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Delivering Better
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Linking Police and Sexual Violence Support Service Victim Data

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Ministry of Justice

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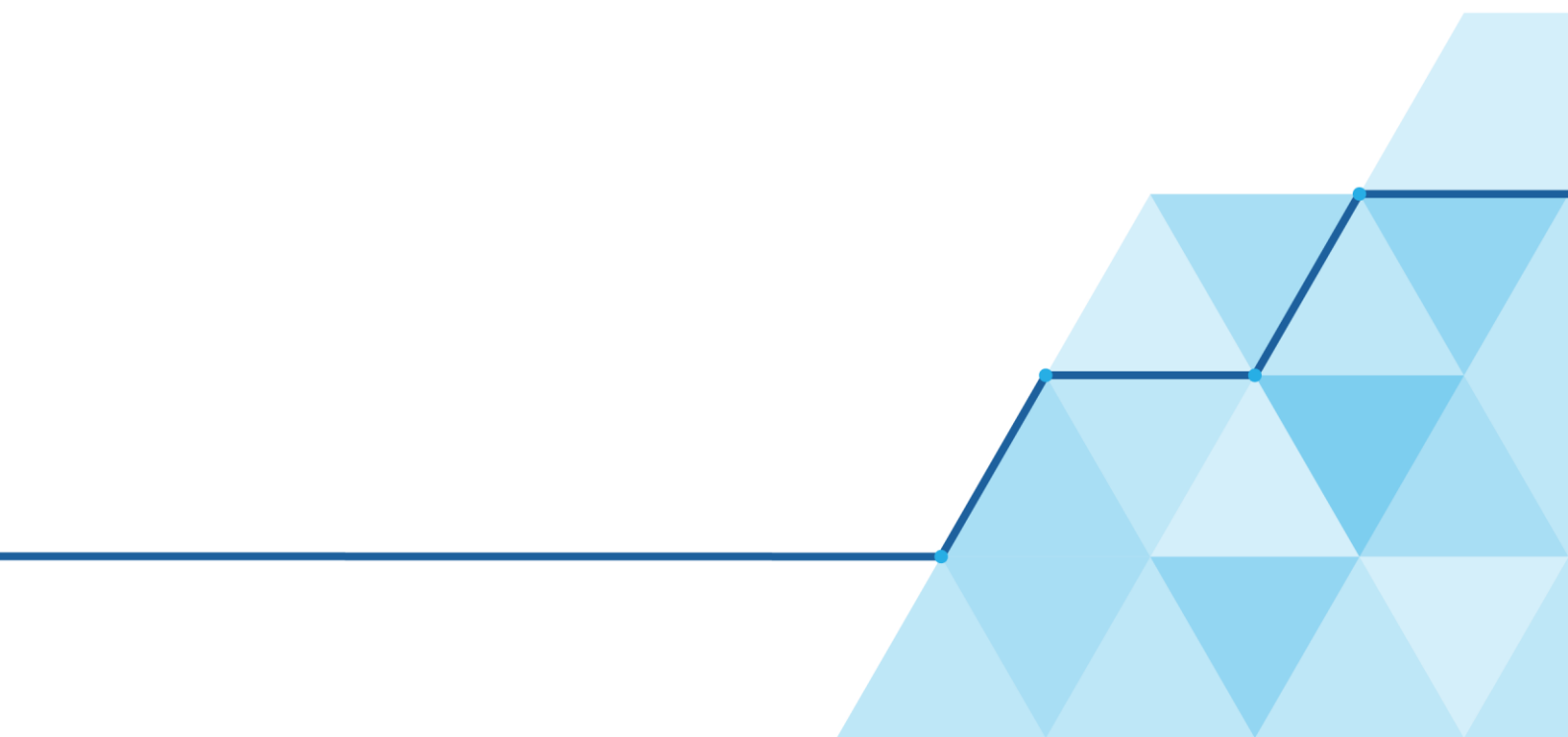
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Key terms and abbreviations

Term/Abbreviation	Explanation
Analytical Platform	A secure data analysis platform made up of tools, packages and datasets for creating applications that utilise data within the Ministry of Justice. (Link: https://user-guidance.analytical-platform.service.justice.gov.uk/).
BOLD	Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) is a government data-linking programme which aims to improve the connectedness of government data in England and Wales. (Link: Ministry of Justice: Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) - GOV.UK).
BOLD Victim Pilot	A proof-of-concept pilot in the BOLD programme focussing on how linking data can be used to improve outcomes for victims of crime.
CJS	Criminal Justice System. The criminal justice system of England and Wales is the collective bodies responsible for administering justice in England and Wales, and consists of various institutions such as the police, Home Office, Crown Prosecution Service, Ministry of Justice, courts and the prison system.
CSA	Child sexual abuse.
Direct Police Pathway Model	The process by which all victims who report rape to Essex Police are referred to SWERCC within 24 hours of that report, if consent is given by the victim to the referral.
DPIA	Data Protection Impact Assessment. This is a risk assessment designed to identify and minimise the privacy risks that come with using, storing, and sharing data. It outlines lawful reasons for sharing data. (Link: What is a DPIA? ICO).
Essex Police	Essex Police is the territorial police force responsible for policing the county of Essex. (Link About us Essex Police).
HMIC Crime Tree Level	The Essex Police dataset contained crimes using His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services crime tree hierarchy. The crime tree hierarchy categorise different types of crimes into groups and sub-groups in a consistent way in order to ensure a clearer and more consistent picture on recorded crime for the public. (Link: crime-tree.pdf About the data - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services).

Incident	A crime recorded in the SWERCC or Essex Police dataset.
ISVA	Independent Sexual Violence Adviser. ISVAs offer support to people who have suffered sexual violence.
MoJ	Ministry of Justice.
PCRN	Police Crime Reference Number. When a crime is reported, a PCRN is generated by the police to allow for the monitoring of the status of the crime. The PCRN should be shared with the victim who reported the crime.
Rape Crisis Centres	Rape Crisis Centres are charities working to end sexual violence and abuse under the umbrella membership organisation of Rape Crisis England & Wales. They deliver free, local and specialist services to victims of all forms of sexual violence and abuse. (Link: Find your local Rape Crisis centre Rape Crisis England & Wales).
RASSO	Rape and serious sexual offences.
SARCS	Sexual assault response co-ordination service. Specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted. They can assist victims in reporting the incident to the police. These services are provided by the National Health Service. (Link: Help after rape and sexual assault - NHS).
SWERCC	South and West Essex Rape Crisis Centres. SWERCC consists of two of the three Rape Crisis Centres in the Synergy Essex partnership: SERICC Rape and Sexual Abuse Specialist Service and Southend-on-Sea Rape Crisis (SOSRC). Both centres are based in Essex.
SWERCC Case	A continuous period of interaction between a victim and SWERCC.
SWERCC Closed Case	A closed case is a period of interaction with SWERCC that has come to an end. There is no on-going interaction on that case.
SWERCC first time case/new case	A victim's first period of interaction with SWERCC.
SWERCC Person ID	A unique identifier used in the SWERCC dataset to identify individuals.
User Research	Interviews conducted with victims supported by SWERCC. More details can be found in Annex B.

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Executive summary

The Victim Pathways Pilot of Better Outcomes Through Linked Data (BOLD)¹ aims to better understand how government and third sector services can most effectively support victims of crime. This is the second report from the BOLD Victim Pathway Pilot. It follows on from the first report, An Adult Victim's Journey Through a Sexual Violence Support Service in Essex,² which used data from two of the three rape crisis centres in the Synergy Essex Partnership,³ (known for reporting purposes as South and West Essex Rape Crisis Centres [SWERCC]).

Data from Essex Police has been linked to the SWERCC dataset to understand how different cohorts of adult victims interact with police and a support service. This research was not intended to be an evaluation of the quality of service offered by SWERCC or Essex Police, but is an exploration of the interaction between the two services.

Background

The purpose of this research was to improve understanding, within MOJ, of the interactions made by victims of sexual violence with the police and support services in Essex. The findings from this report are expected to be of most interest to staff working within victim support services, police staff, policymakers responsible for implementation and oversight of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and victims of sexual violence.

One of the four pillars of the Safer Streets Mission⁴ is halving Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) commitment is 'support for victims'. The research findings in this report help build the evidence base on victims' interactions with third sector support services and

¹ [Ministry of Justice: Better Outcomes through Linked Data \(BOLD\)](#)

² "An Adult Victim's Journey Through a Sexual Violence Support Service in Essex", available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-victims-journey-through-a-sexual-violence-support-service-in-essex>

³ [Synergy Essex](#)

⁴ [Safer Streets](#)

the CJS and our understanding of what works best to support victims to stay engaged in the CJS.

Operation Soteria Bluestone⁵ was developed by the Home Office and initially launched within Avon and Somerset Police force in June 2021. The aim was to increase the number of adult rape and serious sexual assault cases reaching the charge stage. This led to two new National Operating Models being launched in July 2023⁶ with the focus being to improve support for victims of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). This model was officially rolled out in Essex Police in January 2025 – after the data share period for this project – so it was not possible to examine changes in completeness of recorded data over time as a result of this model's introduction.

Research aims

The primary aims of this research were:

1. To compare victims of sexual offences referred to support services who had reported to the police, and those who had not reported to the police to examine any differences that may be inherent in the groups present in this data.
2. To understand the journey of victims of sexual offences through the police stages of the CJS, and how their experiences may impact engagement with victim support services.

To fully answer the second aim, the research looked at:

- the characteristics of those who were referred to victim support services and the CJS,
- the support needs of different groups of victims.

⁵ [Operation Soteria – Transforming the Investigation of Rape](#)

⁶ [Op Soteria rolled out across England and Wales](#)

Methodology

In this research, data from Essex Police and data from third sector support services were examined for quality and comprehensiveness.⁷

Using a novel linking method, (this was the first time MOJ have linked police and third sector data, more detail of which can be found in Annex A), and after initial exploration, fuller analysis of the victim journey was completed. Additionally, a cohort analysis of victims was carried out to explore differences between those who had reported to the police, and those who had not. The three cohorts analysed were: victims that only appeared in the SWERCC dataset (SWERCC-only), victims that only appeared in the police dataset (Police dataset-only), and victims that were linked and appeared in both, (SWERCC-police). This allowed for analysis of the differences between victims whose incident was reported to the police, victims who were referred to support and victims who had both.

A major caveat in the linking was that only data from two out of three of the centres that make up Synergy Essex was obtained. That means victims in the Police dataset-only cohort may have been referred to the third centre. This centre is the largest of the three centres and handles about half of the adult caseload of Synergy. Exploration of this issue found there was no reason to assume that victims referred here were significantly different to those referred to SWERCC. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that the differences between the police dataset-only group and the other two groups would still apply, or possibly increase, if data from the third centre was included.

The cohort analysis, performed on victims of rape, was made up of 9,000 adult victims, split into three cohorts. These were victims that appeared in both Essex Police and SWERCC data (1,028), victims who only appeared in SWERCC data (1,445), and victims who only appeared in Essex Police data (6,527).

⁷ The data included victims who had reported their crime to Essex Police, and victims aged over 18 who had been referred to SWERCC. Some victims will have experienced their incident before they were 18 (this includes all Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) victims). The data excluded victims who did not engage with either Essex Police or SWERCC, or who engaged with SWERCC before they turned 18.

The quantitative findings in this report were supplemented by insights from user research with adult victims of rape who reported to the police and engaged with SWERCC.⁸ More details can be found in Annex B.

Key findings

Victim Engagement and Reporting Behaviour:

Disproportionalities in the make-up of the three cohorts were found when analysing them using the available demographics.

- Rape victims from a minority ethnic background were overrepresented in the SWERCC cohorts. Around one-in-ten (13%) of those that were referred to SWERCC, (victims in the SWERCC-police and SWERCC-only cohorts) were from minority ethnic groups. This compared to 9% in the Police dataset-only cohort, and 10% of the total victims in the cohort analysis being from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- There was a significantly higher proportion of male rape victims in the Police dataset-only cohort (9%), compared with the SWERCC-police cohort (3%), and the SWERCC-only cohort (4%).
- Among female victims of all incident types in the SWERCC data, 60% had reported at least one RASSO incident to the police, compared to just 40% of male victims.
- Young adult rape victims (aged 18 – 24) were more frequently found in the SWERCC dataset and not the police dataset. Proportionally, more young adult rape victim cases (aged 18-24) were found only in SWERCC data (34%), than only Essex Police data (27%).

Timing of Support Seeking:

⁸ The user research findings included in this report form part of a wider service design programme taking a design-led 'test and learn' approach to designing interventions to better meet victims' support needs. This involved 16 journey mapping sessions with victims.

