Understanding the factors that predict victim retraction in police reported allegations of intimate

partner violence.

Abstract

Objective

A large number of victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), who report their victimisation to the police, subsequently either retract or disengage from the police investigation. Given that we have a very limited understanding of victim retraction/disengagement in IPV cases, this study addresses this gap by identifying the victim, perpetrator, and offence characteristics that predict retraction/disengagement.

Method

Five hundred and twenty-four cases of police reported IPV were analysed to examine victim, perpetrator, and offence characteristics that may predict retraction or disengagement as well as examining the reasons given for retracting/disengaging from the police investigation.

Results

The results indicated a high level of retraction or disengagement from police investigations. Victim and perpetrator characteristics did not predict retraction or disengagement; however, in comparison with cases where the victims maintain engagement with the case, a number of offence related characteristics (e.g., risk assessment level) did predict retraction and disengagement.

Conclusions

Victim retraction and disengagement is a significant issue in the successful prosecution of IPV cases, and the findings suggest that certain offence related characteristics increase the likelihood of victim retraction/disengagement.

Key words: *Retraction; Withdrawal; Victim; Domestic Violence; Police.*

Understanding the factors that predict victim retraction in cases of police reported

intimate partner violence.

Violence within intimate partner relationships remains a significant issue within our

society. Data drawn from victimisation surveys demonstrate that a significant number of men

and women are likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV). In England and Wales

crime statistics have suggested high levels of lifetime victimisation with Hall and Smith

(2011) estimating that one in four women and one in five men have experienced IPV since the

age of 16. This level of victimisation means that an estimated 4.5 million female victims and

2.6 million male victims of IPV exist in the United Kingdom (U.K.). International

comparisons of the prevalence of physical assault in dating relationships have shown figures

between 14-39%, with similar levels shown between the U.K. (32.1%) and the United States

(28.3%) (Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008). The magnitude of these

statistics highlights this issue to be of significant social policy importance. On this basis,

researchers have developed a body of knowledge about IPV victimisation. One strand of this

research relates to IPV victims and their engagement with relevant criminal justice agencies.

The purpose of this current study is to add to our knowledge of case drop out during the

police investigative stage by examining whether cases that proceed through the police

investigative stage of criminal justice processing differ to cases where (i) the victim formally

retracts their involvement with the case or (ii) where the victim informally disengages from

the case. These differences will be examined in relation to victim, perpetrator, and offence

characteristics using police recorded data of IPV cases. Furthermore, this study will examine

the reasons given by victims for the retraction/disengagement to provide an understanding of

these processes.

Criminal justice agencies have been significantly criticised in relation to IPV cases, in

particular in relation to the 'justice gap' (Hester, 2005). This refers to the high proportion of

cases reported to the police that drop out at various points in the system (also known as

attrition). Commonly, attrition data demonstrates that a significant number of reported

incidents of IPV drop out of the criminal justice process at the police investigation stage for

numerous reasons that relate to both police investigative processes and victim involvement (Hester, Westmarland, Pearce, & Williamson, 2008). For example, Robinson and Cook (2006) identified that 44% of their victim sample retracted during the police investigation.

Within England and Wales and in many other countries, the victim of IPV remains of central importance to both police and court processes in relation to testimony and as a source of information (Bell, Perez, Goodman, & Dutton, 2011). Both police investigations and prosecutions rarely go ahead without the cooperation of the victim (Ellison, 2002), and it is often perceived by criminal justice agencies that victim withdrawal marks the end of a case (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). For example, Klein (2008) in a U.S. study, found that prosecutors' main reason for cases of IPV not proceeding to court was a lack of victim cooperation. This is despite a continued emphasis in shifting the focus of investigations away from the victim. In England and Wales, the National Policing Improvement Agency (2008) guidance for police investigations of IPV cases underlines that strong case building should not focus upon the victim's support for the prosecution, but instead upon other sources of evidence. This approach mimics the processes of the 'no-drop' prosecutions that occur in a number of U.S. states (Ellison, 2002).

Characteristics associated with victims of IPV not supporting a prosecution case

Epstein, Bell, and Goodman (2003) developed an ecological model with five different levels that may influence an IPV victim's engagement or disengagement with the criminal justice process. The smallest circle at the centre of four concentric circles is the individual level e.g., the victim's mental and physical health. This is surrounded by level two, which is the relational level, e.g., the victim's relationships with partner, family, and friends. Level three relates to the community level, e.g., work-related, ethnic, religious based communities. Level four represents institutional factors e.g., interactions and perceptions/experiences with the criminal justice system, and finally level five relates to cultural beliefs and identification with those beliefs. This model represents the individual factors from the micro to macro level, thus explaining the complexity of factors that guide a victim's decision to engage with the criminal justice system.

