

Policing intimate partner violence in Victoria (Australia): Examining police attitudes and the potential of specialisation

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Abstract

The adequacy of police responses to intimate partner violence has long animated scholarly debate, review and legislative change. While there have been significant shifts in community recognition of and concern about intimate partner violence, particularly in the wake of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, it nonetheless remains a significant form of violence and harm across Australian communities and a key issue for police, as noted in the report and recommendations of the Royal Commission. This article draws on findings from semi-structured interviews ($n = 163$) with police in Victoria and pursues two key inter-related arguments. The first is that police attitudes towards incidents of intimate partner violence remain overwhelmingly negative. Despite innovations in policy and training, we suggest that this consistent dissatisfaction with intimate partner violence incidents as a policing task indicates a significant barrier, possibly insurmountable, to attempts to reform the policing of intimate partner violence via force-wide initiatives and the mobilisation of general duties for this purpose. Consequently, our second argument is that specialisation via a commitment to dedicated intimate partner violence units – implemented more consistently and comprehensively than Victoria Police has to date – extends the greatest promise for effective policing of intimate partner violence in the future.

Keywords

Intimate partner violence, police culture, policing, specialist police, victims

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There have been significant criminal justice interventions in the area of intimate partner violence (hereinafter IPV)¹ over the last decade, including support and prevention measures, legislative change and policy innovation. Recently, the issue has catapulted to become a major national priority in Australia: in 2014 family violence was declared a 'national emergency' (Malone & Phillips, 2014), and in 2015 Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull committed \$100 million to combating IPV (Ireland, 2015). The elevation to the top of the national agenda has largely been driven by recent cases where children and women have been murdered by current or former partners (e.g. Bowden, 2015). This has led to questioning the cultural attitudes that sustain this violence (Diemer & Webster, 2014; VicHealth, 2014), and also the efficacy of existing criminal justice interventions, including particular scrutiny of police responses to IPV (Blumer, 2015; RCFV, 2015, 2016; Goldsworthy, 2015; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence, 2015). It is clear that while the criminal justice system, policy makers, advocates and researchers grapple with innovative responses that will allow more traditional styles of reactive intervention to be superseded, policing will remain a critical component of the suite of interventions required (RCFV, 2016). In order to examine IPV and the role of police, research on police experience – such as the research we draw on – is essential, as it enables a perspective on IPV within the broader remit of policing and provides a strong platform from which to advocate for specific and informed policing strategies. This article aims to offer a timely contribution to the analysis of the role of police, within the context of a broader community and political commitment to disrupting the alarming persistence of IPV and the collateral damage it leaves in its wake.

This article focuses specifically on police, and in particular general duties² police, and their experiences working with incidents of IPV and how these experiences inform attitudes and actions within a particular organisational culture. It draws on data arising from a broader research project examining the police–victim interface (Segrave & Wilson, 2011). As we detail below, IPV was raised consistently by participants, and we focus here on these data as they offer insight into police experiences and attitudes in relation to policing IPV. We note at the outset that policing does not offer a solution to IPV, and this is not our focus. Nor are we focused on the debate regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of pro-arrest policies (cf. Stewart, 2001). Rather we wish to highlight that, despite decades of research regarding police attitudes towards victimisation in the context of IPV, there remain persistent police attitudes towards this crime type. We offer some insight into these attitudes from an organisational and operational perspective. This article illuminates how police attitudes mapped decades ago in relation to IPV remain largely unchanged. Generally, IPV and victims of IPV are considered by police as a burden, notwithstanding the consistent articulation of participants' commitment to always maintaining professionalism. Responding to IPV can contribute significantly to dissatisfaction and/or frustration with the experience of policing. We consider the possibility of a specific form of specialisation and lay the groundwork for rethinking the current model of efforts to improve the police response to IPV: education, improved police incident response and family violence screening practices. Before we turn to the findings, we provide a review of policy and data on IPV, followed by a selective survey of current scholarship on policing and IPV and an overview of the Victoria policing and policy setting. We then outline the broader research project design, before turning to the findings and their implications.