Exploration of the SWERCC dataset found that the time taken to seek support was associated with the type of primary incident the victim was seeking support for, and the risks they faced.

- Victims seeking support over two years post-incident were more likely to be CSA victims (49%) than rape victims (39%).
- Rape victims were split between those who delayed seeking support and those who sought support early. Over a third of victims with rape as their primary incident (38%) had waited over two years to seek support, while a quarter (27%) waited less than a week. The remaining 35% waited for a period in between these two lengths.
- Rape victims who waited longer to seek support after the incident reported poorer mental health at referral, with 25% of those waiting over two years reporting suicide attempts/thoughts. This compared to 16% among those who had sought support within one week of the incident.
- In regard to crime type, victims of rape referred to SWERCC were more likely to have reported to police (77% told SWERCC they had reported the incident to the police) compared to adult victims of CSA, of whom only 46% had done so.

Interaction with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) during support service engagement:

An association was found between case progression through the CJS and victim engagement with SWERCC, highlighting how CJS interaction can affect engagement with victim support, and the important role Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) play.

- Victims whose cases had progressed further through the CJS were more likely to have remained engaged with SWERCC and exit the service in a planned way⁹ (71% of victims whose case was 'Sent to CPS for decision' had a planned closure, compared with 54% for those who received no further action (NFA) from the police).
- A small proportion of victims chose to report to the police during their period of SWERCC engagement (7% for rape victims and 6% for CSA victims). The majority

⁹ When victims exit the service in an agreed or planned way, this is known as a 'planned closure'. A SWERCC case ends in a 'planned closure' when a victim feels that they no longer need support and agree this with their support service workers. If a victim leaves before this agreed point or does not complete any service, the case will have an 'unexpected closure'.

of rape victims (65%) reported to the police before SWERCC support. Over half (54%) of CSA victims had not reported to the police at the time the data was shared.

- The user research highlighted the importance of ISVAs as a point of contact, and how they might help maintain victim engagement in the CJS.

Domestic Abuse (DA) Risk in Rape Cases:

A link was found between the prevalence of facing domestic abuse risks and victims who reported to the police and were referred to support.

- There was higher prevalence of the recording of the presence of domestic abuse for victims found in both the police dataset and the SWERCC dataset (57%) compared to those that appeared only the police dataset (40%) and those that appeared only in the SWERCC dataset (23%).
- The proportion of rape cases in the police data flagged with DA rose from 2018 (at 25%) and peaked at 47% in 2022.

Implications

The analysis in this research found that victims from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to be in the SWERCC-police and SWERCC-only cohorts. Further work needs to be carried out to understand whether individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to report RASSO incidents to the police, and why that may be.

Evidence also pointed to a gap in the presence of male victims in the support service.¹⁰ The data available for this research showed that males were less likely to appear in the SWERCC data than the police data, suggesting that male victims may be less likely to seek support. Male victims were generally unrepresented in research on referral and support service journeys of RASSO victims. Research from the University of York in 2022

¹⁰ For Essex Police, a field titled Gender was used. The entries, (if known) were male or female. For SWERCC, a field called Gender was used. The entries, (if known) were male, female, transgender male, transgender female, transgender and non-binary. For the analysis, transgender males were included in the male grouping and transgender female were included in the female grouping. Transgender and non-binary were not included.

found only a single study that related to male victims, and no studies that sought male victims' views.¹¹ Therefore drivers of this gap were uncertain.

To support the aims of the Safer Streets Mission and strengthen engagement with the criminal justice system (CJS), further research is needed to understand what would help young people who come forward for support to feel confident in reporting to the police.

For victims who chose to engage with the CJS, the further that their case had progressed, the more likely they were to remain engaged with support and exit services in a planned way. However, delays in rape cases may contribute to attrition from both the justice process and support services. Research from the Victims Commissioner found that delays in the Crown Court meant victims' trust in the criminal justice system was being diminished, leading to them disengaging with the system, and in many cases withdrawing entirely.¹²

Victims in this data rarely reported to the police during their time with SWERCC, suggesting that decisions about CJS engagement were typically made prior to accessing support. The data suggested that support services played a stronger role in retaining engagement with the CJS rather than initiating it. This suggests that there were other factors that influence a victim's decision to engage with the CJS. This could be explored if further research is conducted to investigate why and how victims choose to engage with the CJS.

Mental health needs at the time of seeking support were often more acute among victims who delayed seeking support. Those who delayed seeking support were often in the older age groups, and had not reported the incident to the police. Research from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse found that victims who delayed disclosure of CSA suffered detrimental impacts on their mental health.¹³ The research found disclosing the incidents could produce feelings of shame and guilt. These intense feelings may lead to the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

¹¹ [Adult specialist services for victim-survivors of sexual violence and abuse: a systematic map of evidence](#)

¹² [Justice delayed: The impact of the Crown Court backlog on victims, victim services and the criminal justice system](#)

¹³ [Key messages from research on the impacts of child sexual abuse](#)

The data and interviews suggested offering a range of support at different time points could encourage victims to support their wellbeing sooner and reduce the likelihood of waiting to engage with support until they reach a crisis point (i.e. when they are suicidal).

Finally, the significant overlap between rape and domestic abuse highlighted the need for coordinated responses to these crime types. Coordinated working between specialist sexual violence and domestic abuse services, alongside CJS agencies, is vital to ensuring that victims' full range of needs are met.

1. Introduction

The Victims' Code¹⁴ states that if a victim reports a crime to the police, they have the right to be referred to a service that supports victims. The Victims' Code also states that if a victim chooses not to report the crime to the police, they still have the right to access support services at any time. Accordingly, many victims are referred to third sector support services,¹⁵ but they may also be referred to Criminal Justice System (CJS)¹⁶ victim-support services, or to a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC).¹⁷ This makes a holistic understanding of the experiences of victims particularly difficult as each organisation that refers or supports victims typically has different recording standards and practices suited to their purpose. This means different data may be collected, to different levels of accuracy, depending on the route taken by a victim through the CJS and support services, making comparisons difficult.

There has been a concerted effort to improve government data collection and use in recent years including through the BOLD Victims Pilot work aiming to improve the use of data for adult victims of crime. Through this research, the principles of quality and joined-up data are leveraged to explore journeys of adult victims of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in Essex. This is the second piece of research into victim and support service data produced with the co-operation of local organisations.¹⁸

1.1 RASSO in England and Wales

According to figures published by the Home Office, police-recorded cases of adult rape have increased from 41,159 in the year ending March 2017 to 71,540 in the year ending March 2025.¹⁹

¹⁴ [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales \(Victims' Code\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime-in-england-and-wales)

¹⁵ The third-sector includes organisations that are not in the public sector, (such as government) or private sector, (for profit businesses.)

¹⁶ The collective bodies responsible for administering justice in England and Wales.

¹⁷ [Help after rape and sexual assault - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sexual-assault/)

¹⁸ The first is available here: [Adult victim's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex.](#)

¹⁹ [Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables](#)

In response, successive governments have called for greater understanding of victim experiences, and a focus on improving the police stage of investigations. The Safer Streets Mission²⁰ calls for a reform of police standards of investigation, and improved training for investigators and support staff, to support the aim of halving Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) over the next decade.

The Safer Streets Mission builds on findings from wider research and change programmes, including Operation Soteria Bluestone, a specialist study which was launched in 2021 by the Home Office with the aim of improving the proportion of adult rape cases that appropriately reach the court stage.²¹ The initial work consisted of in-depth research with four police forces (known as ‘pathfinders’) between September 2021 and August 2022.

Using findings from that research, a new national operating model for RASSO²² was developed through Operation Soteria and rolled out in July 2023. It was developed in collaboration with victims and victim support organisations, and promotes improved training, strategic use of police data, and a structured approach to engaging with victims.

The findings set out in this report focus on examining the feasibility and value of linking data from Essex Police and SWERCC, and explore the interactions between victims’ journeys with the police and victim support services. The first BOLD Victims Pilot report²³ showed that the victim journey through the criminal justice system (CJS) and related victim-support services is not yet fully understood.

This analysis in the first report found that the largest level of attrition from SWERCC happened between the initial referral and the victim-survivor completing an assessment of needs. The most common service accessed by victims referred to SWERCC was therapy (38%) followed by the use of the wraparound service (both therapy and advocacy) (20%). For victim-survivors who completed a before and after questionnaire, it was indicated that

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/missions/safer-streets>

²¹ [Operation Soteria Year One Report](#)

²² <https://www.college.police.uk/national-operating-model-rasso>

²³ “An Adult Victim’s Journey Through a Sexual Violence Support Service in Essex”, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-victims-journey-through-a-sexual-violence-support-service-in-essex>

engagement with SWERCC has a positive impact on a victim-survivor's ability to cope and build resilience.

By linking CJS data to third sector data, this research aimed to provide further insights into victims' journeys and help to better understand their interactions within and between organisations.

1.2 Operational context: RASSO in Essex

The first BOLD Victims pilot report, 'Adult victim-survivor's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex'²⁴ showed that information about victims is both decentralised and unstandardised. It suggested that to understand victim's journeys holistically required aggregating datasets across multiple sectors. For this reason, the BOLD Victims Pilot partnered with the police for this research.

The partnership for this research included the South and West Essex Rape Crisis Centres (SWERCC). These centres constitute two of the three sexual violence support services in Essex, the SERICC Rape and Sexual Abuse Specialist Service (SERICC), and Southend-on-Sea Rape Crisis (SOSRC). Together with the Centre for Action on Rape and Abuse (CARA), these centres form Synergy Essex,²⁵ providing the only specialised sexual support services in Essex. CARA makes up approximately 50% of the Synergy caseload.

Essex Police and Synergy Essex applied a direct police pathway model for victims' services. If consent was given by the victim, all those who reported rape to Essex Police were referred to Synergy Essex within 24 hours of that report. In cases where Essex police were not immediately able to allocate an officer, this meant that Synergy Essex could still offer initial support and early intervention.

The BOLD Victims Pilot worked with Essex Police and SWERCC to build a set of victim-level data. This gave BOLD access to a cut of both structured police data and support service records of victim interactions. The next phase of this research was to link the datasets.

²⁴ [Adult victim-survivor's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex](#)

²⁵ <https://synergyessex.org.uk/>

Since this data was shared in May 2024, Essex Police have adopted the National Operating Model under Operation Soteria. This model guides officers to challenge myths, avoid victim-blaming, and ensure victims are heard and supported throughout the criminal justice process.

2. Research Aims and Methodology

2.1 Research aims

The primary aims of this research were:

1. To compare the characteristics of victims of sexual offences referred to support services who had reported to the police, and those who had not reported to the police to examine any differences that may be inherent in the groups present in this data.
2. To understand the journey of victims of sexual offences through the police stages of the CJS, and how their experiences may impact engagement with victim support services.

The findings were based on a subset of data held by a specific police force, Essex, and data from victims over the age of 18 from a specific support service in the same geographical area. For the SWERCC data, only adult victims of sexual offences who had consented to having their data shared for research purposes were included.²⁶ For the data linking, the match rate was 75% for records with Essex PCRN in the SWERCC dataset. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised but should be considered foundational as part of wider efforts to improve outcomes for victims, by understanding and enhancing the data that is held on them across multiple organisations.

Aim one for the research focused on analysing the linked SWERCC and Police data to compare three victim cohorts: rape victims solely in the Essex Police data (referred to as Police dataset-only in the analysis); rape victims solely in the SWERCC data share (SWERCC-only); and those who appeared in both datasets (SWERCC-police).²⁷ Due to data quality limitations in the linked dataset, (further information on missing data can be found in section 2.3 and Annex C), supplementary analysis using the SWERCC data in

²⁶ For the time period that the data shared covered, 86% of SWERCC victims consented to having their data shared.

²⁷ Victims in the Police dataset-only cohort may have been referred to the third rape crisis centre in Essex. Data from this centre was not obtained for this project. More details of limitations can be found in section 2.4.

isolation was also conducted to support aim one. This analysis looked at all incident types, not just rape.

Aim two was more complex, as victims suffered different crimes, had different demographic backgrounds and differing needs. Analysis for this aim used the police and SWERCC datasets separately, each contributing a distinct perspective on the victim journey. To fully answer this research aim, the analysis looked at:

- the characteristics of those who were referred to victim support services and the CJS,
- the support needs of different groups of victims.

The quantitative findings in this report were complemented by insights from user research with victims, offering additional depth and contextual understanding. More details can be found in Annex B.

2.2 Data sharing

To achieve the research aims, a data sharing agreement and Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) were required to transfer a sub-set of Essex Police data to the MoJ Analytical Platform.²⁸ This allowed for linking the Essex Police data to other data sources.

