address these issues.

The laws have not caught up to behaviour online and police aren’t well trained on the seriousness of the crimes. For instance- the account was using fake videos of me that were porn- but because they weren’t me it doesn’t count as revenge porn- although the abuser was pretending the porn was of me.

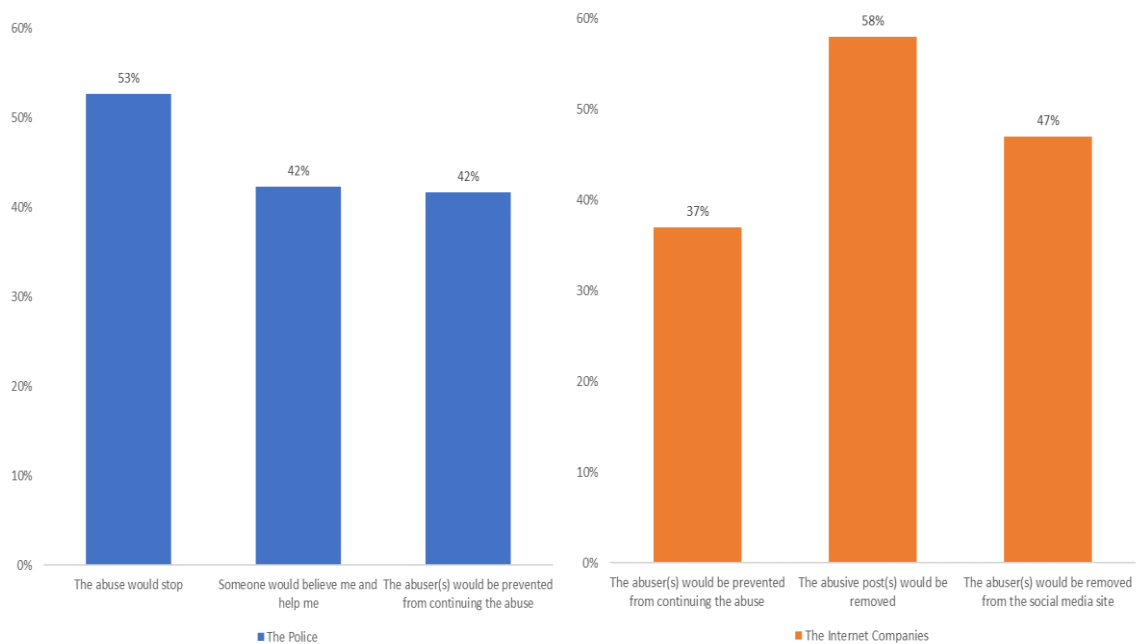
The desired outcome

The most desired outcome for victims who reported to the police was that the abuse would stop and that someone would help and believe them. Whereas the most wanted outcome from reporting to the internet companies was that the abusive posts would be removed and the abuser would be removed from the platform.

¹³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/2/section/1/enacted>

¹⁴ [Taking, making and sharing intimate images without consent | Law Commission](#)

The top three desired outcomes from reporting the abuse to the police and the internet companies

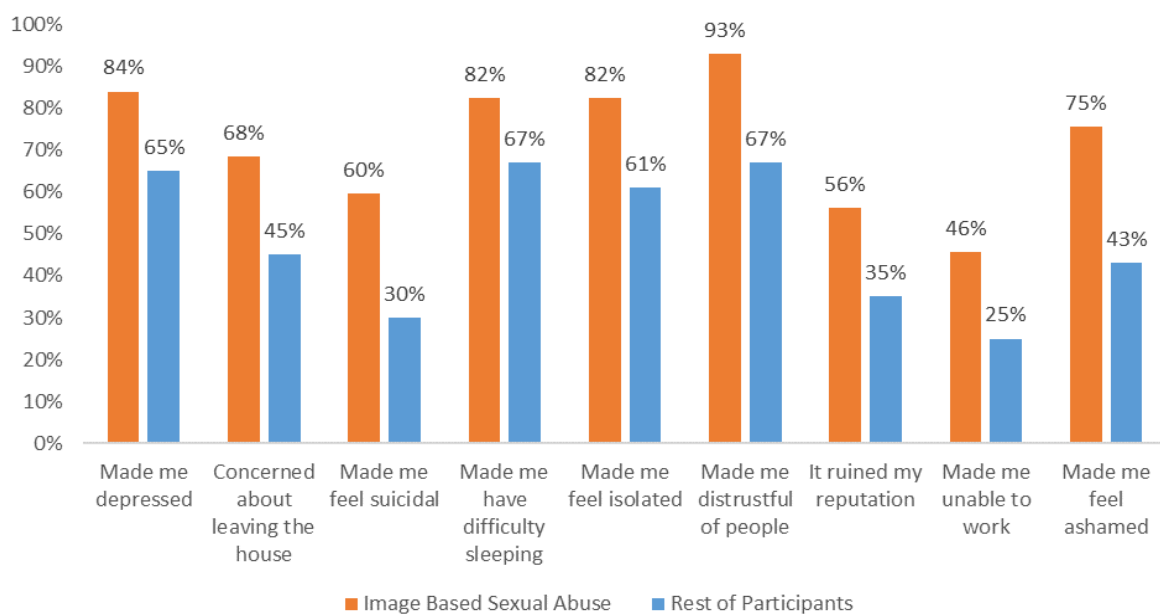


(Number of respondents 19-27)