This model is well supported by the literature, which has demonstrated that victims report a range of reasons for why they may or may not support the prosecution of the perpetrator. Three common reasons are often reported within the literature as explaining why victims of IPV oppose the prosecution of the perpetrator: fear of the perpetrator, emotional/financial dependence upon the perpetrator, and dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system (e.g., Hare, 2006). In addition to these main factors, there are a multitude of other reasons that victims report in relation to not supporting the court trial prosecution of their case including: (i) mental health and psychological reasons (Hare, 2010), (ii) continued emotional attachments to the perpetrator, (Hare, 2010) and (iii) requiring only the immediate response of the police to stop the violence (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). Victims have been found to conduct a cost-benefit analysis where the costs of supporting the investigation are often considered higher than any potential benefits e.g., the potential future increase in the level of violence as a result of reporting the crime (see Hester, 2005; Landau, 2000). Victims have also been found to perceive the crime to be minor and/or unintentional and so believe that the perpetrator should not be punished (Hare, 2006). Hester (2005) found that if a victim had children with the perpetrator, this was often given as a reason for why the victim may not wish to pursue charges (see also Fanslow & Robinson, 2010).

These studies provide valuable information with regards to victim decision making, however the findings do not help agencies identify whether there are specific types of victims who are more likely to continue to support a prosecution or to retract/disengage from the criminal justice process. There is some limited evidence that shows that some characteristics of the victim and crime do affect the level of support of a prosecution. Hare (2006) found that older victims (e.g., those aged 30 years and older) and victims who were married to the perpetrator at the time of the offence were significantly less likely to want charges to be filed. Educational level of the victim, number of dependent children at home, ethnicity, level of injury and the frequency of prior victimisation had no impact on whether the victim supported a prosecution or not. However, a later study by Hare (2010) found that increased injury, prior victimisation, and being afraid of the perpetrator increased support for going to trial. Weisz

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(2002) found that victims who favoured prosecution perceived themselves at a higher risk of future IPV, had higher levels of abuse reported in the previous six months, had called the police more frequently, and had suffered IPV for a longer period of time, compared with those who did not favour prosecution.

Victim retraction of allegations of IPV

The limitation of the above studies is that whilst they provide valuable information as to why a victim may or may not support a prosecution (e.g., in supporting charges being filed against their perpetrator), they do not establish why a victim may initially report an IPV offence but then subsequently withdraw from participation in a police investigation either by formally retracting their allegation or by informally disengaging from the investigation. Logically, victim retraction represents a different process to other victim decisions that can be made in relation to criminal justice processes. For example, not reporting the offence suggests a complete lack of engagement with criminal justice processes whereas victim retraction suggests that some value was seen in initially engaging in criminal justice processes. Victim retraction occurs in a significant number of cases; for example, Cretney and Davis (1997) reported a 52% discontinuance rate in their sample of IPV cases due to victim retraction. Furthermore, levels of retraction in IPV cases have been identified as significantly higher than levels of victim retraction across all other types of cases dealt with by the Crown Prosecution Service (Home Office Affairs, Sixth Report, 2008). Therefore, victim retraction presents a formidable challenge to both police investigators and also prosecutors in England and Wales (Ellison, 2002) and around the world.

Our understanding of this process of victim retraction is currently very limited with only one known published study explicitly examining victim retraction in the police investigation stage (i.e., Robinson & Cook, 2006). Robinson and Cook (2006) analysed data gathered in 2003, which examined victim and offence-related characteristics that may predict retraction. Fifty per cent of this sample retracted their allegation with 71.3% of these retracting during the police investigation. In terms of the documentation of those cases, 73% of the retracted cases had retraction statements from the victims. Within these statements, a

substantial amount contained only the information that the victim does not wish to continue with the case, with other cases including no written documentation, thus providing us with little understanding of the reasons that guided the retraction decision. Victims were more likely to retract when they were in a current relationship with the perpetrator, when the victim had experienced past violence from the perpetrator, when the offence involved an assault (e.g., classified as Common Assault or Actual Bodily Harm), when the victim was injured from the offence, and when the perpetrator was alcohol intoxicated during the offence. Characteristics that did not predict retraction were: having children with the perpetrator and being defined as a vulnerable witness (see section 16 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act, 1999, for a definition of vulnerable witnesses).

The limited research in this area leaves a gap in our understanding about victim retraction with regards to what characterises a case where the victim may be at a high risk of retraction, or the reasons for retracting participation at this important early stage of the investigation, in comparison to cases that progress with victim support. Given that we have a limited understanding of formal retraction, we have no current understanding of characteristics that may predict informal victim disengagement. Informal victim disengagement occurs when the victim withdraws from involvement in the case by informal methods. These methods include not maintaining contact with the case (e.g., by not responding to telephone messages, answering the door for police visits), not providing a victim statement when requested, or not providing evidence when requested. No prior study has examined whether victim, offender, or offence characteristics differ between cases where the victim informally disengages compared to cases that progress with victim support.