The data in scope to be shared from both Essex Police and SWERCC was data that had been completed using drop-down options in a standard format. No free text answers were supplied due to data protection sensitivities and the potential for personally identifiable information (PII) to exist within the free text fields. More detail on data sharing can be found in Annex A.

2.3 Methodology

The police dataset was first examined to assess data quality, including variable completeness and consistency. Subsequently, the subset of fields common to both the police and SWERCC datasets were evaluated to determine their suitability for accurate

²⁸ See Glossary.

linkage.²⁹ This analysis focused on the feasibility of matching records across datasets using shared identifiers.

The SWERCC dataset contained information on 6,457 cases, representing 5,288 unique individuals who were 18 or over, had accessed SWERCC support before 6th May 2023, and had consented to sharing their data in May 2018 or later. A total of 4,436 cases in the SWERCC data represented victims' first interaction with SWERCC, where the case was closed at the time of the data share.

Figure 2.1 – Count of first time cases in SWERCC by primary incident

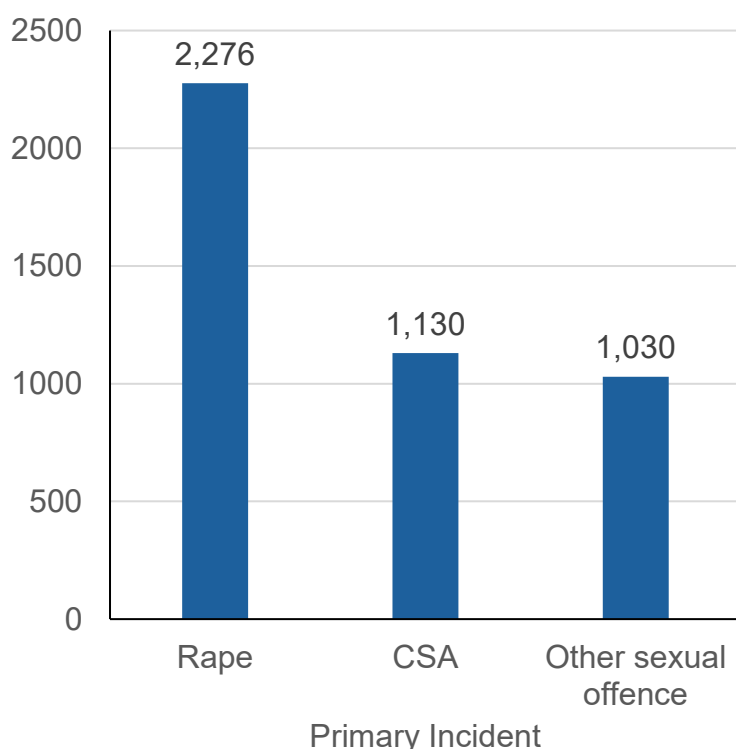


Table 2.1 - Breakdown of SWERCC database

Description	Count
Cases with information entered in the PCRN field	3,998
Cases with PCRN in Correct Format	3,073
Cases with PCRN in Incorrect Format	925

Base = 6,457 all cases in SWERCC database

Base = 4,436 first time cases in SWERCC database

The police dataset contained information on 749,108 unique incidents reported to Essex Police between May 2018 and May 2024. These were identified by the Police Crime Reference Number (PCRN), which was unique to a specific incident. Individual victims linked to a PCRN were identified using a combination of date of birth, gender, and latest

²⁹ This included Police Crime Reference Number, date of birth and gender.

known postcode. A total of 730,802 unique combinations of PCRN and identifiable victims were found. In this data, 99% of PCRN had a single identifiable victim associated.

Table 2.2 - Breakdown of incidents in the Essex Police Database

Description	Count
Combinations of PCRN and identifiable victims where the PCRN related to sexual offences and the victim was 18 or over at the time of report to the police, (base)	17,851
Combinations with rape incident	9,940
Combinations with other sexual offence incident	7,911

Variable completeness

Data completeness varied significantly across police-recorded variables. Fields such as "location district" were well populated (98% complete), but fields such as "country of birth", "occupation code 1" and "nationality" had substantial missing data (missing 64%, 60% and 42% respectively for sexual offences). This restricted robust disaggregation by protected characteristics and introduced potential bias. Therefore, analysis was only conducted using variables that were sufficiently complete to allow for non-biased findings.³⁰ More details on variable completeness in the Essex Police data can be found in Annex C.

Since this data was shared, Essex Police have been working on one of the improvement principles set out in the Operation Soteria Bluestone Police National Operating model, which is to improve the completeness and quality of data that the police record.³¹ The model was rolled out in Essex Police in January 2025 – after the data share period for this project – so it was not possible to examine changes in completeness of recorded data over time as a result of this model's introduction.

Comparatively, SWERCC data had low missing data across core variables (6–8%), enabling more detailed and reliable cohort analysis.

Linked dataset

The final linked dataset included 1,833 records. Linking was achieved by using a combination of PCRN and date of birth of the victim; these were the only two fields

³⁰ Only variables with at least 65% of entries present were analysed.

³¹ [Measuring success – key performance indicators for forces](#)

available with victim identifiable information that were recorded the same way in both datasets.

Of 3,073 SWERCC cases with a PCRN in the correct format, 60% were successfully matched to police records using Police Crime Reference Numbers (PCRN) and date of birth, rising to 75% when filtered for Essex-specific PCRN. Those not linked may have been due to an incorrectly recorded PCRN, missing or incorrectly recorded dates of birth, the victim reporting to police outside of the date range that the police data covered, or the victims reporting an offence that took place outside of the Essex Police area.

The quality of linkage was constrained by missing or inconsistently formatted identifiers, particularly in the police dataset. While linkage allowed for comparisons on key demographics, inconsistencies were observed:

- Gender: In 21 cases, gender did not align between datasets; 13 of these involved transgender identities recorded by SWERCC but not by police.³² This highlighted the value of integrated datasets in improving demographic visibility.
- Ethnicity: Only 65% of linked records had matching ethnicity data. Misalignment often resulted from differing classification systems (e.g., “Black African” in SWERCC recorded as “White and Black African” or “Any Other Black Background” by police), revealing the need for harmonised coding standards.³³
- Crime Type: There was strong agreement for rape cases (93% match). However, CSA was not identifiable in the police dataset that was shared therefore SWERCC data was used to identify CSA.³⁴ Here, linked data added value—SWERCC categorisation revealed child abuse cases otherwise obscured in police classifications.

³² These were marked as “Misaligned Gender” for analytical purposes.

³³ Analysis was done by grouping ethnicities into a higher level, where the rate at which they misaligned was 2%.

³⁴ There was no CSA category in the police dataset. Cases in SWERCC with CSA as the primary incident were divided in Essex Police data between a classification of Rape (53%), Other Sexual Offences (45%), Public Order Offences (0.4%), Violence with Injury (0.4%) and Violence Without Injury (0.4%).

These findings demonstrated the value of linked datasets while highlighting the critical importance of data quality, recording alignment, and variable consistency for meaningful cross-organisational insight. More details on the data linking can be found in Annex A.

2.4 Limitations

The linked data faced significant limitations, and therefore analysis in this report must be interpreted appropriately and not generalised to all Essex RASSO victims. The major caveats were:

- The Police dataset-only cohort should not be interpreted as victims who had only engaged with Essex Police. This cohort may have included:
 - Victims who were known to SWERCC but did not consent to have their data shared,³⁵
 - Victims who were known to the third, and largest Rape Crisis Centre in Essex (which was not part of the SWERCC data share) and handled about half of the caseload,
 - Victims that were known to SWERCC prior to 2018 or after May 2023,
 - Victims who were known to SWERCC but there was insufficient information available for successful data linking to police data (e.g. no PCRN),
 - Victims who may have been referred to support services outside the Essex area.
- The SWERCC-only cohort needed to be interpreted with caution as it could contain victims who reported an incident to a police force other than Essex, or reported to Essex Police outside of the timeframe that the data shared covered.
- Victims under the age of 18 were excluded from the SWERCC data share. This meant that any CSA that appears in the data was likely to be non-recent.

³⁵ For the period that the data share covered, 86% of SWERCC victims consented to having their data shared.

- The data covered a police force and a specific support service in one area of England, and therefore may not be representative of the country as a whole.
- SWERCC cover south and west Essex, whereas Essex Police cover the whole of the county. This means there may be potential edge effects such as different demographic makeup in the area covered by the third rape crisis centre. This may lead to unintended bias in the reporting. Therefore, findings are not representative of all Essex RASSO victims.

2.5 Ethics

A number of ethical issues were considered when conducting this research, particularly due to the sensitive nature of the data included in the data share.

Stakeholders, both internal and external were consulted to ensure that there was a need for this research to be carried out. This included consulting with MOJ Policy colleagues on which government priorities would be supported, as well as both SWERCC and Essex Police to understand the burden and benefits to them and victims.

Data from SWERCC was obtained using informed consent. Only data from adult victims who had signed a consent form stating that their data could be used for research purposes was shared. Data from police was shared using the legal process of public task.

Data minimisation standards were met with both police and SWERCC data shares. This was achieved by only sharing data from structured fields, with no free text shared. This was due to the potential for personally identifiable information (PII) to be present in the free text fields. Only fields that were relevant to our research aims were shared.

No fields containing names (either of the victim or perpetrator) and addresses (excluding postcode) were shared. Apart from Police Crime Reference Number, date of birth and latest known postcode, which were used for linking purposes, any structured fields that contained PII were excluded from the data share. For example, National Insurance Number was excluded.

Confidentiality and privacy was ensured by using the MOJ Analytical platform (AP).³⁶ The AP allows for strict controls on who can access the data. This project was limited to only the analysts who linked the data, performed the analysis and quality assured the code. All analysis was conducted within the AP, with no raw data being exported to external files. The analyst who linked the data did not conduct the cohort analysis.

Integrity and transparency was achieved by ensuring the analysis was quality assured by analysts outside of the BOLD Victims Pilot. This report has also been externally peer reviewed by independent reviewers to ensure objectivity in the findings.

When conducting the user research, the Government Social Research (GSR) ethics checklist was adhered to,³⁷ and a bespoke set of internal principles were set out to minimise both participant and researcher harm. In particular, the following steps were taken:

Participants

1. **Recruitment & Support** – recruitment made via SWERCC and emotional support provided both during and after sessions.
2. **Ongoing Consent** – interviews were conducted using dynamic consent to ensure participants know they can withdraw anytime without consequence.
3. **Setting Expectations** – the purpose of the project was clearly explained, including session details and to reassure participants they would not need to disclose details of the offence.
4. **Human First** – researchers understood the importance of building trust and rapport, keeping discussions conversational and allowing extra so that participants could feel heard and validated.

³⁶ A secure data analysis platform made up of tools, packages and datasets for creating applications that utilise data within the Ministry of Justice. (Link: <https://user-guidance.analytical-platform.service.justice.gov.uk/>)

³⁷ [GSR Ethical Assurance for Social and Behavioural Research](#)

5. **Build Hope** – participants were informed about next steps in the research and how their input would be used, to assure them of the value of their contribution.