Impact of the abuse

One of the key findings from this research is that online abuse has a real impact on the victims who experience it. However, for some victims, the impact of the abuse is felt much more keenly. Victims of intimate image abuse were more likely to report significantly higher levels of harm across all categories than were reported more generally by our respondents.

Impact of abuse for image based sexual abuse vs all online harms



(Number of respondents 56-57)

In some categories the additional level of a harm experienced by people who had been a victim of intimate image abuse was stark. The themes that arose from our respondents qualitative responses echoed the quantitative responses that had been given. Victims of intimate image abuse experienced problems with severe loss of confidence which impacted greatly on their ability to engage with the world around them. 68% of victims reported that they became worried about leaving the house because they often felt people would have seen those images or be aware of them. The abuse had made these victims lose faith in people and they were 26 percentage points more likely to report that the abuse had made them distrustful of people. These victims told us how their feelings of paranoia, that everyone they came into contact with would have seen their intimate images, could cripple their ability to socialise.

I think everyone must of heard of me and hate me and I worry socially.

I became withdrawn, paranoid and afraid to leave the house.

I am so frightened of giving people my full name in fear people will search for me

These feelings impacted on their mental health and victims reported increasing feelings of anxiety. People who had experienced intimate image abuse were 30 percentage points more likely to report that the abuse had made them suicidal. These numbers are reflected in what some victims told us:

It has completely destroyed who I previously was as a person. I am significantly impacted from the abuse. I suffer with my mental health now.

It messed up my mental health so much, I couldn't eat, I self-harmed and I attempted suicide multiple times. The worst was that I felt that I couldn't tell anyone. I couldn't tell my family, I had become isolated from friends. There was literally nobody.

These victims also experienced high levels of shame, that the images were seen by people. They were 33 percentage points more likely to report the abuse had made them feel ashamed. The abuse impacted on their work lives and 54% of victims reported that the abuse had a detrimental impact on their work or business and they were 21 percentage points more likely to report that the abuse had left them unable to work.

These victims explained how the abuse had impacted their work life:

There was shame and humiliation to me and my family. It almost threatened my job as I report to a governing body and my full name and profession has been published with the images.

As a result of this my employment was terminated, thereby meaning I could no longer meet financial commitments in relation to my home, which I will lose. I have lost a much loved career and have faced victim blaming. I suffer with a mental health condition resulting from this.

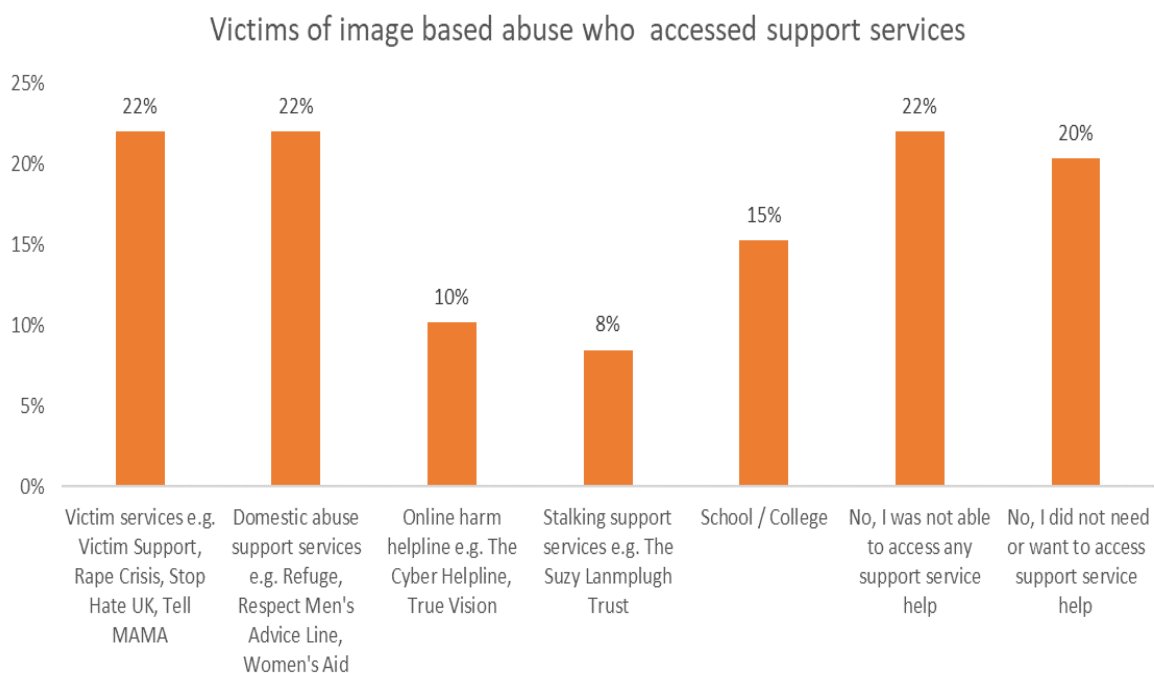
In some cases the abuse was not just felt by the victims. For some the sharing of these intimate images had repercussions on the victims' families too. The shame had far reaching implications as their relationships with wider family and friends were also damaged. Here a survivor explains:

I can't really put it into words. It pains me a lot to see my mum upset especially. It's hit her hardest because relatives have cut contact due to the shameful nature of what my ex has shared to every family member, calling me a prostitute etc. I worry for my parents and sister, and they worry for me. It's constant unnerving anxiety of when he will start again. [...] I changed my name which upsets me because it feels like I lost a sense of my family identity.

For this victim as well as having to deal with her own feelings surrounding the abuse, she needs to cope with the impacts that extend out to her wider family. The shame is not just hers, but expands to incorporate her whole family, making the impact of the abuse even greater.

Finding a way to cope

Of those people who experienced image based abuse, 20% stated they did not want any help from support services. A further 22% of victims were unable to access any support services. The remainder of responders were able to engage with a range of victims' services including the Revenge Porn Helpline which specifically helps victims of intimate image abuse.



(Number of respondents 59)

Of those people who accessed victims' services a third, 32%, said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the help they received. For those people, who were happy with the support they received, these services provided these victims with vital help and support. One victim explained how these services had made a huge difference to their life, telling us 'These support networks were quite likely the difference between life and death for me'. For other people, the enormity of the impact of the abuse leaves them feeling hopeless and that very little can be done to rectify the situation. As another victim explained:

Nothing helps. It can't be made better. The only thing that would make it better is to know of all the images and know they are no longer out there. But I'll never know who, where and how many images or videos are out there.

We asked victims if they had managed to find a way to cope with the abuse. Some victims have engaged in activism and try and help others by talking about the abuse and trying to effect change. One survivor told us they cope 'By speaking out publicly against the abuse and petitioning Instagram to do better.'

Writing blogs, volunteering for a domestic abuse charity, working, isolating from everyone, avoiding getting into intimate relationships.

Some people found support from online support groups or talking with friends. For others the impact of this abuse is so great they simply learn to live with it, but currently cannot imagine a time when they will be over it. The ease with which images can proliferate around the

internet means that even if the images are removed quickly from one site, they could easily have already been shared to another.

I don't think I have found a way to cope with this as it churns my stomach to this day when I think of it. I have simply learned to live life and not think about it too much - although it is always there and always will be. Despite the original website removing the images and videos, I had found them on multiple others and there is no record of whether they were downloaded by anyone during the time they were visible.

There is no record of what is on the internet, nor anyway for these victims to know where or how many times their images have been shared. This makes this abuse particularly difficult to get over as the threat remains present long after the initial act has taken place.

You never really get over something like that, in the same way you ever get over being raped, or burgled. It's a violation and though time can make you forget, something small can trigger those emotions and fears and you're right back there again. I did adopt a dog from a rescue shelter and I've had rescue dogs ever since. I NEVER use my real name in ID or screen names (Unless it's a government thing) and I never use my real profile photo unless it's a few years out of date and looks nothing like me.

The victims of image based abuse have to somehow learn to live with this abuse, but as the words of these victims show, it alters them and their behaviour in irrevocable ways. Something personal and intimate of theirs has been taken and violated. This is a crime which seemingly never ends and these people have to adjust to live with that thought.

Conclusion to section 7: intimate image abuse

Victims of intimate image abuse reported experiencing the highest levels of harm of all of the victims of online abuse. Almost a third of these victims of abuse were women aged between 30 – 39. These victims were more likely to experience the abuse from a partner or ex-partner than other types of online abuse and they also experienced multiple other harms, an average of 7.9 per person, showing that this was part of a pattern of abuse they were experiencing. The impact of this type of abuse was particularly acute for these victims as although the initial act may only occur once, or over a short time period, the images can remain online for extended periods of time. There is no way of knowing how many times the image has been shared or all of the sites where the images might end up, making it an almost impossible task to have the images permanently removed.

Victims of this crime explained that sometime the police were not able to fully comprehend the complexity of these crimes nor the impact of it on victims. Where officers were empathetic and properly trained the experience for the victims was immeasurably improved, conversely when these victims were confronted with a distinct lack of tact and understanding this made the process much worse. What these victims overwhelmingly wanted from the police was that someone would prevent the abuse from continuing and for the internet companies to remove the images and the abuser from their sites.