The current study also represents an extension of the previous research in this area, by providing a more detailed examination of the characteristics present within an IPV case. For example, Robinson and Cook (2006) did not examine perpetrator characteristics and the offence-related characteristics were also limited to three variables of: assaultive offence, injury, and use of alcohol by defendant. The current study also examines a measure of seriousness or risk to the victim by using the risk assessment score produced by the Domestic

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Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence (DASH, 2009) risk assessment tool. This tool is currently used by all police forces in England and Wales to risk assess IPV cases and is recommended by the Association of Chief Police Officers. This measure uses 15 risk factors that according to the DASH (2009) have been shown to predict the risk of serious harm to the victim including factors such as victim pregnancy, escalation of offence related behaviour, and perpetrator controlling behaviour. This tool is considered to have good face and content validity, however no evaluation of predictive validity has been carried out at this time (Robinson & Howart, 2012). The completion of the DASH results in the categorisation of the offence into three levels of increasing risk: standard, medium, and high. This is a factor that has not been studied previously in relation to retraction or disengagement in cases of IPV. However, parallel literature for offenders has shown a relationship between engagement (e.g., in offender rehabilitation treatment programmes) and risk factors (e.g., Schley, Yuen, Fletcher, & Radovini, 2012; Yang et al., 2013) suggesting that this is important to examine in the current study. In addition, the current study includes the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the crime location as a variable that may be predictive of victim engagement with the police. This deprivation score is calculated for small geographical areas, and is a composite value based of 38 indicators of deprivation (e.g. income, employment, education). This provides a quantitative, relative measure of deprivation for locations that acts as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status, which has been successfully used in other studies which have analysed police recorded crime data (Shuttlewood, Bond, & Smith, 2011; Smith & Bond, 2009).

Furthermore, numerous changes have occurred in England and Wales since the data gathered in 2003 and reported by Robinson and Cook (2006). For example, the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act was introduced in 2004. This act was introduced with a particular focus upon supporting and protecting victims of IPV, as well as having a focus on improving police practice and reducing the 'justice gap' (Hester et al., 2008). In addition, the current study represents police recorded data rather than Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) case files. As a significant number of cases may not progress to the point where they are

referred to the CPS, the data described here may provide a clearer understanding of victim retraction during the police investigative stage than Robinson and Cook (2006) were able to. Therefore, the more current understanding of the level of victim retraction and the characteristics that may predict retraction as reported in this current study will provide a timely and significant contribution to our understanding of retraction within the literature as well as contributing to an undeveloped area of literature in relation to informal victim disengagement from IPV cases.

Benefits of engaging in prosecution of IPV cases

For victims, engagement in the criminal justice process can be important in enabling them to seek justice following victimisation. Engagement has been shown to be associated with benefits such as the cessation of the abuse, the opportunity to engage in help seeking behaviours, and access to legal resources. These benefits have been associated with recovery from the effects of victimisation, suggesting that there may be advantages to continuing engagement in criminal justice processes (Beeble, Bybee, Sullivan, & Adams, 2009; Bell et al., 2011). For criminal justice agencies, continued prosecutions of IPV cases have numerous benefits e.g., in reducing the waste of public monies resulting from ended investigations and improved indicators of performance. Furthermore, Gauthier (2010) suggests that dropping charges has been associated with negative consequences for criminal justice professionals in addition to those experienced by the victim. Criminal justice professionals may become discouraged, demotivated and frustrated by dropped charges, which may reflect in their future responses to IPV victims. These issues suggest that where appropriate, it is important that victims are supported to continue to engage with the prosecution of their cases.

Current study

Based upon the previous literature, it is hypothesised that:

1. Victim characteristics such as increased age and being in a current relationship with the perpetrator will increase the likelihood of formal retraction and disengagement.

2. Offence characteristics such as use of a weapon, the victim sustaining injury, alcohol being involved, and children being present during the offence will also increase the likelihood of formal retraction and disengagement.

3. Although there is no current literature regarding demographic characteristics of the perpetrator and how this may predict retraction, based upon the victim literature, it is predicted that age will predict an increased likelihood of formal retraction and disengagement.

In addition to the quantitative data analysis, a qualitative analysis of the available victim retraction statements and free text within the police recording database, will explore the reasons given by victims in order to understand the decision making that leads to retraction and disengagement.

Method

Design

A mixed methods approach was used within this study to examine the issue of victim formal retraction and disengagement. For the quantitative data, a cross-sectional correlational design was used to establish whether the identified characteristics could differentiate between cases where (i) a victim would formally retract an allegation or (ii) whether the victim disengaged from participating in the investigation with cases that continued to progress with victim support. Identified characteristics included variables that related to the victim, perpetrator, and the offence. For the qualitative data, where a victim retracted/disengaged, either the victim retraction statements and/or the free text completed within the police recording database were examined for insight into the decision making process regarding these processes.

Sample

The data were collected for a three-month period between 1st January and the 31st March 2011, representing crime recorded by one regional police force in England. This region was representative of population size in comparison to surrounding regions, but is characterised from having elevated levels of deprivation and crime levels. No further details can be presented here to maintain the anonymity of the police force. The data were gathered from the police recording system, which is where every crime that is reported to the police is recorded in that regional area. Each reported case is allocated a unique crime reference number. This system is then used as a case tracking database whereby any information relating to each crime reference number (e.g., victim statements), are attached and the progress made on the investigation is recorded in the free text part of each crime number section.

Each individual case was examined within the police recording database to ensure that it met the inclusion criteria below. The case must have been flagged as domestic violence within the police force crime recording system. Under-flagging has been previously identified as an issue within police forces (Hanmer, Griffiths, & Jerwood, 1999), however as there is no specific crime for IPV, this is the only way that IPV cases can be identified without an extensive review of all reported violent offences. As the focus of this current study was on physical violence towards a person, any offences that did not involve physical offences were removed. Furthermore, only offences between previous or current partners were retained in the data set, therefore, any criminal offences that occurred between other family members (e.g., son attacking father) were removed.