Researchers

1. **Staggered Scheduling** – interviews were limited to a maximum of two per day, with breaks in between, to prevent vicarious traumatisation and burnout.
2. **Wellbeing Debriefs** – daily check-ins between researchers were made on interview days, with additional support available from line managers, MoJ counselling support and self-care guidance.³⁸

³⁸ <https://medium.com/user-research-explained/self-care-in-user-research-765b5869a5e8>

3. Key Findings

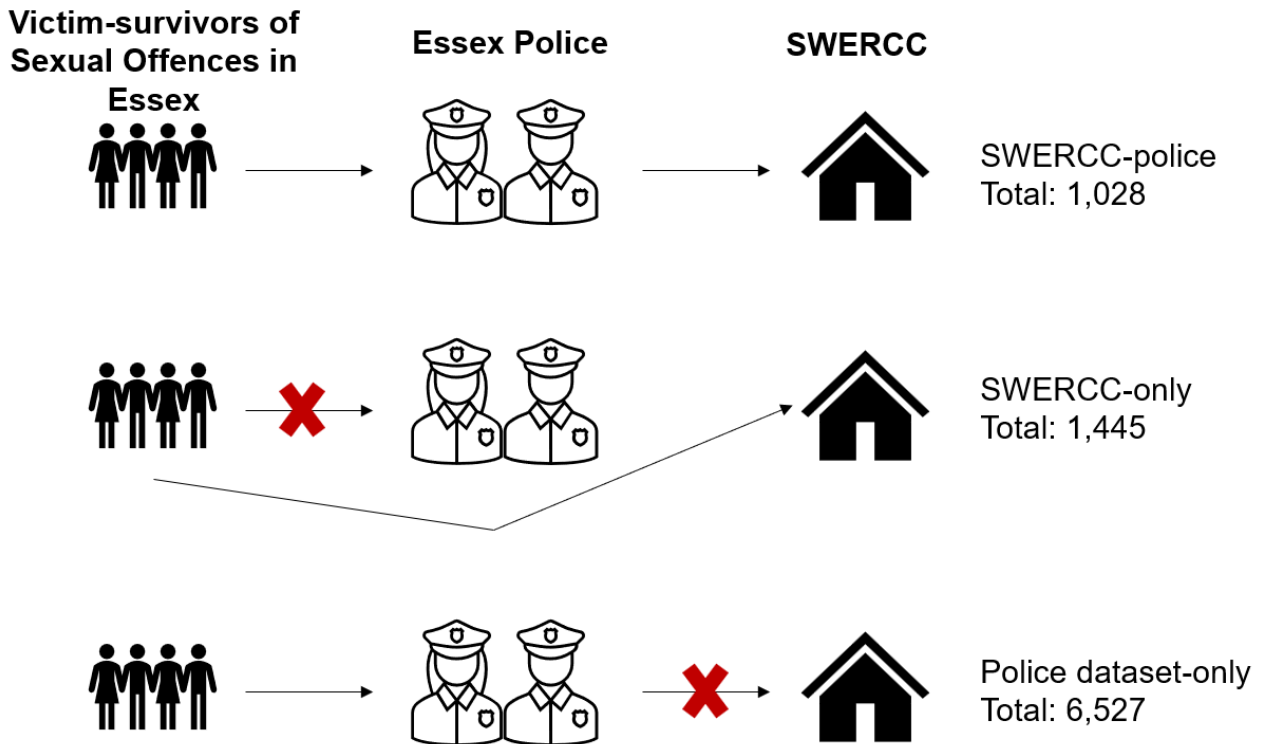
Synergy Essex, (including SWERCC) and Essex Police ran a 'direct police pathway' model for victims of rape, which meant this group of victims should be offered a referral into SWERCC as standard. To ensure only this cohort of victims was considered, the linked dataset used for analysis was restricted to rape victims only – and further restricted to adults (aged 18+)³⁹ – to conduct a cohort analysis.

The resulting 9,000 adult victims of rape were split into three cohorts, as shown in figure 3.1. These were victims that appeared in both Essex Police and SWERCC data (1,028), victims who only appeared in SWERCC data (1,445), and victims who only appeared in Essex Police data⁴⁰ (6,527). Of the SWERCC-only cohort, 90 (6%) had a PCRN recorded in the SWERCC dataset that did not find a match in the Essex Police dataset.

Figure 3.1 - Breakdown of analytical cohorts for victims of rape

³⁹ Analysis was restricted to 18+ because SWERCC data contained only adult victims.

⁴⁰ These victims may have been referred to the third rape crisis centre in Essex, whose data was not part of this research. More details of limitations can be found in section 2.4.



Base = 9,000. Adult victims of rape appearing in at least one dataset.

In the following analysis, these three cohorts were compared. To add depth and insight to the cohort analysis, both datasets were also analysed in isolation, in their entirety. For the SWERCC data, this included victims of rape, CSA and other sexual offences. For police data, this included rape and other sexual offences. The analysis presented below indicates the source of the findings. Where differences are statistically significant, it is noted in the text.

3.1 Victim Engagement and Reporting Behaviour

Key Findings

- Rape victims from a minority ethnic background were over represented in the SWERCC cohorts. Around one-in-ten, (13%) of those that were referred to SWERCC, (victims in the SWERCC-police and SWERCC-only cohorts) were from minority ethnic groups. This compared to 9% in the Police dataset-only cohort, and 10% of the total victims in the cohort analysis being from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- There was a significantly higher proportion of male rape victims in the Police dataset-only cohort, (9%) compared with the SWERCC-police cohort, (3%) and the SWERCC-only cohort, (4%). This was driven by a lower proportion of men appearing in the SWERCC cohort data.
- Among female victims of all incident types in the SWERCC data, 60% had reported at least one RASSO incident to police, compared to just 40% of male victims.
- Young adult rape victims (aged 18 – 24) were more frequently found in the SWERCC dataset and not the police dataset. Proportionally, more young adult rape victim cases (aged 18-24) were found only in SWERCC data (34%), than only Essex Police data (27%).

Ethnicity

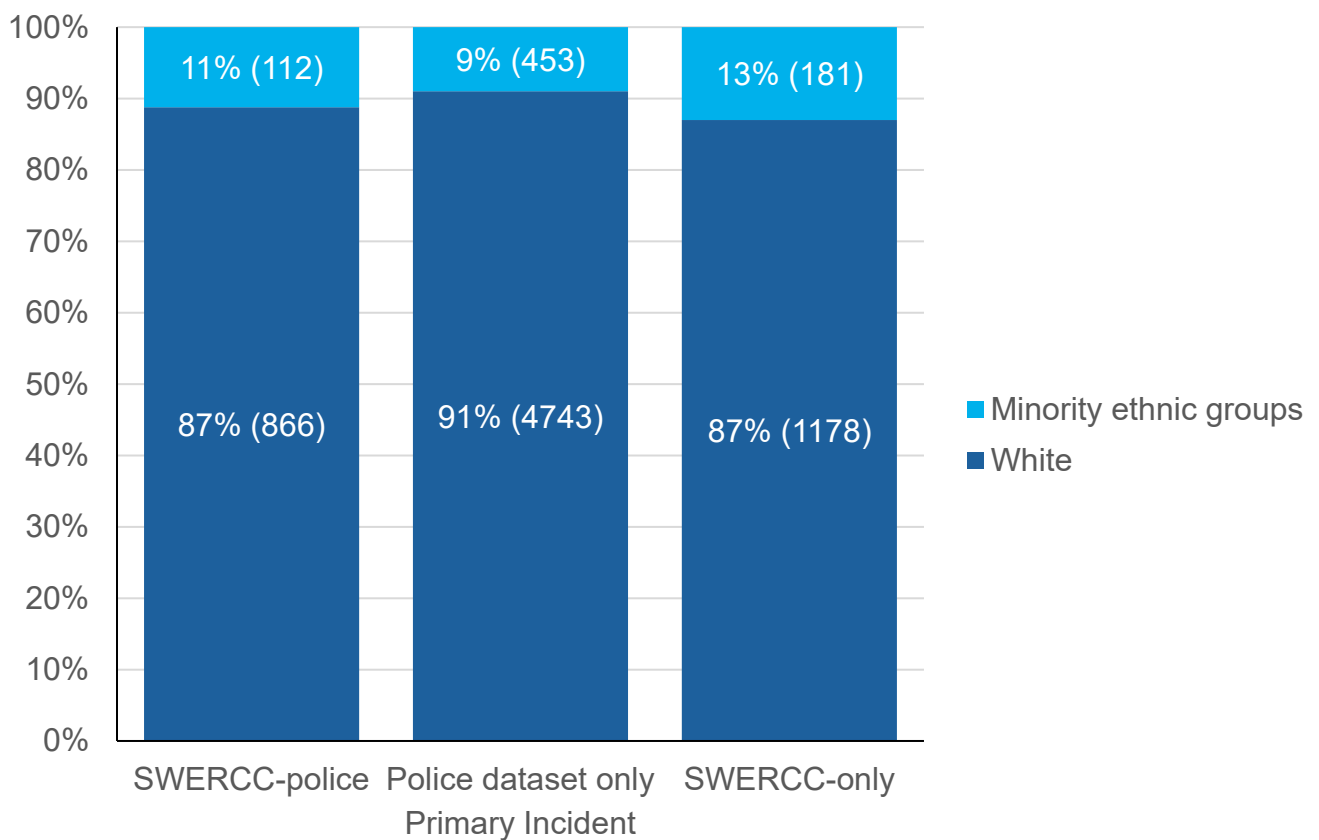
According to the 2021 census, 90% of usual residents in Essex identified their ethnic group within the high-level "White" category.⁴¹ Ethnicity recorded in both SWERCC and Essex Police datasets showed that victims of rape in this data were mostly from white backgrounds. Due to the low number of victims from minority ethnic groups in the cohorts,

⁴¹ [Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

(10%), these categories were aggregated to enable more meaningful comparative analysis.

Figure 3.2 illustrates a significantly smaller proportion of victims from minority ethnic groups⁴² were in the police dataset-only cohort compared to the other two cohorts.⁴³

Figure 3.2 - Proportion (% of total victims with recorded ethnicity) of white and minority ethnic groups, by analytical cohort⁴⁴



Base = 7,552 victim-cases with a recorded ethnicity

Given that 10% of the victims in the cohort analysis were from minority ethnic groups, more victims from this background were referred to SWERCC than would be expected.

⁴² Includes "Any other ethnic group", "Asian or Asian British", "Black or Black British", "Chinese" and "Mixed or dual".

⁴³ Using pairwise chi-squared test results with Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparisons, ($p < 0.05$).

⁴⁴ The remaining 2% of the SWERCC-police cohort was made up of ethnicities that were misaligned between datasets, after grouping into the higher category.

Thirteen per cent of those that were referred to SWERCC (victims in the SWERCC-police and SWERCC-only cohorts) were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Gender

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) reported that women were the victims of rape at a higher rate than men. CSEW estimates that 7.3% of females and 0.5% of males had experienced rape (including attempts) since the age of 16 years.⁴⁵ A similar pattern is seen with CSA. The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse reported that of all children on child protection plans due to sexual abuse, 59% were female and 41% were male.⁴⁶

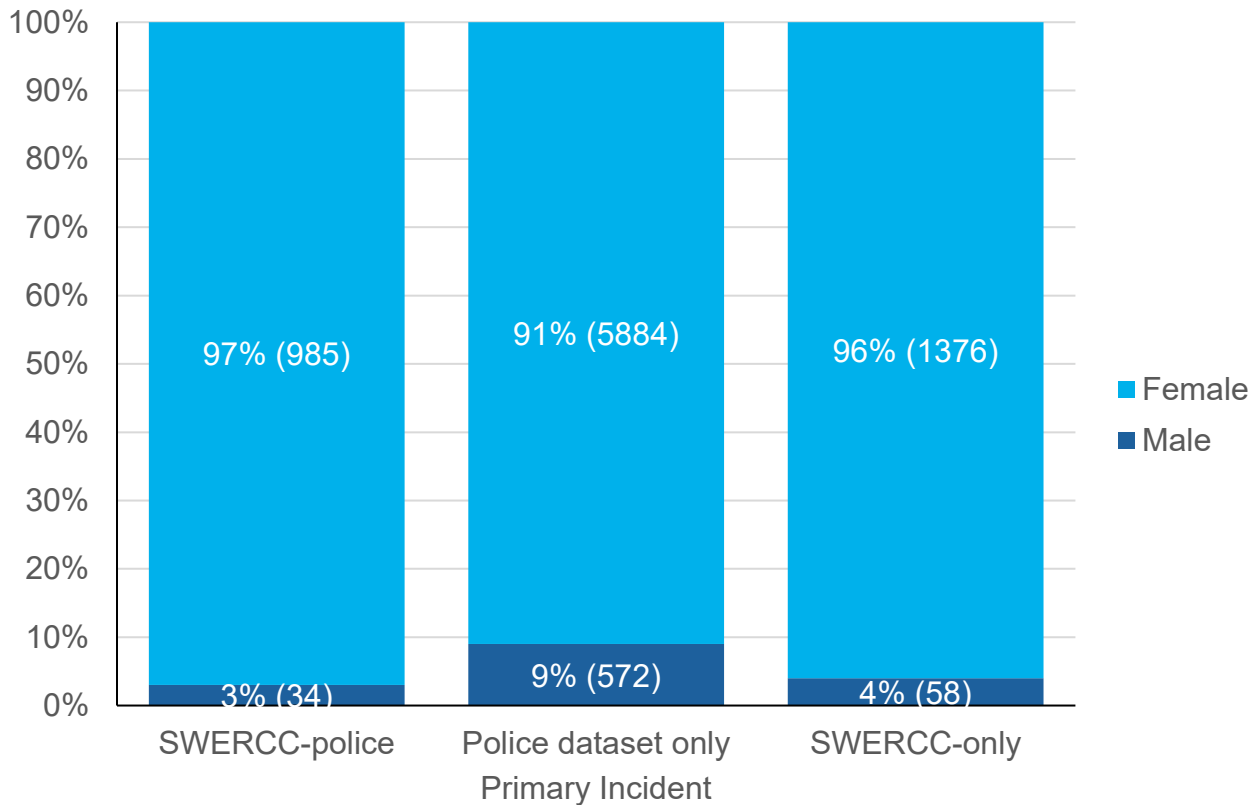
In the cohort analysis, it was found that the majority of victims in all groups, (91-97%) were female, as shown in figure 3.3. However, there was a significantly higher proportion of male rape victims in the Police dataset-only cohort compared with the other two cohorts.⁴⁷ In this group, 9% were male, compared to 4% in the SWERCC-only cohort and 3% in the SWERCC-police cohort.

