

Partners or family members are responsible for nearly half of the women killed each year in the UK, and many of these deaths follow long periods of domestic abuse. Yet in recent years, the rate of statement withdrawal by victims of such violence has been rising. **Tom Kirchmaier** and **Ekaterina Oparina** highlight the potential role of police workload.

Police workload linked to victim statement withdrawals

Domestic abuse cases are widespread in countries across the world. In the United States, around 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner (Leemis et al, 2022). Across the European Union, at least two women are killed daily by an intimate partner or family member (European Union, 2024); and in the UK, partners or family members are responsible for nearly half of all female homicides (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Given the profound impact of domestic violence on individuals and society, and the potential risk of escalation of harm, cases in which there is a high risk of future abuse have been identified as a high priority for law enforcement agencies. Yet across England and Wales, we see an increasing number of domestic abuse cases that are closed because victims withdraw their complaint (Her Majesty's

Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2019).

In new research, we explore the connection between the workload of police officers and the likelihood of victims withdrawing from high-risk domestic abuse cases, using data from the Greater Manchester Police spanning the period from January 2014 to March 2019. During this time the annual workload of responding officers increased from an average of five to 13 cases per month, with a monthly peak of 23 cases in August 2017. Our findings reveal that an addition of 10 cases per officer per month is related to a 3 percentage point increase in the likelihood of victim withdrawal.

Risk factors

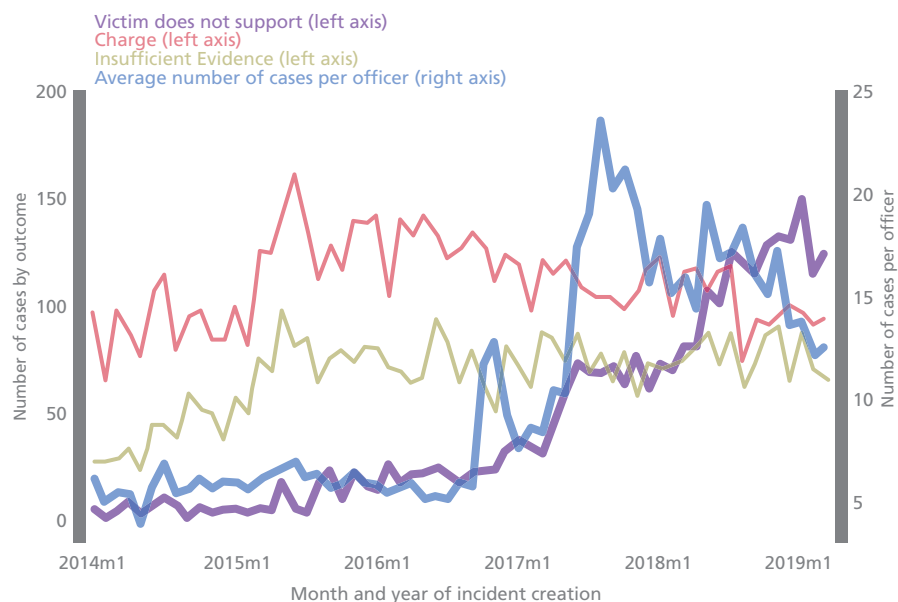
We focus specifically on domestic abuse incidents involving women victims deemed at high risk of future harm. Given the

critical nature of these cases, they are presumably less susceptible to variations in recording and officer attendance over time and across different locations. Our analysis employs the number of cases assigned to an officer in a given month as a proxy for their workload.

By analysing individual officers' variation in workload over time, we show that adding 10 more cases to an officer's monthly workload is related, on average, with an increase of 3 percentage points in the probability of a victim withdrawing from a high-risk domestic abuse case. During the observation period, the proportion of cases resulting in victim withdrawal surged from 5% to 38%, a staggering increase of 33 percentage points.

Our results suggest that the increased workload accounts for 9% of the total rise in withdrawals – a significant portion.

Figure 1:
Police workload and outcome of high-risk domestic abuse cases



Notes: Number of cases by outcome (left axis) and average number of cases per officer (right axis), monthly. Source: Authors' calculations by Kirchmaier and Oparina.

Increased police workload appears to account for 9% of the total rise in victim statement withdrawals – a significant portion

These conclusions hold after controlling for the characteristics of the crime, the victim, the potential perpetrator and the details of the police response, such as the response time and length of investigation.

We also identify characteristics that are associated with a higher probability of victim withdrawal. Notably, victims of sexual offences are 20 percentage points more likely to retract their complaints than those involved in other types of violent incidents.

Furthermore, victim intoxication at the time of the incident increases the likelihood of withdrawal, whereas alleged perpetrator intoxication reduces this likelihood. The relationship between the victim and the alleged perpetrator also plays a significant role, with victims more inclined to withdraw complaints against family members and less so against former partners.

Additionally, our data reveal a seasonal pattern, with withdrawals more common in the latter part of the year, particularly from September to December.

The backdrop to these findings is a

period of significant institutional change within the sector, characterised by a 29% rise in recorded crimes across Greater Manchester from 2014 to 2019, alongside a 9% reduction in available police officers. This imbalance has led to an increased average workload per officer and reduced opportunities for meaningful victim engagement.

These challenges are compounded by austerity policies implemented across England and Wales, leading to significant cuts in public spending, including the resources allocated to policing, courts and prisons.

Time pressure

The data and setup do not allow us to argue conclusively that police workload causes the higher chance of victim statement withdrawals, as there may be other unknown factors that remain unidentified. But we believe that this is likely to be the case as we do not observe any other fundamental change in policy that would negatively affect the handling of domestic abuse cases across Greater Manchester.

Our main result comes from comparing victim withdrawal rates for the same officer in months when they have more

Policing practices are affected by time pressure – and this affects how victims react



cases and months when they have fewer cases. Any policy change that could affect this result would need to affect both workload and withdrawal rates at the individual level.

Our suggested interpretations of these findings, informed by speaking to law enforcement professionals, is that subjecting officers to time pressure means police officers have less time to engage with victims, affecting victims' confidence and willingness to continue with the process.

It is likely that the effect of workload on withdrawals for lower-priority crimes, such as harassment, is even higher than our estimate for high-risk domestic abuse case withdrawal. The heightened focus on domestic abuse and other priority offences puts pressure on police forces and officers to conduct thorough investigations, a pressure not necessarily shared across all types of offences. As such, the secondary costs of austerity policies, in terms of reduced victim engagement, may be more pronounced than initially indicated by our findings.

The effect of workload on statement withdrawals is likely to be larger for lower-priority crimes than high-risk cases

This article summarises 'Under Pressure: Victim Withdrawal and Police Officer Workload' by Tom Kirchmaier and Ekaterina Oparina, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1985 (<https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1985.pdf>). A version of it first appeared as 'Higher workload for police officers correlates with victims withdrawing statements' on *LSE British Politics and Policy*, (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/higher-workload-for-police-officers-correlates-with-victims-withdrawing-statements/>).

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Further reading

European Union (2024) 'Ending Violence against Women' (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/figures-gender-based-violence/#0>).

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2019) 'The Police Response to Domestic Abuse: An Update Report' (<https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/uploads/the-police-response-to-domestic-abuse-an-update-report.pdf>).

Ruth Leemis, Norah Friar, Srijana Khatiwada, May Chen, Marcie-jo Kresnow, Sharon Smith, Sharon Caslin and Kathleen Basile (2022) 'The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Intimate Partner Violence', National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Office for National Statistics (2022) 'Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2022' (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/march2022>).