In total, there were 1529 offences in the original data set, however once the inclusion criteria were applied a sample of 643 police reported cases of IPV cases was established. This sample was reduced to 524 cases for the statistical analysis due to the multinomial logistic regression removing cases where there were any missing data. Each individual case represents an incident with a female victim, of physical violence that has been reported to the police, accurately flagged by the police force as domestic abuse, and that occurred between current or previous intimate partners.

Measures

Data were gathered on a range of victim, perpetrator, and offence characteristics as outlined below. The outcome variables for the cases were (i) cases that proceeded with the victim supporting/engaging in the investigation, (ii) cases where the victim formally retracted, and (iii) cases where the victim disengaged from the police investigation. Each of these outcomes were operationalised as below. For cases where the victim maintained engagement, this was evidenced by the presence of a victim statement and continued contact with the victim within the police recoding data based. For cases where the victim formally retracted, this was defined as retraction when it was flagged (this is formally tracked by the police force) within the police recording database case. Each individual case was further verified by checking the case file. Retraction involved the victim approaching the police and stating that they wished to retract their IPV allegation and did not support the investigation of their case.

In total, there were 113 (21.60%) cases recorded as having formally retracted their victim statements. For the victims who disengaged from the investigation, this was measured by assessing evidence within the police crime recording system that the victim was not supporting the investigation. Therefore, a case was defined as involving disengagement where the case notes identified that contact with the victim had been unsuccessful on several occasions using a range of contact points e.g., telephone calls, visiting the home address for the victim. In total, there were 140 (26.70%) cases in which the victim disengaged with the investigation.

It is acknowledged there are limitations to the data in that it is reliant on police recording accuracy. For example, if a victim was not offered the opportunity to provide a victim retraction statement by the police officer, this may have resulted in the case being designated as the victim informally disengaging as opposed to formally retracting. Accuracy of the data is a limitation that exists for analyses of any secondary data. However, as all of the available documents for each case were examined in the data collection process, the designation of each case as either progressing, retraction or informal disengagement was as accurate as possible.

Victim characteristics.

In relation to the victim, variables gathered were: age, gender (all victims were female), ethnicity, whether the victim and perpetrator were currently in a relationship, number of reports made in the previous six months (including all offence types), and the deprivation score of their home address. The deprivation score is calculated via the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2010) dataset. This is a composite measure of 38 different indicators to calculate a measure of deprivation of an area. The higher the deprivation score, the greater the level of deprivation within an area.

Perpetrator characteristics.

Similar to the victim data, perpetrator data variables gathered were: age, gender, ethnicity, and the deprivation score of their home address (calculated as above).

Offence characteristics.

A range of offence characteristics were gathered. Crime types are outlined in table one and were coded categorically. Alcohol/drug involvement is flagged by the police force within the police recording database and is coded dichotomously as 1 for the presence of alcohol/drugs, and 0 as the absence of any alcohol/drugs. As this only codes for the presence of alcohol/drugs, this may refer to either the victim, perpetrator or both. Whether the offence occurred during the day or night, whether the offence occurred during the weekend or weekday, whether a weapon was used, whether the victim sustained injury, whether the victim sought medical services, and whether children were present at the time of the offence were all coded dichotomously with the presence of the behaviour coded as 1, and the absence of the behaviour coded as 0. This information was gathered from victim and perpetrator statements (where present) and also within the free text within the police crime recording database. Crime site deprivation score was calculated as described above. Also, whether the crime was detected or not was also coded dichotomously with the crime being detected coded as 1, and the crime not being detected coded as 0. Crime detection represents a measure used by police for case processing. A case is considered detected if there is sufficient evidence to identify the perpetrator of the crime. This does not necessarily indicate that the perpetrator

has been charged and prosecuted for the offence, as many other factors can affect this process. In relation to weapon use, a very broad definition of this was used within this current study. This meant that if any object was used in the commission of the violence, this was classified as weapon use. This means that weapons such as knives are included but also that household items, such as saucepans, are included in this categorisation of weapon use. The risk assessment level was calculated using the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence (DASH, 2009) risk assessment tool, which is completed and recorded as part of the police investigation. The DASH (2009) is approved for use by police forces in England and Wales by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and therefore is the standardised risk assessment tool used within police forces. In this police force, the DASH (2009) is completed each time the police respond to a domestic violence call. As noted by Robinson and Howarth (2012), this tool is considered to have good face and content validity, but there have been no empirical testing of its convergent or predictive validity The calculation of risk achieves three levels of risk: standard (coded as 0), medium (coded as 1), and high (coded as 2).

Analytical Strategy

The data were analysed to determine whether victim, perpetrator, or offence characteristics would predict retraction or disengagement from the police investigation. The combination of categorical and continuous predictor and outcome variables, these data were well suited for multinomial logistic regressions analysis. Multinomial logistic regression works in the same way as binary logistic regression, by determining the significance of a variety of predictor variables in relation to the outcome variable. However, multinomial logistic regression is suitable for analyses where the outcome variable has more than two categories (Field, 2009). The outcome variable used for the analysis was level of engagement, where three categories were compared: cases where victims maintained engagement (coded as the reference category), cases where victims formally retracted their police statements, and cases where victims disengaged with the police investigation.

