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**‘Every time it happens, you question  
continuing as an officer’:  
The experiences of police workers as  
victims of hate crime**

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# **‘Every time it happens, you question continuing as an officer’: The experiences of police workers as victims of hate crime**

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2015, the authors of this report in partnership with an English police force conducted a pilot study in order to examine the experiences of police workers as victims of hate crime. Specifically, we placed a message on the force intranet, inviting prospective participants to contact us in order to arrange interviews to discuss their experiences as victims of hate crime. In total, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with police workers. This is the first ever project to examine the nature, extent and impact of hate crime upon police workers. This report summarises the purpose and key findings of the project.

## **2. Aims and Design**

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the experiences of police workers as victims of hate crime. The main aims of the research were to:

1. Identify the nature and frequency of hate crime directed towards police officers and police staff;
2. Explore the impacts of this victimisation;
3. Determine officers' and staff's coping mechanisms and responses; and
4. Provide an initial evidence base for determining what, if any, further actions are necessary

Participants were recruited through a message placed on the force intranet in June 2015 inviting interested parties to contact the researchers direct to arrange a semi-structured interview to discuss their hate crime experiences. By the end of July 2015, twenty interviews were completed.

The interviews were guided by a schedule with questions encouraging participants to talk about the circumstances, impact of, and responses to, acts of hate crime victimisation. In particular we asked participants to tell us about how they perceived they had been targeted directly because of (a) who they are, i.e., their personal identities, and (b) their occupational identity as police officers. In this document we have reported participants' experiences of hate crime victimisation without applying legal or academic definitions of hate crime; rather, we employed a broad and inclusive definition of hate crime where anyone can be a victim of a hate crime on the basis that they feel targeted because of who they are.

The sample was diverse in terms of age (from mid-20's to mid-50's), gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, rank, role, and length of service (from less than five years to more than twenty). Nineteen interviewees were police officers and one was a PCSO. In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their real names have been replaced by pseudonyms whilst any personal information that could identify them has been removed.

### 3. Summary of Findings

The interviews revealed that the hate crime experienced by participants has several dimensions: experiences on and off-duty, experiences from members of the public and from within the organisation, experiences rooted in their police identity and experiences resulting from their personal identity<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Hate crime experiences from members of the public**

The participants reported suffering hate crime on duty based on core aspects of their identity such as race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender. Specifically, every single one of the participants stated that they had suffered verbal abuse including name-calling, swearing and threats of physical violence related to their personal identity. From the participants' perspectives, the language used by the perpetrators indicated hate crime motivation. Examples of the verbal abuse that participants experienced are illustrated below:

*'Get your hands off me you black bastard'. (Raymond)*

*'Oi, Islam, you horrible Islam twat, EDL, you paki cunt'. (Deepak)*

*'Paki bitch', 'fucking slag', they threatened to spit in my face, they tell me to 'fuck off'. (Raksha)*

*Been called a 'white bitch' a number of times. (Laura)*

*'Get off me you fucking poof'. (Mark)*

In addition, the participants reported suffering hate crime on duty based on personal characteristics related to their physical appearance including their body shape and size, wearing glasses, hair, nose and eye shape, as illustrated below:

*A colleague was called 'bald twat' because he did not have hair. (Jermaine)*

*They say "oh, aren't you small? I thought there's a height limit" or 'what are you going to do?' (Preeti)*

*If they see a fat officer, they will say 'you fat' [...] If they see an officer who wears glasses, it's 'you four eyed twat'. (Nihal)*

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to ignore that different types of victimisation can intersect.

Also, the participants reported experiencing hate crime because of their occupational identity as police workers. They argued that certain individuals or groups hated the police and as a result, they would verbally and/or physically attack them because of their occupation as police workers, as indicated in the comments below:

*Lads chanting 'pig, pig, pig, pig.'* (Thomas)

*Dealt with stabbing last week and IP wouldn't cooperate, wouldn't give up clothing as evidence and wouldn't give a statement. You sense they're anti-police by watching body-language, by how they look at you, you can feel it.* (Matt)

*We get people saying 'we are going to chop your heads off' when working with certain members of the Muslim community who we are investigating for Islamist extremism.* (George)

Some participants regarded the uniform as a trigger for abuse. Particular roles, shifts and locations are susceptible to higher levels of abuse. Late shifts in city centres, custody suites, calls to public order and domestic incidents – these are points of tension and conflict where the uniform can trigger a hostile response.