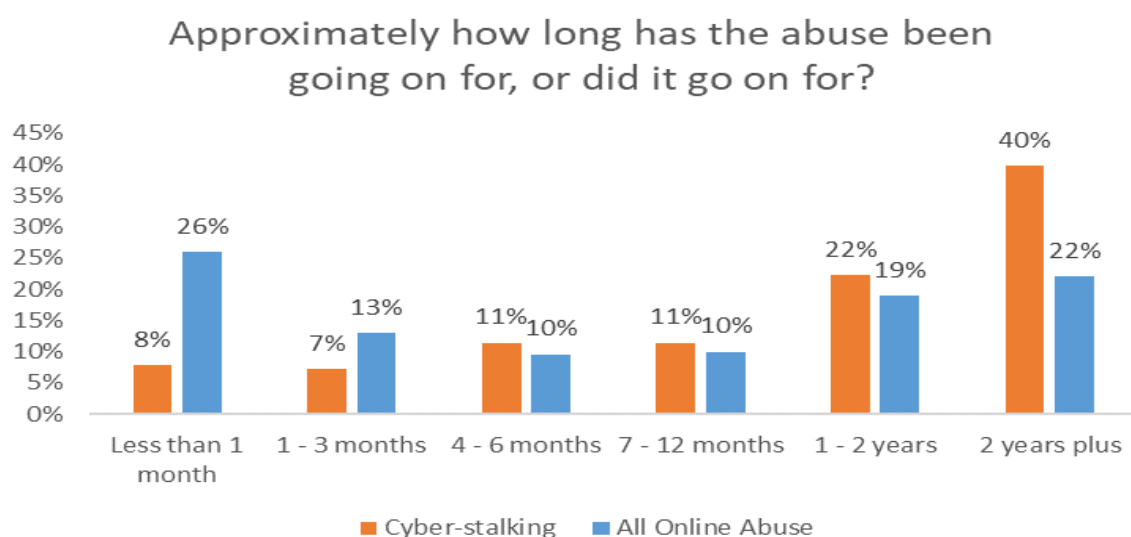
8. Cyber stalking

Introduction

After intimate image abuse, cyber stalking was the type of abuse where respondents reported the second highest levels of harm. This section examines the impact of cyber stalking, highlighting, in detail, the experiences of the victims of this type of online crime and show the harms that they suffer as a result of this abuse.

Who are the victims of cyber stalking?

One hundred and seventy-six people told us they had experienced cyber stalking, 33% of all respondents. 75% of people who reported experiencing this crime were women, 39% of all female respondents. 48% of people experiencing this crime were between the age of 30-49.



(Number of respondents 166)

One of the most notable points about this type of abuse is the length of time it occurs. 40% of people who reported being cyber stalked had experienced this abuse for longer than two years, almost double the time for all types of online abuse.

I have been stalked and harassed for 4 years.

As with people who were experiencing intimate image abuse, victims of cyber stalking were experiencing multiple online abuses, an average of 6.9 per person. For the victims of cyber stalking the abuse was not confined to the internet with 55% of victims reporting that the abuse occurred in their everyday lives. These figures suggest that, in the same way as with victims of intimate image abuse, these crimes are part of a pattern of abuse that these people are experiencing.

Since our separation, due to many years of domestic and sexual abuse, he's been posting multiple times a day slandering me. Posting pictures of my home with

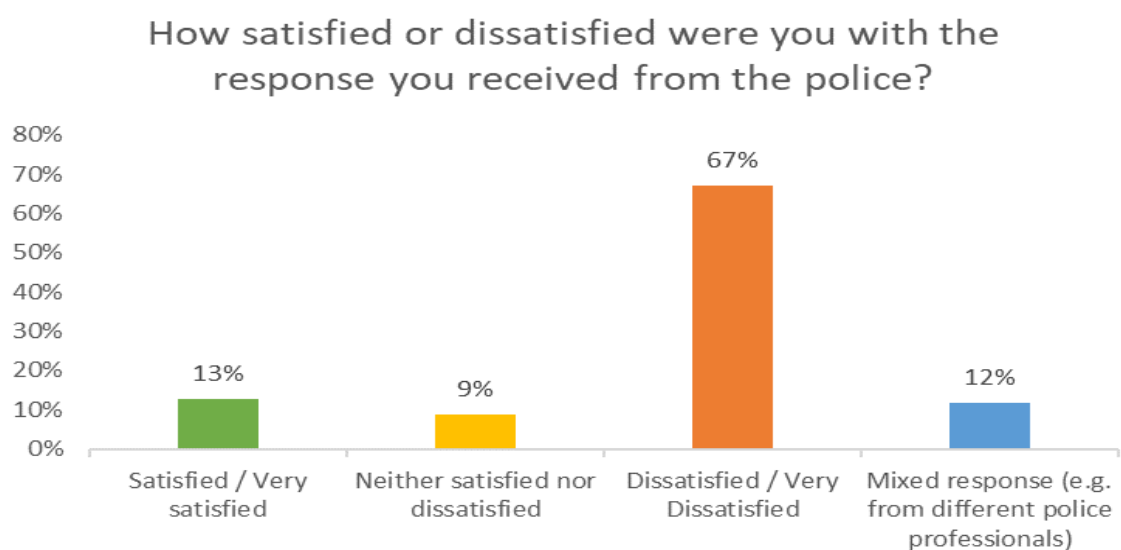
house name, our names, making threats to send gangsters round to take me out. Followed by him sending local grave digger round. Offering rewards to people to come here and take my belongings. Sitting outside my house taking pictures of anyone here, then posting them on social media.