For the qualitative element of the study, where the victim formally retracted or disengaged, data were gathered from the victim retraction statements and also from the free text completed within the police recording database. This attempted to establish the reasons for retracting or disengaging from the investigative process. Retraction statements ranged in length from three sentences (perfunctory statements) to a page of written data. The free text data comprised short pieces of text to a maximum of five sentences long. Data were gathered in this way to enable as much information as possible about why victims ended involvement with the police investigative processes. However, where data is gathered from the free text within the police recording database, it is acknowledged that this is completed by reporting officers and so may not be a completely representative picture of the reasons that the victim gave. For example, the police officer may be reporting a summary of a telephone conversation where not all of the reasons for retracting/disengaging are provided by the victim or written down by the police officer. This meant that a formal qualitative analytical method was not appropriate on this data, however the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method were applied to ensure a structured analysis of the data was completed. Furthermore, Robinson and Cook (2006) highlight that victim retraction statements may not always represent the full details of why the victims retracted/disengage. Finally, a significant number of the cases were perfunctory statements (see Robinson & Cook, 2006), which do not provide any insight into the victim's decision making. Perfunctory statements included only the information that the victim did not wish to proceed supporting the investigation of the case and would not support the prosecution of the case in court. There was no information provided in these statements as to the reason why the victim had decided to take this course of action.

Results

Given the focus on physically aggressive offences, it is unsurprising that the majority of the offences are assaultive in nature with actual bodily harm and common assault as the most common offences (see table one). All of the victims in this sample were female, and

they ranged in age from 16 - 86 years (M = 33.80, $S.D.$ = 10.92) with the majority identified as white ethnicity. Victims' home address deprivation score ranged from 3.04 – 77.12 (M = 33.48, $S.D.$ = 15.08). The number of reports in the previous six months ranged from 0 – 10 (M = 1.68, $S.D.$ = 1.27). Victims were most frequently in current relationships with the perpetrator, although 30% of victims were previously in a relationship with the perpetrator.

Perpetrators ranged in age from 19 – 60 year (M = 34.42, $S.D.$ = 10.29) and the majority were male and identified as white ethnicity. Perpetrators' home address deprivation scores ranged from 3.04 – 77.17 (M = 33.42, $S.D.$ = 15.11). The crime site deprivation score ranged from 3.04 – 77.17 (M = 32.93, $S.D.$ = 15.07). Almost a third of offences involved drugs or alcohol, with 33 cases (6.3%) involving weapon use. Injury was caused to the victim in 48.1% of the cases, however only 34 victims (6.5%) sought medical services suggesting that in most cases the injury level was relatively minor. Children were involved or present in 70 of the cases (13.4%). Nearly half of the victims were risk assessed by the DASH at medium level with 18.9% assessed at standard risk level and 33.0% assessed at high risk level. Finally, 58% of the offences were detected by the police (see table one).

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Factors predicting victim retraction and disengagement

Due to the combination of categorical and continuous predictor variables, and an outcome variable with three categories (formal retraction, disengagement, and non-retractors) the most appropriate statistical test is multinomial logistic regression. The regression was run with a total of 524 cases, with the reference category 'non-retractors' that produced comparisons between this reference and the cases labelled as 'formal retractions' and 'disengagement'. Multicollinearity diagnostics were run and all VIF and Tolerance values were in the acceptable range, indicating no issues of multicollinearity in these data. Table two provides details of the contribution of each predictor variable to this regression model, for both outcome variable comparisons with the reference category.

INSERT TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

The results demonstrate the different variables that are associated with formal retraction and disengagement. This shows that victims who formally retracted, compared to those who progressed with the investigation, were more likely to be from higher deprivation areas ($b = .02$, Wald χ^2 (1) = 4.60, $p<.05$) and have higher DASH risk assessment scores ($b = .45$, Wald χ^2 (1) = 5.11, $p<.05$). Furthermore, the analysis for comparison between victims who disengaged with the investigative process with those who progressed (non-retractors) shows that disengagement was more likely in cases where alcohol or drugs were not involved ($b = -.41$, Wald χ^2 (1) = 3.02, $p<.05$), children were involved ($b = 1.45$, Wald χ^2 (1) = 10.34, $p<.001$), and the DASH risk assessment score was lower ($b = -.29$, Wald χ^2 (1) = 3.50, $p<.05$). Given these findings hypotheses one and three were not supported by the analysis in that victim and perpetrator characteristics did not differentiate between cases that proceeded and (i) cases where the victim formally retracted or (ii) cases where the victim informally disengaged. However, hypothesis two was supported in that offence characteristics did differentiate between the cases of IPV.

Reasons reported for formal retraction and disengagement.

The reasons did not clearly differentiate between cases where the victim retracted compared with cases where the victim disengaged. One of the main reasons for retracting or disengaging was reconciliation, which resulted in the victim either continuing a relationship with the perpetrator or returning to a relationship with the perpetrator following a short period of time. Reasons for reconciliation were numerous such as the victim being pregnant with the perpetrator's child, that the victim was still in love with the perpetrator, or that the victim and the perpetrator were working on their issues to resolve their current relationship problems. This reason was somewhat related to the child related reasons. This meant that the victim would reconcile with the perpetrator for the sake of their child(ren). However, there were a number of victims within this category of child related reasons who did not wish to prosecute

the perpetrator because they did not want their child(ren) upset or distressed by the prosecution of their father or that prosecution of their father would potentially affect the child(ren)'s access to the father at a future point.