⁴⁵ [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2025](#)

⁴⁶ [Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official data](#)

⁴⁷ Using pairwise chi-squared test results ($p < 0.05$ after Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparison).

Figure 3.3 - Proportion of victims who appear in each analytical cohort, where gender was male or female



Base = 8,909. Victims with a gender of male or female

When analysing the entire SWERCC dataset that was shared and focusing on the victims first period of interaction with SWERCC,⁴⁸ female victims were more likely to have reported a RASSO incident to the police than male victims. Sixty per cent of female victims had reported at least one incident to the police, compared to 40% of males.⁴⁹ The CSEW for the year ending March 2020 and March 2025 combined reported that 15% of women and 12% of men who were victims of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16 years had reported the assault to the police.⁵⁰

This finding suggests that men are under-represented in support service data. It cannot be determined from this data whether this was due to males being less likely to be referred to support, or males not consenting to being referred to support. This lower usage of sexual

⁴⁸ 4,436 first time cases.

⁴⁹ Caveated with the fact that this is a selective sample of victims who had been referred to support services.

⁵⁰ [Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2025](#)

violence support service by men has been recognised in SARC usage. Guidance on SARC access for men produced by the NHS⁵¹ states that men were often unaware these services exist, and if they were aware, did not realise the services were intended for men as well as women. Some of the barriers listed in the guidance included fear of not being taken seriously, fear of being labelled a perpetrator and belief that SARCs were not welcoming to men.

Female victims in the SWERCC data tended to have more incidents recorded than males. On average, females had 1.1 incidents per person recorded in SWERCC data, with 70% of these incidents reported to the police. Male victims had 0.84 incidents per person recorded, with 55% of these incidents reported to the police.⁵²

This may indicate that females were more commonly victims of multiple incidents. However it is also consistent with the hypothesis that male victims may be more reluctant to disclose incidents (and therefore not have provided details to SWERCC). As shown in the first report for this project,⁵³ which focused solely on the SWERCC dataset, male victims engaging with SWERCC were more likely to have suffered non-recent CSA and may have found it difficult to talk about the incidents due to shame and/or reduced memory recall because the incident was non-recent.

Age

The cohort analysis found that a statistically significant higher proportion of young adult rape victim cases (aged 18-24) were found in the SWERCC-only cohort (34%), than the Police dataset-only cohort (27%).⁵⁴ This may indicate that younger people were more willing to seek support from specialist services than they were reporting to the police.

⁵¹ [Supporting male victims/survivors accessing a sexual assault referral centre](#)

⁵² Victims are able to give SWERCC details of the incidents that happened to them, which SWERCC record in an incidents table. Some victims in the SWERCC data had no incidents recorded against them in the data. This may be due to them disengaging from SWERCC support before supplying SWERCC with the information needed.

⁵³ [Adult victim-survivor's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex](#)

⁵⁴ Using pairwise chi-squared test results ($p < 0.05$ after Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparison).

Overall, 42% of the police dataset-only cohort were at least 35 years old, compared with 36% of the SWERCC-only cohort.⁵⁵

The user research suggests that older victims (35+) may have been more hesitant to engage with support from a lack of confidence that support will benefit them, or feel more stigma around seeking support.

“It was them [police] that put me through to [SWERCC]. And I wasn't going to do anything with it because I felt like I was too long gone, too old. You know what I mean? I've got through it this far. Why do I need anything?”

Participant F

Analysis of the entire SWERCC dataset indicated that younger victims were more likely to seek support soon after the incident. Among those who accessed support within one week, 36% were aged 18–24, compared to just 9% aged 45–54. Among those who waited over two years to seek support, 20% were aged 18–24 and 18% were aged 45–54.

There were also differences in the type of primary incident reported across age groups. For victims aged 18–24 at first engagement with SWERCC, 62% reported rape and 18% reported CSA. Among those aged 45–54, 42% reported rape while 34% reported CSA. These patterns suggest that younger victims were more likely to have been seeking support for recent rape, whereas older victims were more likely to have engaged later and for non-recent abuse.

However, older victims in this dataset waiting longer to seek support may be partially explained by the lack of under 18s in the data.

This is further supported by the fact that younger victims in the SWERCC data were more likely to have reported at least one incident to the police. As shown in table 3.1, 66% of victims between 18 and 25 had reported to the police, compared with 46% of those

⁵⁵ Using a two-proportion z-test, the difference between the groups is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

between 66 and 64. This suggests that younger victims of rape were more likely benefiting the most from the direct police pathway model.⁵⁶

Table 3.1 - Percentage of victims that reported at least one incident to the police, by age range

Age 18 - 24	Age 25 - 34	Age 35 - 44	Age 45 - 54	Age 55 - 64	Age 65+	Total
66%	62%	54%	53%	46%	45%	58%

Base = 4,436. First time cases in SWERCC data

User research highlighted that victims' readiness to disclose or report the incident varied significantly. Decisions to engage with support services or the police were closely tied to individual perceptions of emotional readiness, which differed across participants. In some cases, readiness was triggered by significant life events, such as the birth of a child or other major personal milestones.

"And then I got a call from the police shortly afterwards and they're asking me if I want to report it and all of this. And for me, obviously, I was not ready for that. That was a very overwhelming experience because I wasn't ready. No, I hadn't got myself there yet."

Participant M (incident took place when she was a child, was reported to police by a third party)

⁵⁶ See glossary.

3.2 Timing of Support Seeking

Key Findings

- Those seeking support over two years post-incident were more likely to have been non-recent CSA victims (49%) than rape victims (39%).
- Rape victims were split between those who delayed seeking support and those who sought support early. Over a third of victims (38%) had waited over two years to seek support, while a quarter (27%) waited less than a week. The remaining 35% waited for a period in between these two lengths.
- Rape victims who waited to seek support after the incident reported poorer mental health at referral, with 25% of those waiting over two years reporting suicide attempts/thoughts. This compares to 16% among those who sought support within one week of the incident.
- In regard to crime type, victims of rape engaging with SWERCC support were more likely to have reported to police (77%) compared to adult victims of CSA (46%).

Cohort analysis showed that delayed engagement was more common among victims who did not appear in police data. Specifically, 45% of victims in the SWERCC-only cohort had waited over two years to access support, compared with 30% in the SWERCC-police cohort. This could indicate that the longer victims took to seek specialist support, the less likely they were to have reported the incident to the police.

The user research⁵⁷ highlighted that victims may have not reached a point where they feel ready to engage with support or the police but may have been triggered by life events,

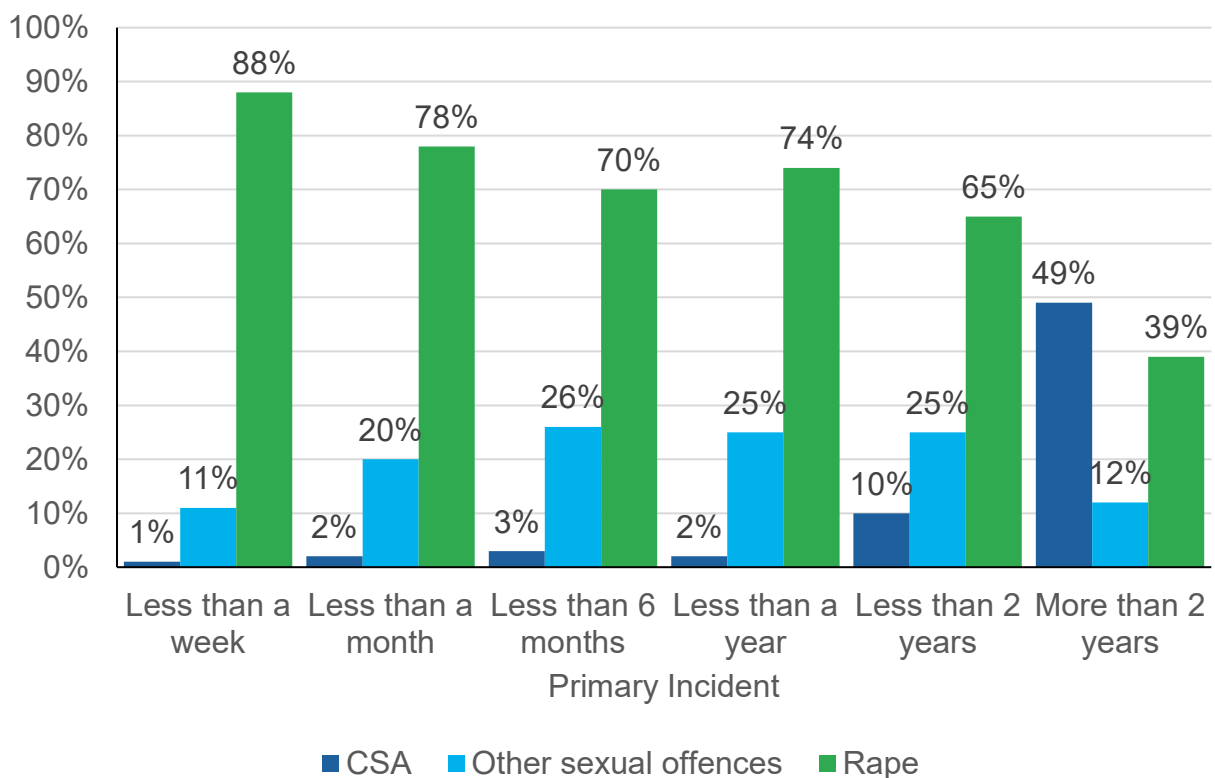
⁵⁷ The user research focused on cases reported to the police **and** receiving support from SWERCC and are therefore not *directly* indicative of those engaging with SWERCC only. However, it is plausible that those engaging with SWERCC only might share similar feelings around readiness and support 'triggers'.

sometimes many years after the incident. This could include the arrival of a child to the family or becoming a parent. Sometimes, engagement (with police and/or SWERCC) took place after reaching crisis point.

The first report – based on SWERCC data⁵⁸ – found that for 57% of cases, victims had waited over two years from the incident before seeking support. In this research, further analysis was carried out to understand if the primary incident that the victim sought support for was associated with the time taken to seek support. Analysis focused on the first interaction each victim had with SWERCC.

Figure 3.4 shows that victims who waited over two years to seek support were more likely to have been seeking support for CSA than for rape.

Figure 3.4 - Time elapsed before seeking support by primary incident⁵⁹



Base = 4,436. Victims first case in SWERCC dataset

⁵⁸ [Adult victim's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex](#)

⁵⁹ Other sexual offences included (as entered in the data) "sexual violence", "domestic violence", "stalking and harassment", and "sexual exploitation".

When focusing on victims with a primary incident of rape, victims were divided between those who sought support over two years post incident (38%) those who had waited less than a week (27%) and those who waited for a period in between these two lengths (35%).

Victims' decisions to report historical incidents or seek support were influenced by a range of factors. User research participants cited barriers such as shame, stigma, suppressed memories, and triggering life events—such as becoming a parent or entering a new relationship—as key drivers of delayed disclosure and engagement.

[About her decision to report to the police] “I couldn't do it anymore because we had... We'd had two daughters, and I needed to protect them.”