Again as with victims of intimate image abuse, people who experienced cyber stalking were more likely to receive that abuse from a partner or ex-partner than people reporting other types of online abuse, with 31% of cyber stalking victims reporting their partner or ex-partner as being responsible.

Ex-boyfriend stalked me for 10 months. Along with direct harassment, he created fake email accounts to message abuse to me and was constantly texting day and night.

Reporting to the police

Cyber stalking victims were more likely to report these abuses to the police with 59% of victims telling us they had reported these offences. However, these victims reported the lowest levels of satisfaction, with only 13% of people saying they were satisfied with the response they received from the police.



(Number of respondents 104)

Minimised & trivialised

Victims of cyber stalking were significantly less likely to feel the police treated them with respect, with only 27% of these victims agreeing with that statement, as opposed to 39% for all online abuses. Many people felt their claims were dismissed or minimised because the abuse was online.

As a male my complaint was disregarded, and I was basically told that if I couldn't "Hack it" I should just not go online.

Many victims felt that there was a lack of empathy and understanding about the crimes they were being subjected to. Only 23% of victims of cyber stalking felt that their concerns were taken seriously by the police and only 25% felt that the offences committed against them were recognised as a crime. Some victims felt the police were simply not adequately trained to understand the nature of this abuse and what the implications of it could be. As this survivor explains:

The police had ample evidence but were insistent there was no threat to me and all I needed to do was block or ignore. It consumed my life for years as I was unable to do either with the stalker finding any possible way to target me and to encourage others to join in with abuse so even if the stalker wasn't getting in touch with me due to a block then their followers could do so. I felt the police didn't understand online stalking at all. I felt I was going mad. It destroyed my life for years and I will never get that time with my boys back from when they were small.

Many victims felt that they were not believed by the police and recounted instances where they had to repeatedly complain in an attempt to get the police to take the offences against them seriously. Victims of any crime want to be believed and when they report these instances to the police they are asking for help, but many victims felt that they were not truly victims of crime and as such little help was forthcoming. As these two victims told us:

Because it was all on me to monitor and complain. I felt I wasn't believed or taken seriously.

They didn't stop him the first 2 times I complained, as they didn't seem to take it seriously. Only when another woman went to the police with the same complaint and told them he had planned to kill me did they take it seriously.

Victims of all crimes want the abuse to stop and victims of cyber stalking are no different in this. The attitudes of the police can have a huge impact on a victim. If they feel heard and acknowledged it makes, what is usually a difficult time a little easier. But when people feel ignored or belittled it can make the entire process of reporting as traumatic as the abuse itself.

The police process has been as exhausting and traumatising as the stalking itself. My case was misclassified, passed between multiple police forces, then passed

within multiple individuals and has been subjected to endless delays. The police do not seem to understand the laws around stalking or the legal difference between stalking and harassment. They seemed to consider the crime as less significant because it occurred mostly online.

Lack of understanding

Online crimes have a real impact on the people experiencing them and to many victims it felt as though 'the police need more training to understand these crimes'. Only 10% of cyber stalking victims felt their accusations were thoroughly investigated and almost half of the victims of this offence, 45% were told to remove themselves from social media.

I do social media for a living and run online businesses, so the police's repeated suggestions to delete my accounts and also at one point to move house, really doesn't seem like a fair and just way of dealing with a victim of crime.

This response shows a deep lack of understanding about the way society now works. Coming 'off-line' is not a realistic option for most people, especially in the wake of the recent lockdowns, that have forced people to interact more through an online presence, as in person contact was not an option.

Many police aren't trained to understand the pattern of abuse. They are trained to deal with straight up crime. When I first reported it the officer totally got it but then I had to speak to different officers who were not really concerned with the smaller details of this harassment campaign.

The advice given by the police also displayed an innate lack of understanding of people's situations. More than that when people who are being cyber stalked come offline it often can escalate the abuse so the stalking happens in person, making the situation much worse for the victim.