*The typical experience is on response policing, working nights, dealing with public order incidents, arrested people 'gobbing off in a holding cell'.* (Arjun)

*I've experienced lots of racism as a uniformed officer but none as a detective, maybe because I am wearing plain clothes as a detective. You're a different person without the uniform. There's something about the uniform that triggers people. The uniform represents the authority that some people don't like.* (Jermaine)

*They just see a guy in uniform – and they target that.* (Thomas)

The participants pointed out that the police identity often triggered the attacks, which often escalated to suffering abuse based on participants' personal characteristics. This demonstrates the affinity between police identity and personal identity in terms of experiencing hate crime on duty.

*Attacking uniform can move to attacking the individual – 'coconut pig'.* (Thomas)

*They see that uniform and they find something to abuse you and with me it is my colour. (Jermaine)*

*People turn the focus to you. If you're black you're going to get it, if you're white you're going to get it, if you wear glasses you're going to get it, you become the target. Whatever characteristics you have, they will go for it. (Laura)*

Typically, abuse originates from people who are being challenged and arrested but this is not always the case. For example, our participants had also experienced abuse from people who had called the police for assistance.

*I knocked on the door and the little child, a 6 year old girl, said 'Mummy, there's a paki at the door'. So the mum comes to the door and says "I don't want to talk to you, I want to talk to a white officer". I said fine, I went back to the car, got in touch with the control room, and said that particular person does not want to talk to a paki officer, they want to talk to a white officer, so my control room said "fine, leave it, we'll give them a ring, if they don't talk to you, then there's no other officer available". (Meera)*

### **Off duty**

Off-duty incidents of hate crime directed at the participants as police officers are infrequent, as they often take measures to protect themselves from potential abuse, for example, through avoiding certain places off-duty. However, some participants do experience hate crime off-duty both in the virtual world (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) but also in the physical world. Such experiences ranged from being targeted verbally and physically by individuals that the participant had previously arrested to another officer whose in-laws stopped speaking to him after he became a police officer.

*Known criminal mouthed off at me at petrol station and approached me. He watched me drive off and park at home nearby. A week later a brick was thrown through my bedroom window in the night, terrifying. I knew it was the criminal but no proof. (Stephen)*

*This comes from my wife's side of the family and they have been distant since I joined the job. They don't come to family events when I am there and if I am they don't even sit in the same room as me. (Matt)*

### **Hate crime experiences from within the organisation**

Some participants talked about being victims of hate crime internally within the police service. They reported experiencing hate crime, incidents and processes perpetrated by police staff including colleagues and supervisors. In particular, BME participants felt that double standards operated across the areas of progression, performance management and complaints investigation.

*I joined the police when I was 20 years old. My supervisor set me up to fail. He would give me tasks that would make me feel incompetent. He used to intimidate me, calling me 'fucking stupid', swearing at me. I was 20 years old, I did not know if this was normal. His attitude was not the same towards everyone, it was just towards myself [...] He would not get away with it now if I was the way I am now. I was very naive back then. (Shiva)*

*I was criticised for my performance and a lot of the times it was not to my face, it was behind my back, the way I was treated in personal situations was always very harsh, in disciplinary cases I had to fight the organisation. (Raymond)*

Some participants felt intentionally isolated by fellow colleagues, as indicated in the quote below:

*I was sitting on a chair, someone would walk past me, miss a chair, and sit on the next chair. How does this make you feel? Everyone is always reluctant to sit next to me. They never ask me any questions, they never tried to get to know me. Colleagues here are very cliquy, they have banter with each other, but not with me. I feel very isolated. I am never included in conversations. It's like I am not even there. (Paresh)*

In addition, officers with learning difficulties perceived that organisational processes did not account for their needs.