Participant F, reported many years after the incident

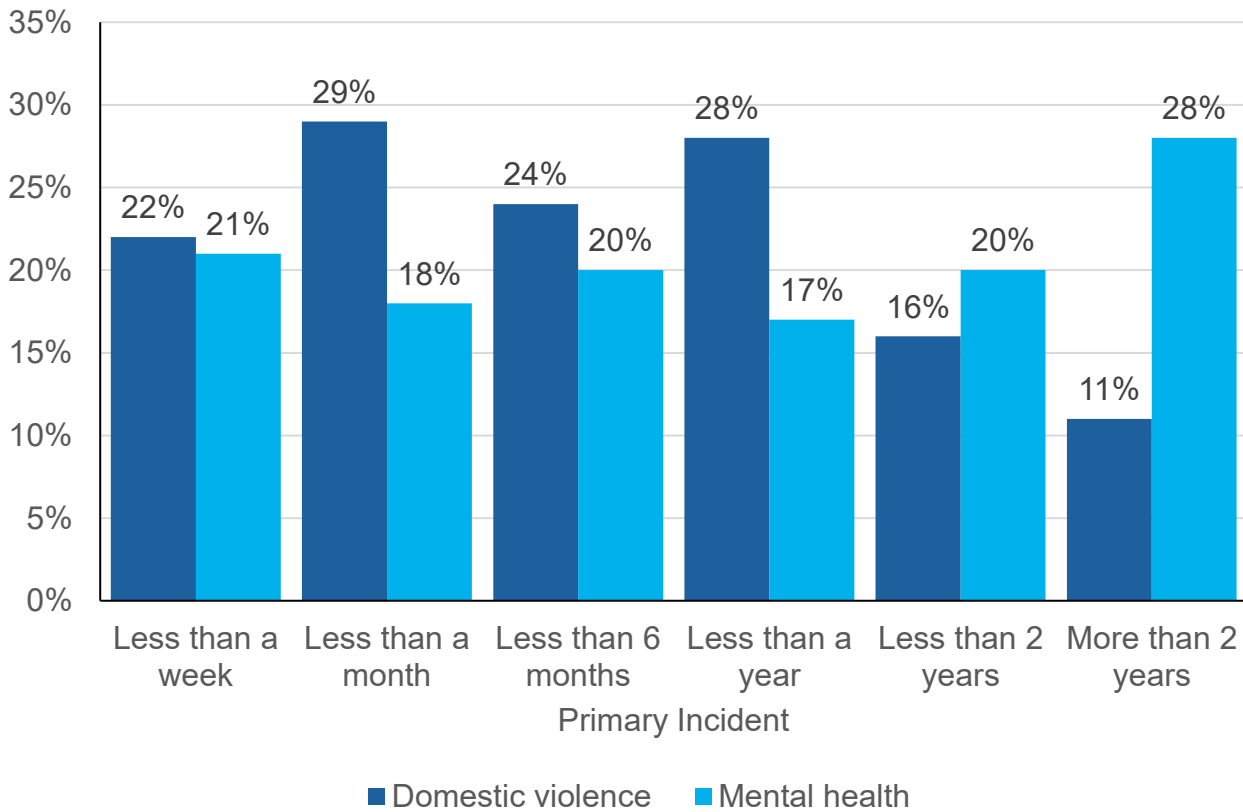
The findings highlighted the need for support services to remain accessible long after an incident, particularly for victims of CSA who often delay engagement. Police referrals appeared effective at ensuring recent adult rape cases received a support service referral. Engagement can be triggered by life events or crisis points, highlighting the importance of flexible, trauma-informed pathways into support that accommodate delayed disclosure. Overall, the research suggested recovery and readiness are not a linear process.

SWERCC recorded risks, issues and incident impacts

The SWERCC dataset recorded risks to the supported victim, as well as issues faced and incident impacts, in dedicated fields. Risks included domestic abuse, mental health, substance misuse and deportation. Issues included bullying, homelessness and self-neglect.

Figure 3.5 illustrates victims with a primary incident of rape who waited over two years to seek SWERCC support were more likely to have reported mental health as a risk, compared to those who sought support earlier. The opposite is true for domestic violence risks, where victims who took over two years to seek support for rape were less likely to have reported domestic violence as a risk than those who had sought support earlier.

Figure 3.5 - A comparison of domestic violence risks and mental health needs for victims of rape



Base = 2,276. Rape victims in the SWERCC dataset

Victims who delayed seeking support, particularly those with a primary incident of CSA, were more likely to have presented with mental health risks. Among CSA victims who waited over two years to seek support, 34% reported mental health concerns, while only 3% reported domestic violence risks. Across all incident types, loneliness, isolation, or relationship loss was cited by 30% of those who delayed support for over two years, compared to 14% who sought help within a week.

For rape victims, 25% of those who waited over two years to seek support reported suicidal thoughts or attempts, compared to 16% of those who accessed support early. More detail of these risks and issues can be found in Annex D.

Findings from the user research suggested that late engagement may have coincided with reaching a critical point in mental health deterioration, a trend echoed in user research.

Interviews revealed that mental health challenges were often longstanding, compounded by the incident, and in some cases worsened by delayed access to support.

“In April last year I took [an] overdose, which I think was very linked to what happened. I don't think it would have happened without what happened... I ended up being in ICU for three weeks [...]. It was before I started counselling”.

Participant J

User research also highlighted the cyclical nature of trauma recovery, and that even after receiving initial support, incidents can have long-lasting and wider-reaching impact on mental wellbeing, with consequences such as dropping out of university, job loss and relationship break-down.

“I did go to university, but, like, for a month and then I was just like, I don't really want to be here, I dropped out. But there were other factors in that. It wasn't just him. It kind of affected my ability to go places in this area because he lives around here”.

Participant C

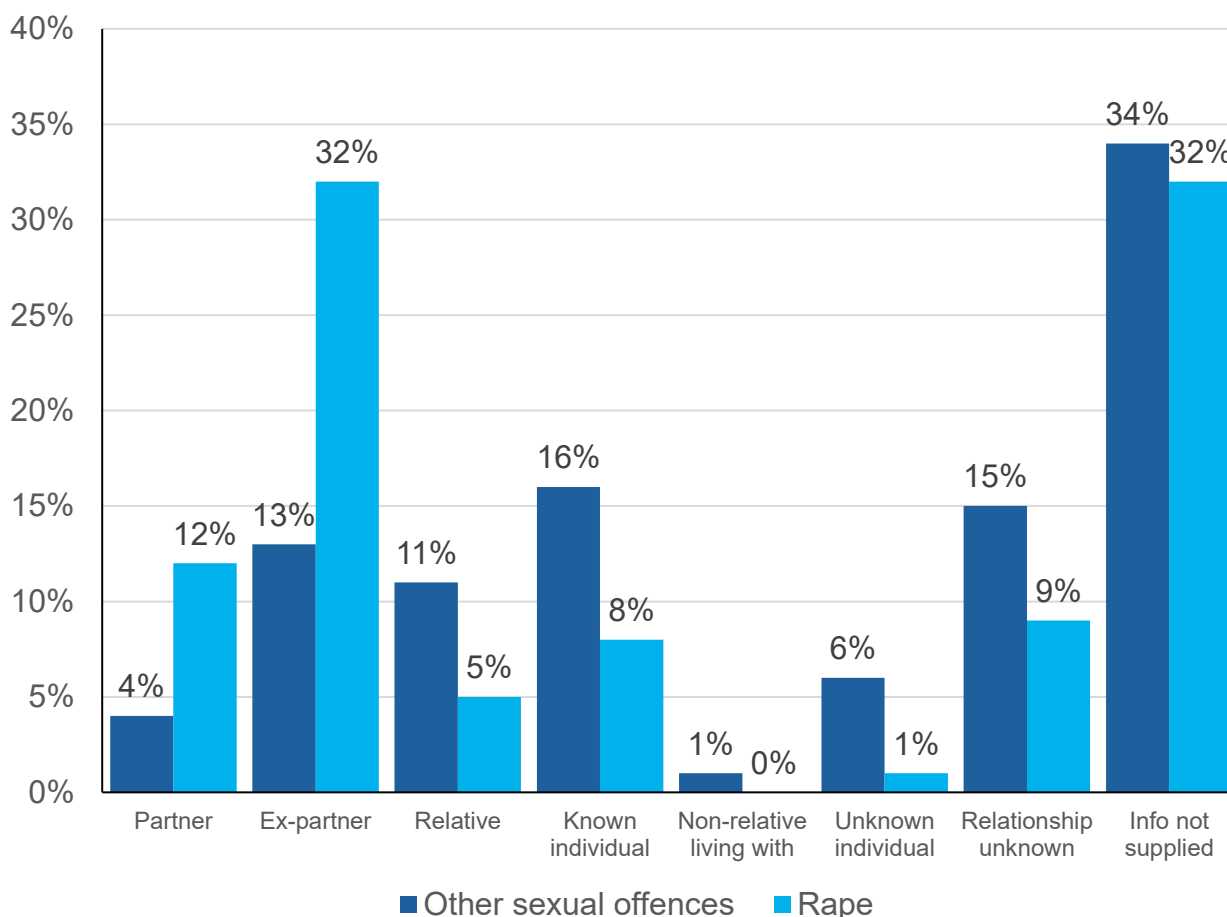
Further research is needed to explore the relationship between the timing of support-seeking, the primary incident that brought the victim to support services, and the mental health needs of victims. This could be enhanced by obtaining data for those victims under 18 and linking this to police data to give a fuller picture of what factors affect the time taken to seek support for CSA victims. This would give access to data for both recent and non-recent CSA, making it more comparable with rape.

Primary perpetrator

When analysing each of the SWERCC and Essex Police datasets in isolation, differences were found in the make-up of the victims' identified primary perpetrator. This might indicate that the identity of the perpetrator affected the journey taken by the victim after the incident, in terms of reporting to the police and seeking support. This information was missing for a third of police cases in this research. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted with caution and treated as indicative only.

Essex Police recorded information regarding the relationship of the suspect to the victim in the field “victim-suspect relationship”.⁶⁰

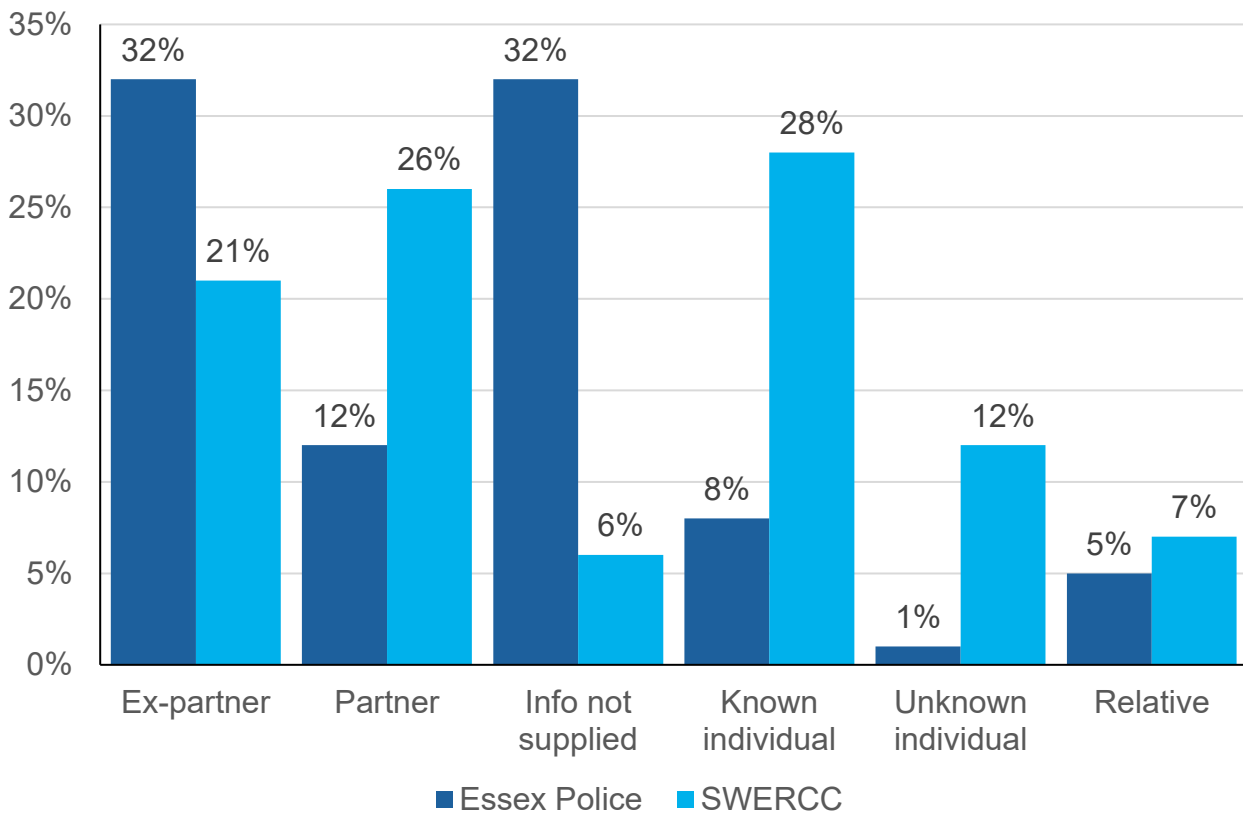
Figure 3.6 – Victim-suspect relationship in the Essex Police data, by crime type



Base = 17,840. Victims of sexual offences in Essex Police data

SWERCC also recorded information on the suspect’s relationship to the victim (labelled as “primary perpetrator” in this dataset). Figure 3.7 shows how it compared with Essex Police data.

⁶⁰ For this analysis, these entries were grouped for ease of visualisation, as shown in Figure 3.5. See Annex E for further details.

Figure 3.7 - Primary perpetrator comparison

Base = 2,276 SWERCC first time cases with rape as primary incident, 9,940 police cases with a crime type of rape.