I am also being watched by a stalker and as soon as my accounts online were closed down he was sat at my house the next morning. I know it was directly linked as his access to me was cut off. It makes me feel scared and isolated

Moreover, as more than half of victims of cyber stalking are also experiencing the abuse in person, just telling people to come off-line shows a lack of understanding of the problems people are experiencing. Often, the abuse is simply part of an overall campaign of mistreatment that people are experiencing and the police need to be fully aware of all the ways this abuse can occur and be more proactive in dealing with it. As this victim explains:

There was so much abuse going on but when he did this to me online, it was a different level of anxiety. It affected me so badly that I was constantly looking over my shoulder. Trying to explain to the police was difficult as they didn't take it seriously nor did they join it up initially with the rest of the abuse.

Conclusion to section 8: cyber stalking

As with intimate image abuse, the impacts of cyber stalking are much higher for these victims than for other online abuse. This abuse is more likely to be one part of a pattern of abuse and for these victims the offences are much more likely to continue for an extended period of time with 40% of victims telling us the abuse had been going on for more than two years. More so than other victims of online abuse, victims of cyber stalking felt the police did not take the crimes against them seriously, nor did they feel they were treated with respect. Many victims reported the response was for them to come offline, an action that could escalate the abuse further.

9. Key research findings

Online abuse causes real harms.

Our findings show the real impact that online abuse can have on the victims who are experiencing it. The majority of our respondents, 91% told us about the impact that the abuse had on them and their lives. Only 3% of female victims told us that the abuse did not bother them. The findings indicate that some online abuses produce much greater levels of harm than others.

The impact of intimate image abuse is felt clearly by victims and the ramifications of this abuse have to be lived with for a long time, as even if these images are only shared once in a single incident, there is no way of knowing how many times the images are downloaded and shared. Victims told us of receiving notifications of the images still appearing on the internet long after the initial posting took place.

Some online abuses are likely to be part of an ongoing pattern of abuse.

The research showed that those victims who indicated higher levels of online abuse were likely to be experiencing a number of online abuses. Victims who told us they had experienced intimate image abuse and cyber stalking were more likely to report experiencing a higher average number of online abuses. All victims who responded to our questionnaire were likely to experience on average 4.2 types of different online abuse, but this increased to an average of 7.9 harms per person for victims of intimate image abuse and an average of 6.9 harms for victims of cyber stalking. The high number of harms these victims experience indicate that this abuse they are suffering is not a one off incidence but is part of a pattern of ongoing behaviour.

Being taken seriously is one of the most important things to victims, but many feel their concerns are minimised and dismissed.

For victims of online abuse, like other victims of crime, what they want is their concerns to be taken seriously. If they report these abuses to the police, they want them to be investigated. Victims felt that often the police did not understand that the abuses they were reporting were crimes. They also felt that the police did not fully appreciate the impact that these crimes had on them.

If the victims report these incidents to the internet companies they want a response from a human being. If they report abusive content they want it removed instantly. Reporting to the internet companies can be a difficult process. Most complaints are reviewed by algorithms and often people have no idea if any action has been taken. Simply responding to victims saying that their complaint does not breach community standards is unacceptable. What victims deserve is for their complaints to be taken seriously and dealt with quickly.

Prompt, proactive communication is very important to victims, though many told us they had to chase for updates and went long periods without hearing any information.

The Victims' Code states that victims have the right to be provided with information about the investigation, to be told when the police have made key decisions in relation to their case. Yet repeatedly victims have told us that if their case is investigated the process is slow and victims are left to chase for information.

When they want specialist support with online crimes victims can find it hard to find organisations who can assist with this.

Victims have told us they often found it difficult to find support services that help them specifically with online abuses. When trying to deal with internet companies it can be difficult to know where to start. There are very few organisations who specifically offer assistance in dealing with the internet companies and getting content removed. This is a resource that victims of online abuse would welcome.

The legislation is piecemeal¹⁵ – a mismatch of old and new laws. Sometimes the police do not fully understand what is a crime.

There needs to be a review of the laws criminalising online abuse. Currently there is an amalgam of old and new laws. This can present confusion as the police are not always sure what is, and what is not a crime. Moreover, some kinds of abuse, such as the use of fakeporn, where the intimate images are purporting to be of the victim, are not currently a crime. These victims are struggling to gain any justice from the police or the internet companies, but the impact of fakeporn posts is just as harmful as if the intimate images were really of them.

¹⁵ McGlynn (2021) <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39012/pdf/>

Annexes

1. Respondents to our request for information

This section will describe the characteristics of the 534 people who responded to our request for information (our sample). It gives demographic information (age, gender and ethnicity and so forth).