IPV: The policy and policing and setting

In recent years, increased recognition of the inadequacy of responses to IPV, both within and beyond the police, has prompted law reform reviews nationally and internationally. One of the most recent comprehensive reviews of policing IPV was the 2014 UK report, *Everyone's business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse*, which described the overall police response to domestic violence in England and Wales as 'not good enough' (HMIC, 2014, p. 6). This report found that domestic violence was not prioritised by police, there was limited leadership on the issue and that 'many frontline officers' lacked the skills needed to effectively respond. The HMIC (2014) report made 11 Recommendations, including updated professional practice guidelines and improved evidence-based training. In December 2015, the HMIC progress review report noted 'a number of improvements' (HMIC, 2015, p. 6), including clearer leadership and improved police attitudes, whilst also emphasising the continued importance of improving training.

Mirroring attention paid to issues arising in the policing of IPV internationally, over the last five years reviews of the family violence system in Australia have recommended a range of policing reforms. The 2011 *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* articulated the importance of a proactive police response, consistent training and improving policing approaches in indigenous communities. The 2016 COAG *Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children* (2016, p. 26, 48) Report recommendations included education and training for police. This finding reaffirmed the earlier work of the *Australasian Policing Strategy for Preventing and Reducing Family Violence* (2008).

Building on work undertaken at the national level, the findings of several state-led reviews including the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV, 2016, discussed below) and the Queensland Special Taskforce (2015) also point to inadequacies in policing responses to IPV and recommend significant practice and policy reform. With regards to policing, the Queensland Special Taskforce noted that 'police responses need to be swifter, more empathetic and focus more on victim's safety' (2015, p. 13) and recommended, among other reforms, that training and specialised police practice materials be adopted.

In other Australian states, the police role in preventing and responding to IPV is increasingly framed as part of an integrated multi-agency approach, such as the Tasmanian *Safe at Home* strategy, also a trend in Victoria (Victoria Police, 2015). Alongside the growth of integrated responses, several Australian states and the ACT (Gorrey, 2015) have also moved towards specialisation, but what counts as 'specialisation' is variously interpreted, as we consider later. So too the impact of police education remains a core focus in the reviews outlined above, with little research on the impact of such measures, we discuss this later. First, we outline the development of the contemporary policing and broader policy reform agenda in Victoria.

Policing IPV in Victoria: Policies and strategies

According to Victoria Police (2014, p. 13) the response to IPV must aim to 'maximise safety...provide support to those involved in the incident, to investigate the

incident . . . to prosecute persons assessed of any criminal offences, and to assist in preventing and deterring IPV within the wider community'. Since the *Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence* was launched in 2004, Victoria Police have committed to enhancing police training around IPV, adopting a pro-arrest policy³, that mandates referrals to relevant support services, and implementing legislation granting police the power to take out intervention orders on behalf of victims.⁴

Alongside these developments, strategies targeted at improving police responses to IPV were developed including specialist responses and training (ALRC/NSWLRC, 2010; George & Harris, 2014; The Look Out, 2013). In 2004, Victoria Police introduced Family Violence Advisors in each police region in Victoria (a role designed to provide 'interface between operational police, Family Violence Liaison Officers and local agencies', Victoria Police, 2015, p. 43). There are also approximately 180 Family Violence Liaison Officers (FVLO)⁵ tasked with ensuring a 'consistent and coordinated approach' to policing family violence and providing contact to support services and referral agencies (Victoria Police, 2015, p. 44). More recently, 30 Family Violence Units have been implemented across the State (Victoria Police, 2015, p. 38). Evidence of impact of these developments is limited, though it is worth noting that the FVLO role has been criticised for being inadequately resourced and frequently rotated to the detriment of both achieving consistency in practice and developing ties between FVLOs and the community (Police Association Victoria in RCFV (2016, vol. III, p. 788)).

The 2016 Victorian *Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) Report and Recommendations* detailed 227 recommendations to 'transform' the family violence system, many of which pertain to the role, management and practice of Victoria Police (RCFV, 2016, p. 7). The Commission noted that the police role is significant, given that family violence incidents are high volume⁶ for Victoria Police. The policing-related recommendations of the RCFV emphasised the need to further enhance the responsibility and training of general duties police (see RCFV, 2016, vol. III, pp. 1–116). These recommendations have set the agenda for reform across Victoria.