One of the most frequent reasons that victims reported in relation to retraction/disengagement was that they wished to simply get on with their life. This reason was often reported in conjunction with the end of the relationship with the perpetrator. The reasons given were that the victim just wanted to forget the incident and move on, that the victim and/or perpetrator were going to move away to make a fresh start, and that the victim had had no contact and/or issues with the perpetrator since the incident. In addition to this reason, victims did not always provide clear reasons for why they did not want to be involved in the police investigation. These victims denied the offence occurred and/or did not cooperate with the police in any way (e.g., not responding to telephone messages) or provided only perfunctory statements. Furthermore, a substantial number of victims reported reasons associated with going to court and supporting the prosecution as an explanation for why they did not wish to pursue the complaint. This particular reason suggested that victims perceive attending court as a 'hassle' and as causing further problems. Going to court was not perceived by these victims as providing them with any positive outcomes.

Some less reported reasons were: a wish to not punish the perpetrator, fear of the perpetrator and substance misuse/mental health issues. Short-term benefits related to victims who called the police to deal with the short term effects of the IPV behaviour. In this instance, the victim reported that they called the police to remove the perpetrator from the house or that they called the police without thinking it through properly. Not wishing to punish the perpetrator included reasons such as the victims not wishing to cause trouble for the partner (e.g., loss of job) or that the prosecution of the partner would somehow make the situation worse. Finally, a very small number of victims reported that the reason that they would not pursue the prosecution was because they feared the perpetrator and/or the repercussions of making a statement or pursuing a prosecution. Similarly, a small number of victims reported associated issues with substance misuse (alcohol and/or drug use) or mental

health issues, which meant that they did not feel able to report accurately what happened to them and/or well enough to pursue a prosecution (see table three).

INSERT TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE

Discussion

This study has examined the differences in victim, perpetrator, and offence related characteristics between cases that progress through the police investigative stage and (i) cases that are formally retracted by the victim and (ii) cases where the victim informally disengages. The findings do not provide support for hypotheses one or two in that neither victim nor perpetrator characteristics differentiated between cases where the victim engaged in the police investigation in comparison to those cases where the victim retracted/disengaged. However, support was found for hypothesis three in that victims who retracted from the police investigation (in comparison with victims who did not retract) were more likely to be from higher deprivation areas and to have higher DASH risk assessment scores. A different pattern was found where victims who informally disengaged from the case (in comparison with victim who continued engagement with the case) were more likely in cases where alcohol/drugs were not involved, where children were involved, and where the DASH risk assessment score was lower.

Limitations

Before discussing the research and clinical/policy implications, it is important to acknowledge that this research does have some limitations. This data solely focusses on cases that involve physical violence as opposed to the full range of behaviours that IPV can involve. As this is police data, the reliability of the coding does rely upon accurate inputting by police forces. There are a number of points where this accuracy may have affected the data used within this study. For example, one issue is the flagging of cases as IPV, as under-flagging of IPV cases has been identified as an issue within police forces (Hanmer et al., 1999). This may mean that the cases within the dataset may not represent the full occurrence of physically violent IPV within the reported time frame. However, as noted earlier, without an extensive

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time-laden data search of all violent offences, there is no method of addressing this issue. Accuracy of the reasons for victim retraction and disengagement may also be affected by police officer recording accuracy. For example, if a victim was not offered the opportunity to provide a victim retraction statement, this may have resulted in the case being inaccurately designated as a victim disengagement case. The police force from which the data were gathered has a number of data quality checking procedures in place to ensure that all cases are accurately reported and processed e.g., in relation to flagging of cases. This should increase the accuracy of the data but it still must be acknowledged that there is the potential for errors within this secondary data. In relation to the reasons for victim withdrawal, it is unfortunate that many of the victims retraction statements and other reporting data sources (e.g., signing of pocket note book), were only perfunctory in nature. However, as reported below, the findings from this study integrate well with the current literature regarding victims of IPV who do not support the prosecution of the perpetrator. It is unsurprising, given the nature of the offence and that these statement may be read by many criminal justice individuals, that victims only give token reasons for the retraction (Robinson & Cook, 2006).

Research implications

The initial basis of this study was to understand the predictive factors that relate to victims formally retracting their allegations in relation to IPV offences. In developing this study, it became apparent that in addition to victims who had formally retracted (which was approximately 19% within the current study), a larger number of victims had also informally disengaged from the investigative process. The result of both forms of withdrawal from the criminal justice process meant that cases often did not progress any further in terms of either cautioning or charging the perpetrator with an offence. This high level of victim withdrawal has been confirmed within the one earlier study that explicitly examined retraction e.g., Robinson and Cook (2006) found, in data gathered in 2003, that 44% of their sample formally retracted before trial. This is a level that is almost exactly the same amount as is found within the current study.