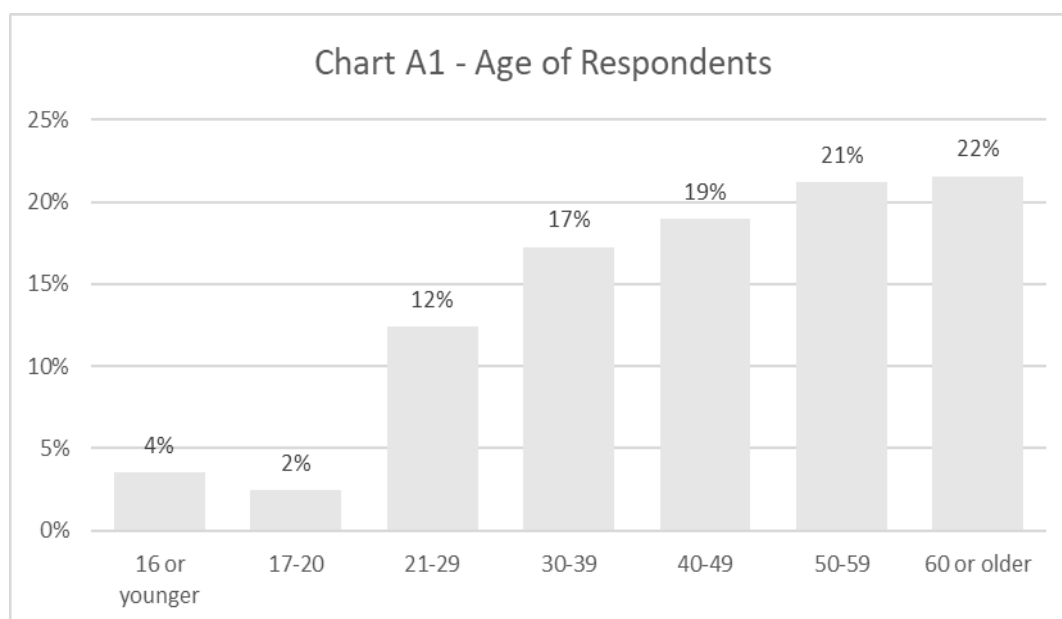
As discussed in the methodology section (Annex 2), it is important to note that our respondents were self-selecting, insofar as they responded to our request for information publicised across a range of media. This means that we cannot claim that the views and experiences expressed are representative of all victims of online abuse. Although the sample is large in number, it only represents the views and experiences of this particular group of victims.^{16,17}

Sex

Sixty-five per cent of respondents said they were female, 33% male and 3% preferred not to say.¹⁸ 92% of our sample said that this was the gender they were assigned at birth, with 2% saying their gender was different to that assigned at birth and 4% preferred not to say.

Age

As shown in chart A1, the age of our respondents is skewed towards the older age range with 21% aged 50-59 and 22% aged over 60.



(Number of respondents = 534)

¹⁶ The other measure of how much notice we can take of particular findings is the size of the sample: when we are talking about a small or very small sub-sample of respondents (100 and under and 50 and under respectively), quantitative (percentage) findings should be treated with caution, as more tentative than those applying to larger sub-samples..

¹⁷ Please also note that most of the questions bar three were voluntary: this means the size of the sample for each question varies throughout, depending on how many it applied to and how many people chose to answer it.

¹⁸ As elsewhere in the report, percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Ethnicity

Eighty-four per cent of our sample described their ethnicity as White, 6% Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group, 4% as Asian/Asian British, 3% preferred not to say, 2% said 'Other' and 0% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British.

Religion

Forty-seven per cent of our sample said they did not have a religion, 35% were Christian, 2% were Muslim and 1% said they were each of Buddhist and Jewish, with 6% specifying another religion and 5% preferring not to say.