This might suggest that victims were more likely to have reported rape to the police when the perpetrator was an ex-partner, whereas ongoing relationships—such as those involving current partners or relatives—may have presented greater barriers to disclosure. Research published by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found that in some cases rapes were not reported to the police due to the victim's belief that the incident was not rape if the perpetrator was someone known to them, or someone they had participated in consensual sexual activity with.⁶¹

The SWERCC data showed that victims of rape were more likely to have reported to the police than adult victims of CSA, regardless of their relationship to the perpetrator. This may have been due to the direct police pathway model working effectively.

⁶¹ [Evaluation of rape survivors' experience of the Police & other Criminal Justice Agencies](#)

Of the 2,276 SWERCC cases with a primary incident of rape, 77% (1,748) told SWERCC they had reported at least one incident to the police. Of the 1,130 cases with a primary incident of CSA, 46% (522) had reported to the police.

Table 3.2 - Percentage of rape victims in the SWERCC data who had reported to the police, by primary perpetrator⁶²

SWERCC Dataset	Ex-partner	Partner	Relative	Known Individual
Reported to the Police	88%	82%	72%	71%

Base = 2,276 SWERCC first time cases with rape as primary incident.

For victims in the SWERCC dataset, who had CSA as their primary incident, 50% (326) who had named a relative and 47% (154) of those who described a known individual as the primary perpetrator had reported to the police.⁶³

Case closures

A SWERCC case ends in a 'planned closure' when a victim feels that they no longer need support and agree this with their support service workers. If a victim does not complete any service, the case will have an 'unexpected closure'.

The first report⁶⁴ which used only SWERCC data showed that victims with a primary incident of rape were less likely to have had a planned closure for any of their cases with SWERCC (29%) than those with a primary incident of CSA (42%). This research carried out further analysis, using only SWERCC data, which showed that CSA had a higher planned closure rate regardless of the reported primary perpetrator.

Among victims whose first SWERCC case involved a primary incident of rape, planned closure rates varied by perpetrator relationship: 36% for those who named a relative, 33% for a known individual, 30% for a partner, and 29% for an ex-partner.

⁶² 197 (74%) of those who had an unknown individual, 87 (63%) of those who did not disclose the primary perpetrator and 8 (38%) of those who had a group of perpetrators as the primary perpetrator.

⁶³ 3 (25%) who had partner and 3 (75%) who had ex-partner had reported to the police.

⁶⁴ [Adult victim-survivor's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex](#)

For victims whose primary incident was CSA, planned closure rates were higher overall: 47% for those who named a known individual and 46% for those who named a relative.

As previously mentioned, these findings also suggested that closure outcomes may have been influenced by the nature of the victim–perpetrator relationship, with victims of historic or familial abuse more likely to have remained engaged with support services.

Analysis of the SWERCC data also showed that rape victims who had not reported an incident to the police were significantly more likely to have had a planned closure with support services for their first case (37%), than those who had reported to the police (28%). This might suggest that ongoing police investigations, and the outcomes from them, made it more difficult for victims to engage with support services and that some victims might prioritise seeking support to enable them to cope and build resilience above seeking justice via the CJS. This might be exacerbated by trepidation and confusion around the disclosure of information during pre-trial therapy⁶⁵ as shown in the user research:

“So [in counselling] I was becoming very guarded about how I talked about things, because I knew, because I'd read that they may have to use your counselling notes if there was any kind of trial”

Participant G

“And it was hard because obviously while the investigation was going on, you can't talk about stuff [...] And they'd explain that it was, you know, it was for my benefit and for theirs that, you know, then nothing could be used against us in trial, which I kind of, you know, got.”

Participant K

The differences for victims of CSA were smaller, with 41% of those who had not reported to the police had a planned closure, compared with 46% of those who had reported to the police having had a planned closure.

⁶⁵ Pre-Trial Therapy refers to any therapeutic work undertaken before a survivor's court case concludes, (sourced from: <https://survivorsnetwork.org.uk/pre-trial-therapy-what-every-therapist-needs-to-know/>).

User research findings showed that ‘planned closure’ figures should be interpreted with caution, as victims’ journeys tended to be more cyclical than linear, much like the cyclical recovery from trauma. For example, a victim may have a ‘planned closure’ for pre-trial therapy but may come back to the service for counselling after the trial.

3.3 Interaction with the Criminal Justice System (CJS)

Key Findings

- Victims whose cases had progressed further through the CJS were more likely to have remained engaged with SWERCC and exited the service in a planned way⁶⁶ (71% of victims whose case was ‘Sent to CPS for decision’ had a planned closure, compared with 54% for those who received no further action (NFA) from the police’).
- A small proportion of victims chose to report to the police during their period of SWERCC engagement (7% for rape victims and 6% for CSA victims).
- The user research highlighted the importance of ISVAs as a point of contact, and how they might help maintain victim engagement in the CJS.

Whilst there was no information on case progression in the data shared by Essex Police, there was some information regarding this in the SWERCC dataset. Victims who were using SWERCC’s service could supply SWERCC with information regarding the police investigation into the crime committed against them. For example, they could have told SWERCC about when they reported to the police and what stage the investigation had reached, e.g. the case had been sent to the CPS, or there was no further action due to

⁶⁶ When victims exit the service in an agreed or planned way, this is known as a ‘planned closure’. A SWERCC case ends in a ‘planned closure’ when a victim feels that they no longer need support and agree this with their support service workers. If a victim leaves before this agreed point or does not complete any service, the case will have an ‘unexpected closure’. The planned closure rate is the number of planned closures divided by the total number of closed cases.

lack of evidence, (NFA). The latest outcome was known in the SWERCC data as the “Police Crime Classification”. However, the outcome of the police stage of the investigation was not known for every case in the SWERCC dataset. Of the 2,005 cases with information on the police investigation, 878 (45%) had a classification of “Reported - outcome unknown”.

Using only data from the SWERCC dataset, the first report⁶⁷ found that victims who were referred to SWERCC by the police had a lower planned closure rate than all other referral routes.⁶⁸ Table 3.3 shows that victims whose case had progressed further through the CJS process were more likely to have had a planned closure with their SWERCC support. Seven-in-ten (71%) of those whose case was ‘Sent to CPS for decision’ had a planned SWERCC closure, compared with 54% of victims who received ‘No further action - Police decision’. However, 44% had an unknown CJS outcome, and only 7% of this group had a planned closure with SWERCC.

Table 3.3 - Police crime classification in SWERCC data

Police Crime Classification	Victim Count	SWERCC Planned Closure Rate
No further action - Police decision	908	54%
Reported - outcome unknown	878	7%
Sent to CPS for decision	114	71%
Other outcome	57	32%
Initial account only	28	75%
Detected and charged	20	6%

Base = 2,005 SWERCC cases with police reported information

This highlighted the limitations of the police dataset that was shared, as well as the possibility of linking data to fill in the missing information. Knowing the outcome for these 878 cases with particularly low planned closure rates may have revealed useful insights

⁶⁷ [Adult victim-survivor's journey through a sexual violence support service in Essex](#)

⁶⁸ 26% planned closure rate with SWERCC for victims referred by police, compared with 43% for self-referral, 35% for support service referral, 34% for local authority referral, 34% for healthcare referral, and 33% for all other sources.

about victims with unplanned SWERCC closures, which at present cannot be fully understood.

The user research found that the way an NFA is communicated to the victim could make receiving the news more difficult.

“I think [instead of telling me directly] if they'd let my ISVA know [of the NFA decision] and then if I'd had a face to face meeting with my ISVA. It'd have been easier to... It's really hard to receive that kind of news over the phone”

Participant J, NFA decision

This shows the importance of how information - in particular, more difficult news - is communicated, matters for victim-survivors. This could, in turn, affect victim attrition, highlighting the fact that communication with support services is a key part of ensuring victims stay engaged with their support. However, without key information from the police records such as charge information and case outcomes, it was difficult to draw robust conclusions from this.

Further analysis, including qualitative research, could be carried out if the final outcome of the police investigation was available. This would align with BOLD's aim of better supporting vulnerable adults by linking data to better understand their needs.

SWERCC data indicated that victims were unlikely to initiate police reporting during their period of support. Among rape victims, 65% had reported to the police prior to engaging with SWERCC, while only 7% reported during support and a further 2% reported both before and during their engagement. Research published by HMICFRS found that victims stated that potential reasons to not report to the police included concerns about confidentiality, not being believed, the effect the CJS process may have on their mental health and having left it too late to report the incident.⁶⁹

For victims of CSA, the figures were lower: 31% reported prior to support, 6% during, and 1% both before and during support.

⁶⁹ [Evaluation of rape survivors' experience of the Police & other Criminal Justice Agencies](#)

This pattern may reflect the role and ethos of support services, particularly the work of Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs). The ISVA statutory guidance⁷⁰ states that “ISVAs should operate in a way which centres the victim’s need”. Insights from user research suggested that ISVAs operating in SWERCC provided non-directive, trauma-informed support that enabled informed decision-making without pressuring victims to engage with the criminal justice system. ISVAs were consistently praised for their holistic approach, which included practical assistance beyond CJS engagement—such as support with welfare applications and health services—and for acting as a reliable point of continuity.

The user research highlighted how ISVAs might maintain victim engagement in the CJS: ISVAs ensure victims feel empowered⁷¹ to make the decision that is right for them, whilst offering crucial emotional and practical support.

“And then they would allocate me an advocate [ISVA], which has been the only constant I’ve had, in eight years [since reporting].[...] I mean, without [ISVA], I don’t think I would have got even this far. No, not at all.”

Participant E⁷²

It is important to highlight that this data could not show what victims do after their support with SWERCC ended, such as reporting the crime in the future. As the user research was only conducted with victim-survivors that received support *and* reported to the police, further qualitative research would be needed to understand how victim-survivors that have not (yet) engaged with police feel about doing so after interacting with a specialist support service. This work could also be used to explore any barriers victims face when seeking support or reporting to the police.

⁷⁰ [Independent Sexual Violence Advisor – Statutory Guidance](#).

⁷¹ SOSRC ISVAs work under the *empowerment model*, which is described as “a holistic approach, with the goal of giving survivors the choice of which services they use, who they speak to and how they live their lives. We trust survivors to make the right decisions for themselves”. Available at [accessed August 2025]: <https://sosrc.org.uk/for-professionals>

⁷² Although most trial cancellations were due to defendant health, the participant felt delays were disproportionate and made them feel like their rights were sidelined in favour of those of the defendant.

3.4 Domestic Abuse (DA) Risk in Rape Cases

Key Findings

- There was higher prevalence of the recording of the presence of domestic abuse for victims found in both the police dataset and the SWERCC dataset, compared to those that appeared in a single dataset.
- The proportion of rape cases in the police data flagged with DA rose from 2018 and peaked at 47% in 2022.

In the Essex Police data, a field called “vulnerability indicator” recorded various kinds of victims’ needs. Examples of recorded vulnerabilities included disabilities, exposure to risks such as intimidation, and broader issues such as ill health and substance misuse. Not all victims have vulnerabilities listed. However, those that do can have a single vulnerability or multiple vulnerabilities recorded. This information came from police crime reports and was recorded in greater detail elsewhere in police databases that were not accessed for this project. Therefore, information in the “vulnerability indicator” may have been missing or less accurate. Nonetheless, the data available was sufficiently complete to support preliminary analytical insights.⁷³

As mentioned in section 3.2, SWERCC recorded risks of DA in their Risks field. Of the 4,436 first time cases in the SWERCC data, 88% has at least one risk present.

Table 3.4 shows that victims in the SWERCC-police cohort had higher rates of DA recorded by both Essex Police and SWERCC than in the other two cohorts. In the SWERCC-police cohort, 21% of victims had DA captured by both Essex Police as a vulnerability indicator and also by SWERCC as a risk that the victim faced. In the same cohort, a further 24% of victims had DA captured by Essex Police only, and 12% had DA

⁷³ A total of 66% of victims had a vulnerable indicator present, above the threshold of 65%. However it is possible for a victim to have no vulnerabilities present.

captured by SWERCC only. A total of 43% of victims in this cohort had no DA needs captured in either dataset, compared with 60% in the Police dataset-only cohort and 77% in the SWERCC-only cohort.