*Hidden disabilities is a huge problem in the police. I have to work twice as hard to prove myself. Being dyslexic myself, I spend so much time doing written work, I take work home to cope [...] The thought of sitting in a meeting with a lot of paperwork and getting my big glasses out, saying 'yes, these glasses are for my dyslexia', it's like dropping a bombshell. It's like an elephant in the room. People don't understand disability, and the impact it has on people. When I was waiting for my assistive technology, people said 'why do you need so much? It's not like you've got cancer, you need to be patient'. (Mark)*

*Supervisors don't take time to recognise or understand dyslexia. I am expected to do the same as everyone else despite my dyslexia. [...] The control room puts pressure on me. I go to a job and I need to do the paperwork, and pressure is building up because they send me to another job without giving me enough time to do the paperwork so I rush, I might make mistakes or miss something important. I am just a number for the control room. They call you on the radio, and they will give you the job, then they give you another one, and then another one. The more anxiety, the more dyslexic I get. (Paresh)*

Female officers provided examples of being patronised/bullied by supervisors, based on their gender, age (cases of young and mature officers) and height, as the following quotes demonstrate:

*I think because I'm female and young, he [supervising sergeant] talks to me in a patronising way. Once I asked him a question and he was being sarcastic and cocky, and laughed with the other senior officer so I just avoid him now because I don't want to be in this situation again. He is, as we call them, 'an old school officer', so he has old school ways. (Raksha)*

*My sergeant used to make jokes about my age – I was a mature person at the time. He would say 'you are the oldest', reference to age was a big thing for him, reference to me being small, height was the butt of his joke all the time, other officers around the sergeant laughed, no one challenged him. This was an everyday thing. He was so inappropriate, it was untrue. He hindered my promotion big time although I was getting big results. I didn't know how to deal with it; I had just come out of probation. But I am not the same person today. I would not put up with this behaviour now. (Preeti)*

Some white participants reported that they felt disadvantaged due to the need for the organisation to proactively support the progression of female, gay and BME colleagues.

*As a white male, I feel that if I was female or had a different colour skin I would have better chance of promotion. The pendulum has possibly swung too far the other way. (Matt)*

*Friend submitted two applications one as 'bisexual' and one 'hetero' and the former was accepted, the latter rejected. Many*



*stories circulate of people getting on if they are diverse.*  
(Thomas)

### **Impacts and Responses**

Participants variously described the impact of hate crime incidents as frightening, emotional, hurtful, embarrassing, annoying, upsetting, shocking and worrying. The abuse targeted at police officers on duty, as *police officers*, initially shocks; with experience, desensitisation occurs and abuse is accepted as a 'normal' part of policing.

*First time it happened I was speechless. Chased a thief, caught him, put him in van and on trip to station it started – 'you paki, you fucking paki'.* (Deepak)

*I used to take it so personally, you become immune to it [...] it hurts a little less each time.* (Laura)

*It is seen as part of the job, it is something that they should expect.* (George)

However, many participants pointed out that being targeted for being 'different' (rather than their police identity) 'hurts more', as the following quotes indicate:

*Abuse received as a police officer 'cos of the uniform' is easier to shake off. Abuse as an Asian is 'more personal' and you take it home more.* (Arjun)

*You can become desensitised and treat hate crime as just another crime. But you need to step back and realise it hurts more – hurts deep down and affects how people think about themselves. Some try and change themselves, which they shouldn't in my opinion.* (Matt)

*Certain jobs leave a mark on you [...] The racist comments add something extra to it, beyond the normal abuse.* (Mohammed)

By and large, the coping mechanisms that participants employed in order to deal with hate crime included:

- **Communicating:** Asking perpetrators why they are abusive, building a rapport, using humour.
- **Challenging the behaviour:** Using body-worn video camera, recording, reporting and arresting. Internally, challenging people and processes.

- **Tolerating:** Ignoring the abuse and getting on with the job.
- **Detaching:** Switching off personal feelings, stepping back to de-escalate the incident and allowing colleagues to step in.