In gaining an understanding of the factors that predict victim withdrawal, this current study has extended our knowledge by differentiating between cases where the victim formally retracts and cases where the victim informally disengages. In comparing these two forms of victim withdrawal with cases that continued with victim involvement, the data suggests that there are different factors that predict these two forms of victim withdrawal. This has important implications for the research in this area, particularly as we develop our understanding of victim withdrawal. For example, the DASH risk assessment level was a significant predictor for both victim retraction and also victim disengagement, but with opposite directional relationships. Victim retraction was more likely to occur in higher risk cases, whereas victim disengagement was more likely to occur in lower risk cases. Weisz (2002) found that victims who favoured prosecution had higher levels of risk prediction and a higher number of times that the police had been called, compared to those victims who did not support prosecution. The findings from the Weisz study would fit with the current study in relation to victim disengagement, however it does not align in relation to the findings for victim retraction. This may be due to the different ways in which risk has been assessed in the current study and in the Weisz (2002) study. The Weisz (2002) methodology did not involve a risk assessment tool but instead asked victims to predict the likelihood of their perpetrator revictimising them in the next six months using physical, psychological or financial IPV. This approach has clear challenges in relation to validity and reliability, however similarly it has been highlighted that the DASH risk assessment tool has no predictive validity evidence at this time (Robinson & Howarth, 2012). Given this, there is a need to be somewhat cautious about drawing firm conclusions from the current study findings in relation to risk, until there is clear evidence of predictive validity of the DASH.

These findings may be explained by the different types of risk assessments being used in each of the studies. Furthermore, this may reflect the different outcome measures of not supporting a prosecution in comparison with victim retraction/disengagement from a reported case of IPV. Given that this study has found differing effects in relation to victim retraction and disengagement, this suggests that this is a logical explanation. However further research

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is needed in this area to develop an understanding of how risk level may be related to victim retraction, particularly given the importance of understanding why a victim who is at an increased risk of being victimised would be more likely to formally retract their case.

The role of alcohol and/or drug involvement also needs to be examined further on the basis of the findings of this study. This current study found no predictive relationship for victim retraction, however, victim disengagement was more likely (compared to cases that progressed) where no alcohol/drugs were involved. This is counter to the findings of Robinson and Cook (2006) who found that when the perpetrator was intoxicated during the offence, an IPV victim was more likely to retract. Given that this prior study examined retraction as opposed to victim disengagement, this may underline the point that victim withdrawal is more complicated and that future studies in this area need to differentiate the reasons for victim withdrawal from IPV cases. Alcohol intoxication has frequently been associated with aggression (Stappenbeck & Fromme, 2013) and alcohol and/or drugs have been frequently found to play a significant role in IPV offences. Therefore, any findings in relation to alcohol/drug involvement (or lack thereof) need to be examined further.

Many of the reasons that were reported by the victims as underpinning their withdrawal from the case fit very well within the ecological model suggested by Epstein et al. (2003). There did not appear to be any clear differences in the role of different reasons between victim retraction or victim disengagement. With reference to this model, level one, two, and four reasons were reported by victims. In particular, level two (the relationship level) demonstrated particular relevance for victims in that many victims reported wanting to either return to the relationship or had already continued to be in a relationship following the report to the police. This clearly demonstrates the strongly inter-related nature of many of the reasons that explain why victims continue to retract or disengage from allegations of IPV. This demonstrates the challenges that remain within the investigation and prosecution of IPV cases where victim decision making is multi-faceted and intertwined with their daily lives (see also Dutton, 1996).

Clinical and policy implications

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The high level of victim retraction and disengagement suggests that the current focus on improving the level of attrition within IPV cases is not having any significant effect at the police investigation stage of such cases (e.g., introduction of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act, 2004). A previous evaluation of other aspects of the introduction of this act drew similar conclusions with findings suggesting that the impact was limited (Hester et al., 2008). However, this is not to say that more success may be being achieved at other attrition points e.g., in the initial reporting or court trial prosecution of IPV cases. This does remain a significant issue that still needs to be addressed as a number of studies have demonstrated that the highest level of attrition is found during the police investigation stage of the criminal justice process (Hester et al., 2008). A finding that has been confirmed with the substantial level of victim withdrawal found within this study. This suggests that the 'justice gap' is still a significant issue for victims of IPV during the police investigation of their case and as such, more needs to be done to address the level of victim withdrawal from IPV cases.

This research contributes to the existing body of literature focusing on better understanding of IPV perpetrators and victims. In particular, this study has demonstrated the high proportion of victims who withdraw from the criminal justice process during the police investigation of IPV offences, and the difficulties that police agencies have with pursuing victimless prosecutions in these cases. It is therefore imperative that where it is appropriate for the victims, that support is provided throughout the investigative process, in order to maximise opportunities for the detection of IPV offences. This research has indicated some offence characteristics are important in differentiating between cases that progress and cases where the victim withdraws. Such findings may be used to identify particular types of IPV cases where there is a high risk of victim withdrawal. Police forces may be able to develop strategies or a process to provide additional support to victims in these types of cases to ensure that they maintain engagement with the investigation. This is particularly important given the link between victim engagement and case processing (Ellison, 2002) and may offer benefits to both victims (e.g., Beeble et al, 2009) and to police forces in increased successful case processing. However, it is acknowledged that victim involvement may not always be in

the best interests of the victim, so any such strategy must be victim centred as opposed to solely focused on enabling police forces to increase the level of prosecutions. To our knowledge, no such strategy currently exists in police forces within England and Wales, so these findings may be used to build an evidence base to consider the most appropriate way in which to develop such a process/strategy. However, the current literature regarding victim withdrawal is very limited so further research is needed before this type of research can contribute to the development of evidence-based victim support practices.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics relating to the IPV Police Reported Cases