Table 3.4 - Prevalence of recording domestic abuse in each dataset

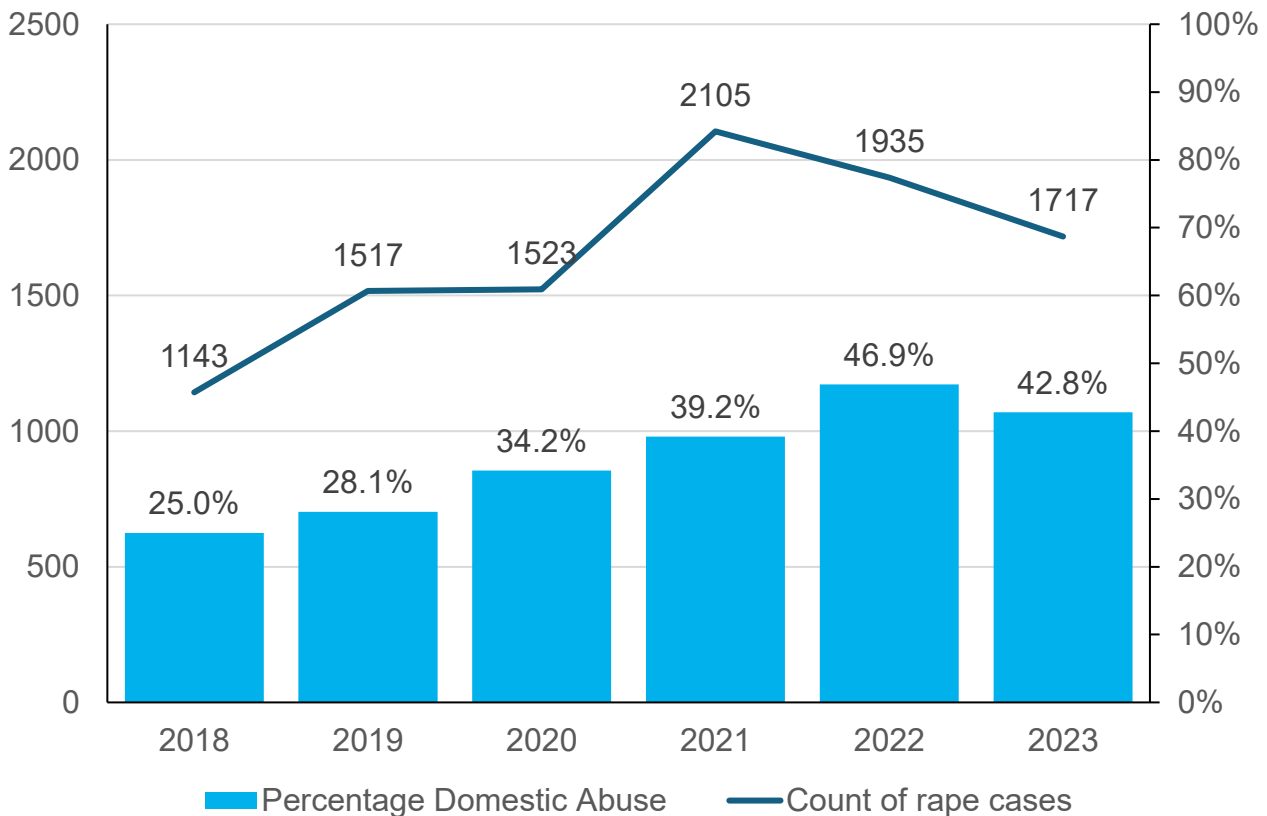
Domestic Abuse Recorded	SWERCC-police	Police dataset-only	SWERCC-only
SWERCC DA Recorded	12%	-	23%
Essex Police DA Recorded	24%	40%	-
EP and SWERCC Recorded DA	21%	-	-
No DA Recorded	43%	60%	77%

Base = 9,000. Adult victims of rape appearing in at least one dataset.

When analysing the data from Essex Police in isolation, it indicated that domestic abuse and rape may increasingly co-occur (or are increasingly recognised as such), and victims therefore required support that meaningfully responded to both issues.

Figure 3.8 shows the proportion of rape cases with domestic abuse listed as a vulnerability indicator rose steadily for the period 2018-2022, reaching a peak of 47% in 2022.

Figure 3.8 - Count of rape cases in Essex police and the proportion with domestic abuse



Base = 9,940. Essex Police cases with a crime type of rape

Operation Soteria Bluestone⁷⁴ found that in the pathfinder forces, around one-third of police recorded rapes and one in ten other sexual offences are marked as domestic abuse related.⁷⁵ Due to the breadth and complexity of behaviours that can constitute domestic abuse, there is no specific offence called ‘domestic abuse’. Coercive or controlling behaviour is a specific criminal offence and is considered a form of domestic abuse under the law in England and Wales. However, most other aspects of domestic abuse, such as assault, rape, harassment, or threats, are criminalised under existing laws. This can make it difficult to identify, particularly where patterns of harm emerge over time rather than through a single incident. Domestic abuse cases also often require immediate intervention to mitigate acute risks and victims are therefore typically supported through distinct and

⁷⁴ [Operation Soteria Year One Report](#)

⁷⁵ Between 2018-2020 for Force A and 2018-2021 for forces B-D.

urgent safeguarding pathways.⁷⁶ As a result, domestic abuse and sexual violence are, in some areas responded to by separate organisations or teams within Criminal Justice Bodies such as the police.

The rise in domestic abuse recorded in Figure 3.8 was also reflected in a report focused on Compass,⁷⁷ a domestic abuse service within Essex. This found a 59% increase in referrals between April and September 2023 when compared to the same period in the previous year.⁷⁸ The Compass report stated that this rise has largely been due to referrals received from the police.

According to the ONS, the period that coincided with the coronavirus pandemic saw domestic abuse services become more in demand. This may not be due to an underlying rise in the prevalence of DA but was perhaps an increase in the severity of abuse and a lack of available coping mechanisms such as being able to find a safe space, or attend support.⁷⁹ The ONS also stated that police were increasingly flagging recorded crime with DA due to improved recording practices.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales saw no underlying rise in prevalence of DA in the year ending March 2022 to the year ending March 2023,⁸⁰ and no significant rise in the year ending March 2024.⁸¹ Therefore, the rise in recording of DA by police may have been due to wider contextual factors, such as the passing of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021⁸² leading to increased awareness of DA risks.

⁷⁶ [Domestic abuse pathway](#)

⁷⁷ [Compass - A partnership of domestic abuse services providing a response in Essex](#)

⁷⁸ [Essex County Council – Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment 2024](#)

⁷⁹ [Domestic abuse during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, England and Wales: November 2020](#)

⁸⁰ [Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2023](#)

⁸¹ [Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2024](#)

⁸² [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

4. Conclusions and Implications

This research set out to examine the feasibility and value of linking data from Essex Police and SWERCC, with the target of improving understanding of victim engagement with the criminal justice system (CJS) and support services.

The primary aims of this research were:

1. To compare victims of sexual offences referred to support services who had reported to the police, and those who had not reported to the police to examine any differences that may be inherent in the groups present in this data.
2. To understand the journey of victims of sexual offences through the police stages of the CJS, and how their experiences may impact engagement with victims' support services.

To fully answer the second aim, the research looked at:

- the characteristics of those who were referred to victim support services and the CJS,
- the support needs of different groups of victims.

This novel research showed linking between datasets from the police and support services was possible. The match rate was 75% for records with Essex PCRN in the SWERCC dataset. This could act as a model for future linking projects with the potential of further insights if more information from the police could be accessed.

The linking highlighted the importance of data standards across organisations, ensuring that key variables such as protected characteristics, demographics and crime types are defined and captured consistently to enable the identification of commonalities and trends. SWERCC data was generally more complete, particularly for victim demographics and needs, while the cut of data shared by Essex Police had notable gaps, limiting its utility for comparative analysis.

There were several limitations to the analysis. The most crucial of these was that the third and largest rape crisis centre in the Essex area was not part of this research, and therefore their data was not available for linking. This means that victims in the Police dataset-only cohort may have accessed support from this third support centre. There was no indication that victims referred to the third centre differed significantly from those referred to SWERCC. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that the differences between the police dataset-only group and the other two groups would still apply, or possibly increase, if data from the third centre was included.

A further limitation in this research was the lack of under 18s in the data, meaning that victims with a primary incident of CSA were more likely to be seeking support for non-recent abuse. This means CSA cannot be directly compared with rape due to rape incidents being both recent and non-recent in this dataset.

Despite this, some key findings could be taken from the research.

By joining up data across police and third sector support services, this research helped to fill key evidence gaps in our understanding of the victim's journeys. These insights could also help to inform future service design, inter-agency practice, and policy decisions. Improved access to joined up data across the CJS will not only improve outcomes for individual victims but could also strengthen accountability and public confidence in the justice system.

4.1 Implications and future work

Ethnicity

This data appeared to show victims from a minority ethnic background were more likely to have been in the SWERCC-police and SWERCC-only cohorts. This finding needs to be tested more widely to understand if this pattern occurs elsewhere, and to explore whether individuals from a minority ethnic background are more likely to access victim support services with less engagement in the CJS. If further data could be obtained with a larger sample size, it may also be possible to understand the differences between minority ethnic groups rather than comparing people from a white ethnic background with all those from a

minority ethnic background. This could lead to further insights regarding sub-group differences in interactions with the police and support services.

Gender

Men appear to be underrepresented in the SWERCC data compared to the police data. This is consistent with wider evidence that states that men are often unaware of support services open to them, or can feel like services are not welcoming to them if they are aware of them.⁸³ More work is needed to understand the offer and uptake levels of support services by men, and barriers to support that they face, including whether the context of the relationships they are in contribute to the levels of accessing support. A study by the University of York found that male victims are generally unrepresented in research on referral and support service journeys of RASSO victims.⁸⁴

Age

The analysis indicated that younger people might be more willing to seek support from specialist services than older people (35+). One possible explanation for this is that older people were less confident that the support would benefit them, or that they may feel there is a stigma around seeking support.

Further research is needed into what could be done to help younger people feel confident in reporting to the police.

CJS journey

While the data did not allow for a full understanding of how a negative police outcome may affect engagement with support services, some preliminary insights were gained. The SWERCC data showed that the further through the CJS a case got (where the outcome was known), the higher the rate of planned closures was. This was in line with user research that found receiving an NFA, and how it is communicated, can be a difficult time

⁸³ [Supporting male victims/survivors accessing a sexual assault referral centre](#)

⁸⁴ [Adult specialist services for victim-survivors of sexual violence and abuse: a systematic map of evidence](#)

for the victim. Further work could be carried out to fully understand this interaction if key information, such as final police and CJS outcomes are obtained.

Time taken to seek support

Victims who took over two years to seek support were more likely to be victims of non-recent CSA than of rape. This may be linked to the direct police pathway model offering victims a referral within 24 hours of reporting to the police. This highlighted the need for support services to remain accessible long after an incident, particularly for victims of CSA who often delay engagement.

The research found that victims who took longer to seek support tended to have worse mental health, feelings of isolation and suicidal ideation. These victims were often in older age groups, were victims of CSA and had not reported to the police. The user research also highlighted the mutually re-enforcing nature of poor mental health and sexual violence. This suggested that it may be beneficial to offer a range of support to victims (including mental health support), and at multiple points, not just immediately after the incident.

This could be further explored if data for victims under 18 years of age could be obtained. A fuller picture of the factors that affect time taken to seek support and reporting to the police for CSA victims may be possible from linking data for victims aged under 18 to police data.

Domestic abuse risk in rape cases

The research also found significant, and increasing, overlap with rape reported in the context of domestic abuse. This is consistent with trends identified within wider literature,⁸⁵ highlighting the need for close partnership working between all victim-facing services including police, specialist sexual violence and domestic abuse support workers.

One project focussing on this in Essex is the Essex Police Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). This is a safeguarding mechanism designed to protect victims at

⁸⁵ [Essex County Council – Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment 2024](#)

high risk of domestic abuse. It aims to do this by having regular conferences to bring together representatives from Essex Police, social care, probation, health services, housing providers, Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), and other relevant agencies. The purpose of these meetings is to review high-risk cases, share intelligence, and agree on safeguarding actions.

Data quality

With improved data collection and further information shared from the police stage, a linked victim dataset across the CJS and specialist support services could allow for a more comprehensive understanding of attrition and victims' needs to be developed. It may also provide the opportunity to explore if areas such as victim needs, risks and protected characteristics act as potential barriers or enablers to engagement with the CJS or support services.

In the absence of improved data collection, other methods to improve data quality could be used. For example, if police free text data could be obtained then data science techniques such as natural language processing could be carried out to understand where information missing in structured data could be completed using information garnered from the free text.

As a result of one or both of these improvements, policymakers could have better quality evidence to support data-driven policy decisions. This may particularly help with the Safer Streets pillar of halving Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and increasing public confidence in the CJS and contribute to building the evidence base to improve our understanding of victim experience.

By better joining up the evidence and data on victim's journeys through the CJS and third sector support services, victims could be better supported, helping them cope and build resilience.

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