The impacts of hate crime experienced from within the police organisation included stress, depression, demotivation and lost enthusiasm, as indicated in the comments below:

*They have taken away my enthusiasm, they have taken away my commitment, they have taken away my fight for it. I am a real fighter, but I am thinking, it is not worth fighting anymore, I don't want it anymore. (Preeti)*

*Sometimes I think I will come to work, I will do the bare minimum that I can, and I am going to go home and that's it. (Raymond)*

*I've seen people who left the service because they were terrified from the abuse. Their mental health will be affected, their physical health will be affected, but we will attribute that to something else. It could be that people turn to food, so their weight becomes a problem but we never address the reasons why they got on weight, or people turn to alcohol, but we don't ask 'why are you drinking?' we'll blame the shifts patterns, but actually eating or drinking is a coping mechanism. (Mark)*

At least one individual who 'spoke up' about incidents of hate crime internally was threatened by their supervisor.

*He [sergeant] told me I had to resign if I were to go to the tribunal but I told him, why should I resign, I have not done anything wrong. (Preeti)*

Using Hirschman's (1970) 'exit, voice and loyalty' (EVL) model<sup>2</sup>, officers subjected to hate crime may fall into the response categories of (1) **exiting** the organisation, (2) raising their **voice** to advocate for change, and (3) remaining **loyal**, supporting the organisation. In addition to these categories, some of the participants adopted a defensive, guarded persona through which

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<sup>2</sup> Hirschman, A.O. (1970) *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Hirschman's model has been used to map and compare employees' responses to adverse working conditions. In this model, employees' responses cluster around: **Exit** - physically or psychologically leaving the organisation; **Voice** - speaking up to management and others; and **Loyalty** - supporting the organisation and waiting for better times.

they protected their professional identities, as indicated in the comment below:

*You have to be really careful what you say and who your audience is – you can't just speak your mind all the time, it's the nature of the police. I'm not completely relaxed in my job, I only show so much of who I am, I have to be professional, rarely let my guard down. You develop the skill of when not to say things. (Mohammed)*

Participants who have suffered hate crime (both externally and internally) value support from colleagues, staff associations, supervisors and the formal reporting processes but, in practice, support is inconsistent. The following comments were made on sources of support within the organisation:

*I don't really seek support from shift colleagues – now white officers go embarrassingly overboard being offended on my behalf, in the past people wouldn't step forward. (Dwayne)*

*White colleagues are proactively supportive. If you're the target you tend to be more reticent – colleagues will step in and challenge them. (Mohammed)*

*I can't rely on my colleagues, I've learnt that early on in my career. My confidence in the organisation has gone. I am very cautious, I write everything down. Internal racism makes you very wary. (Meera)*

While shift colleagues can be supportive, at the same time the working culture can be harsh, for example, shift colleagues laughed aloud while watching a female colleague being subjected to sexually explicit comments by an arrested drunk.

*Drunk man in custody kept verbally abusing me and making sexual gestures (implying oral sex). He stopped as soon as male colleagues came past and then started again when they went. 40 minutes of sexually abusive comments, which was captured on bodycam. Colleagues thought it was hilarious including a female student. I challenged colleagues' banter, they just thought the sexual gestures were funny. (Laura)*

Support from supervisors is mixed in terms of internal and external issues. This is important as officers at sergeant and inspector level can be influential in shaping junior colleagues' careers. Our participants shared experiences of

supervisors who had provided support and encouragement but equal numbers who had, in their views, treated them unequally.

*I have experienced racism internally from my supervisor. He would always put me on my own, on late night shifts, he used to say to me 'I will join you later' but he never did. Also he used to say to me 'come on Meera, you've got to understand that you are an individual of a minority in a majority'. I felt quite left out, he'd single me out from the rest of the officers, including the other white female officers on my shift. (Meera)*

*The supervisors don't take time to recognise or understand dyslexia. I am expected to do the same as everyone else despite my dyslexia. The management should be more aware of it. I don't get much support. They don't understand that my learning style is different, including the work. (Paresh)*

The participants had mixed and ambivalent views concerning the formal reporting and support mechanisms provided by the police. They variously praised, dismissed or were suspicious of the reporting and support mechanisms. Some officers appreciated letters of support they had received from senior officers following their hate crime victimisation while noting that these were not always received now.