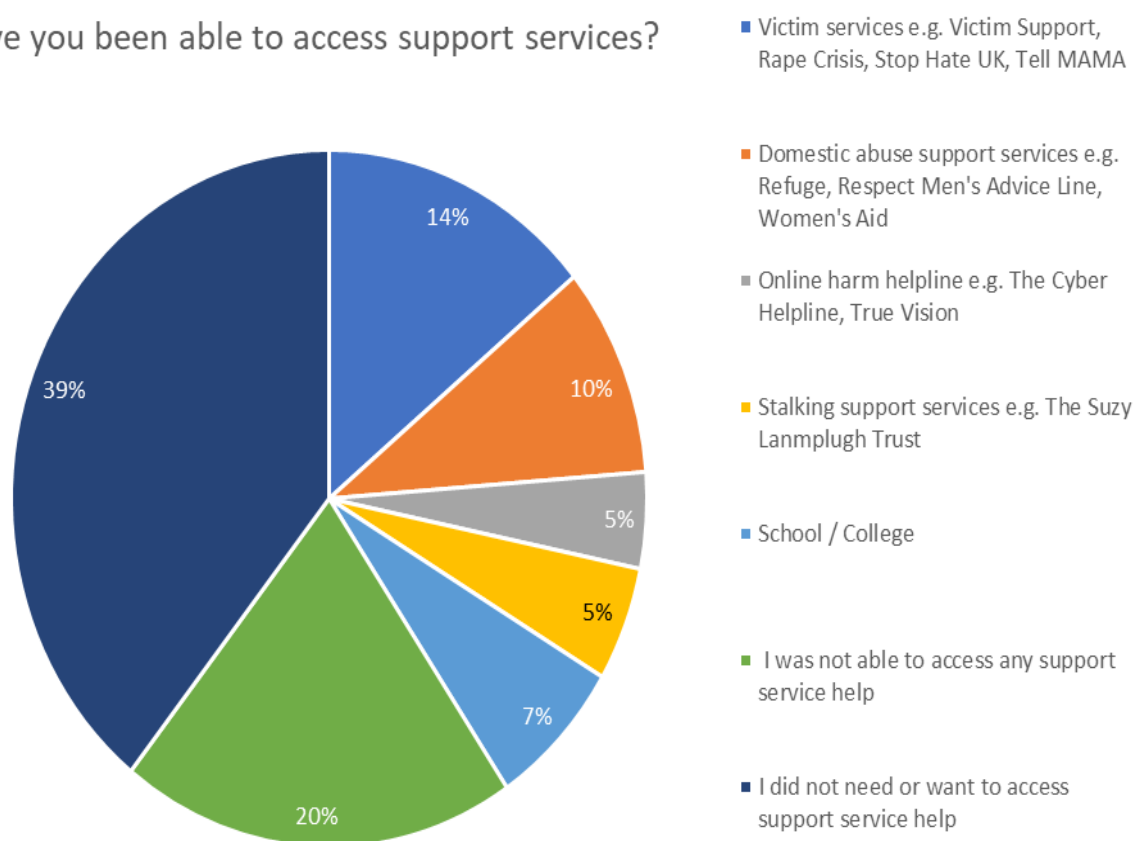
Sexuality

Seventy-seven per cent were straight or heterosexual, 10% bisexual, 6% gay or lesbian, 2% pansexual. Six per cent answered preferred not to say.

Support received by victims

Thirty-nine per cent said they did not want or need support services and 20% per unable to access any support.

Have you been able to access support services?



(Number of respondents 471)

2. Methodology

Designing and promoting the request for information

The Victims' Commissioner decided to do this research to amplify the voice of victims of online abuse. We wanted to hear from as many victims as possible and decided to put out an open call – a 'request for information' – through an online survey.

We worked with colleagues from Refuge, Victims' Support, The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Stop Hate UK and Manchester Women's Aid to scope out the survey and its key questions. We also sought feedback from academics working in the field of online abuse.

The request was structured to give all victims an opportunity to share their experiences. The request focused on: experiences of online abuse, reporting the abuse to the police or internet companies; reasons for not reporting and the impact of the abuse.

The request included a combination of 37 closed and open text box questions (see annex 3). The only questions that required an answer were included to route respondents to groups of questions that were relevant to their experience. If victims did not want to answer any of the questions, we provided space at the end of the survey to write anything they chose to about their experience, the criminal justice system, or any other topic.

At the start of the survey we provided details about the research, how victims responses would be used and contact details to follow up with the Office of the Victims' Commissioner. At the end of the survey we included information about specialist organisations and other sources of available support for victims. We asked for victims consent to include anonymised quotations in the report.

The request for information was launched on 20th January 2022 and responses were collected on SmartSurvey. Our office used social media to promote the request and worked with victims' organisations to distribute links and information about the request to members of their networks. The request was closed on 27th February.

Analysis of responses and reporting

We received 915 completed and partial responses. We identified that some partial responses included answers to nearly all questions, but respondents had not selected 'Finish Survey' on the online survey. After analysing how many questions were answered by the partial response group, we developed a criterion to identify those respondents who answered several, though not all, questions and did not select 'Finish Survey'.¹⁹ The final sample included 534 responses.

We further prepared the dataset by: i) re-categorising responses which had selected an outcome category that different from qualitative responses in open text boxes, e.g. where victims said they did not report, but described reporting the incident; ii) creating new variables to enable quantitative analysis, e.g. simplifying age and ethnicity categories.

We prepared descriptive statistics and charts using responses to closed questions. We prepared crosstabulations for several questions. We tested for statistically significant differences between independent samples using a quick calculation tool. Where two groups are compared in the report, differences are only reported if they are statistically significant.

¹⁹ The minimum criterion was respondents answered the filter question (7), type of abuse experienced and at least three questions afterwards

We also thematically analysed responses to open text questions, identifying recurring themes, issues and concerns across the responses. To exemplify the key themes in the responses, we have included anonymised quotations in the report. We have only included quotations from respondents who gave consent to use their words.

3. Online Harms Questionnaire

[Online Harms Survey: Experiences of online abuse - Victims Commissioner](#)



The Impact of Online Abuse: Hearing the Victims' Voice

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