Offence type		Frequency	Percentage
Actual bodily harm		325	62.02
Common assault		186	35.50
Sexual offences		7	1.34
Wounding with intent		2	0.38
Grievous bodily harm		2	0.38
Indecent assault		1	0.19
Other criminal offences		1	0.19
Victim characteristics			
Ethnicity	White	470	89.70
	Indian/Asian	18	3.40
	Black	26	5.00
	Other	7	1.30
Relationship to perpetrator	Current partner	367	70.00
	Ex-partner	157	30.00
Perpetrator characteristics			
Gender	Female	4	0.80
	Male	302	57.60
Ethnicity	White	255	48.70
	Indian/Asian	14	2.70
	Black	33	6.30
Offence characteristics			
Alcohol/Drug involved	No	374	71.40
	Yes	150	28.60
Part of week where offence occurred	Weekday	283	54.00
	Weekend	241	46.00
Time of the day	Day	203	38.70
	Night	321	61.30
Weapon used	No	491	93.70
	Yes	33	6.30
Injury caused to the victim	No	272	51.90
	Yes	252	48.10
Victim sought medical services	No	490	93.50
	Yes	34	6.50
Children witnessed/involved	No	454	86.60
	Yes	70	13.40
DASH risk assessment level	Standard	99	18.90
	Medium	252	48.10
	High	173	33.00

Crime was detected	No	220	42.00
	Yes	304	58.00
Location of offence	Shared home	132	25.20
	Perpetrator's address	36	6.90
	Victim's address	99	18.90
	Other address	21	4.00

Table 2

Results of multinomial logistic regression for all predictor variables, comparing formal

retractions and disengagement to reference category (where victims maintained engagement)

Variable	B (SE)	Exp(B)	95% confidence interval for Exp(B)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Comparison between cases where there was formal retraction with cases where victims maintained engagement				
Intercept	-1.82 (.75)*			
Alcohol/drugs	.14 (.27)	1.15	.68	1.94
Crime deprivation	.02 (.01)*	1.02	1.00	1.03
Weekend	.19 (.23)	1.21	.77	1.92
Day/Night	-.39 (.24)	.68	.42	1.09
Weapon	-.10 (.43)	.91	.39	2.11
Injury	-.01 (.24)	1.00	.63	1.60
Hospital	-.31 (.44)	.73	.31	1.72
Children	.10 (.32)	1.12	.60	2.06
Current partner	.29 (.25)	1.34	.82	2.19
DASH	.35 (.17)*	1.42	1.02	1.99
Comparison between cases where there was disengagement with cases where victims maintained engagement				
Intercept	-2.86 (.98)*			
Alcohol/drugs	-.41 (.24)*	.66	.41	.98
Crime deprivation	.01 (.01)	1.00	.99	1.02
Weekend	-.16 (.22)	.85	.55	1.31
Day/Night	-.36 (.24)	.70	.44	1.11
Weapon	1.04 (.65)	2.84	.80	10.08
Injury	.11 (.22)	1.12	.72	1.73
Hospital	.34 (.55)	1.41	.48	4.15
Children	1.46 (.45)**	4.30	1.77	10.45
Current partner	.34 (.25)	1.41	.87	2.28
DASH	-.29 (.15)*	.75	.55	.98

Note: $N = 524$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$

Table 3

Reasons and Frequencies for Retraction/Disengagement

Reason	Explanation of reason	Frequency	
		Retraction	Disengagement
Reconciliation	Victim continues or returns to a relationship with the offender.	15	18
Wants to get on with their life/End of relationship	Victims reports that they want to move on and forget what occurred to them and/or that the relationship is now over.	12	11
Child related reasons	Victims reports reasons to not prosecute that are associated with their child(ren)	7	5
Short term benefits	Victim reports reasons for calling the police that focus on the short term benefits (e.g., removal of violent partner from the house)	2	5
Did not want to punish partner	Victim reports reasons to not prosecute that are associated with not wanting to further punish their partner.	2	3
Issues associated with going to court/Supporting prosecution	Victim reports perceived negative associations with going to court and/or supporting the police prosecution	6	9
Disengaged/Denial of offence/Uncooperative	Victim reports that they do not want to be involved in the prosecution or to pursue the complaint	13	10
Fears offender	Victim reports that they either fear the offender or the repercussions of continuing with the complaint	2	3
Substance misuse/Mental health issue	Victim reports substance misuse or mental health issues, which indicate an inability to continue with the prosecution.	8	3
Perfunctory	Victim only reported that they did not wish to make a statement, would not support prosecution or attend court	59	85
No information provided	No information was available in either free text or case information.	14	18

Note: Frequencies will not add up to the total sample size as some victims reported multiple reasons

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