*Usually I put abuse in my statement and it depends on supervisor whether it is picked up and taken further. (Laura)*

*I used to get a letter from supervisor every time I was a victim. Don't get them anymore, not sure why. (Deepak)*

*If you reported all the abuse you'd be taken on one side and told to 'man up'. (Matt)*

*Was once abused by a prisoner and decision made not to prosecute him for it by senior officer. I felt it was not treated seriously. (Stephen)*

*Although I wouldn't consider myself a victim per se I have been racially abused by a variety of people from various ethnic/cultural and religious groups [...] many public order offences are not progressed nor reported. That said a minority are. There is one such example of where officers who had been racially abused was not progressed simply because they were not identified as*

*being from an identifiable group i.e. they were not Asian.*  
(Thomas)

In terms of support from other criminal justice agencies (CPS, the Courts) to challenge and prosecute hate crime against police officers, the participants felt that generally it was not taken seriously enough. Double standards seemed to apply for victims depending upon their status as police or public. Some participants questioned why the support provided to them was better as off-duty victims of hate crime than when they were on duty officers, as indicated in the quotes below:

*Very early on in the training it was like 'this is the type of thing that you will hear, you must be prepared, you must get used to it', which I think is the problem. That's just because you are a police officer. I've heard magistrates talking about the abuse that police officers or members of police staff often experience, and they say 'oh, it is part of your job, you are used to this kind of abuse, and that it goes hand in hand with the job'. They've been clear that under normal circumstances, if it was a member of public, they would be dealing with it in a different way.* (Mark)

*I've been disappointed with the CPS a couple of times. Sometimes they've done their job and everything has gone through the system as it should but other times I've been let down and I thought what the hell happened there? If I was a member of the public they would take it more seriously, but they tend to throw out cases for officers who are victims of hate crime. I will follow the procedure of reporting future incidents but it has left me feeling 'is anybody going to be bothered to look at it this time? To take it seriously?' I have lost faith in the system.*  
(Nihal)

*Arrested young lad for assault and we fell over, he bit me and called me a 'black bastard'. It went to court and the racially aggravated charge was dropped – regarded as 'normal' abuse for police officer.* (Ibrahim)

*East European male arrested and in back of van for minor offence. Asking his name and he kept saying 'you white pussy' again and again. Arrested him for it, it just got to me, it is not acceptable. What did he mean, that I was soft? White? In interview next day said he was too drunk to remember. Was cautioned – I didn't agree with this, especially when CPS said 'you are a police officer, you should be used to it'. I lost faith in*

*the courts that day. CPS weren't helpful, my supervisor said 'it hasn't affected you has it?' [laughs]. (Matt)*

#### **4. Conclusions**

- Hate crime is a problem for police workers both internally and externally.
- The participants noted that police officers were expected to tolerate a level of abuse and hostility that other occupations would find unacceptable. This perception of the banality of abuse was a consistent theme of the interviews.
- The participants differentiated between abuse received as a police officer and abuse that penetrates beneath the uniform and targets their personal characteristics. They pointed out that the latter 'hurts more', especially internally.
- The perceptions captured by the interviews have possible implications for police training, organisational policies, processes, communications, support mechanisms, first line supervision and leadership. Following on from this pilot project, the police may wish to think about:
  - Reviewing the processes for staff reporting internal/external hate crime victimisation.
  - Identifying the barriers to staff reporting hate crime victimisation.
  - Assessing the needs of victims and mechanisms for supporting them (including gathering more data on who is reporting and at what stage in their careers).
  - Implementing communications initiatives aimed at staff, the public, partner agencies regarding this problem (e.g. raising awareness, emphasising its unacceptability and how to address it).
  - Undertaking the internal survey which was originally planned to complement the twenty interviews.
- This pilot project, although small scale and exploratory in nature, is significant as we have not been able to trace any other published studies concerning the hate crime experiences of police workers.