While the interviews presented here were conducted prior to many of the Victoria Police policy changes, and before the RCFV, the findings indicate that rethinking the role of general duties police is a necessary next step in operational terms, moving beyond the reliance upon general duties officers and the focus on training and enhancing their operation, that is echoed throughout the recommendations noted above. We argue that there are persistent and intractable challenges for general duties police in responding to IPV that suggest there is an opportunity to consider an alternative, more definitive and more resourced approach to specialisation. We develop this below, but first outline the broad findings of extant research, and the research design and methodology for the present study.

Research on policing and policing IPV

Policing scholarship has long identified negative attitudes and prejudices towards 'domestics' within policing organisations, and this is often argued to be rooted in a masculine policing ethos (Douglas, 2008; Holder, 2001; Lewis, 2004; Meyer, 2011). It

has also been an issue associated with ‘soft’ policing, for example in Edwards’ (1989) pioneering study she found domestic violence was seen as a low-status task within policing – one which distracted from ‘real’ police work and which traditionally enabled the exercise of police discretion in ways which often involved decisions not to invoke the criminal law (Douglas, 2012; Grimshaw & Jefferson, 1987; Loftus, 2009).

Police attitudes towards IPV are therefore inextricably intertwined with wider debates surrounding the salience and power of ‘police culture’ (see, for example Chan 1997, 2003; O’Neill, Marks, & Singh, 2008; Reiner, 2010), the amenability of ‘police culture’ to transformation, and the organisational and policy context within which policing occurs. The published research on police attitudes and experiences of IPV policing, and the implementation of various policies regarding police practice towards this crime type, have demonstrated repeatedly important (and in some cases seemingly entrenched) aspects of police structure *and* culture (cf. Carswell, 2006; Grant & Rowe, 2011; Rowe, 2007). Much of this work resonates with the very substantial body of work examining police culture and police machinations as gendered, including specific work focused on domestic violence and police culture (see, for example Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; Westmarland, 2001, 2008). The work in this area has informed a range of efforts to counter these demonstrable challenges to policing: from reforms in education and training, to public commentary from police leadership on the important of recognising and responding appropriately to all forms of gendered violence, including IPV. There is also a substantial body of research in the field of policing, victimisation and IPV that has examined policing practice from the perspective of victims (Felson et al., 2002; Hoyle & Sanders, 2003). Much of this work offers sustained critique of the gendered and damaging practices of police, including the emphasis on victim blaming. From a policing perspective, especially a perspective that recognises that victim satisfaction is critical to policing, such research suggests ongoing and disturbingly durable deficits in police practice.

This research sits outside of this significant body of work as it was not focused on IPV specifically. We wish to be very clear that this research did not seek to interview police about IPV, nor is it an extension of the rich and important history of feminist research that seeks to bring to the fore the gendered nature of policing structures and cultures. Rather this research sits within the field of policing scholarship that seeks to better understand policing practices from the perspective of police. We seek to bring to the fore how research focused more broadly on victims and policing, which created a platform for police to speak about IPV at their own behest. We found that participants consistently raised issues pertaining to IPV in ways that, as we detail below, are not new. Nevertheless, we argue that the persistence of a range of (largely negative) perspectives from front-line officers towards IPV incidents raises some important considerations; considerations that challenge the ongoing reliance on training and education. However, first we outline the research and methodology.

Methodology

This paper engages data arising from 204 interviews with operational police across Victoria, Australia, that formed the main data set of a broader research project

examining the police–victim interface (for more detail go to Segrave & Wilson, 2011).⁷ For the purposes of this article, the data are drawn from 163 interviews that specifically mentioned IPV, as indicated by the coding schema. Semi-structured interviews were utilised for this research (see May, 2001), as they are broad enough to interrogate complexity and difference, while granting sufficient depth to probe ‘common sense’ assumptions of police officers (Wilson & Segrave, 2015). Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed, and ranged from 30 to 90 min. As a percentage of the total Victorian police force, approximately 12,000 at the time of the research (Victoria Police, 2011, p. 59), this seems relatively small (approximately 1%). However, it is a unique and substantial data set in Victoria, indeed within Australia. To have conducted this many individual interviews, allowing police to speak at length about their experience and views of policing and working with victims, is rare.

The transcripts were analysed using nVivo software, and both content analysis and thematic analysis were used in coding and data analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), whereby coding was organised according to key aspect of the research (the police role, working with victims and supporting victims) and further codes were identified within each major code, which were then analysed thematically (see Segrave & Wilson, 2011 for a full overview). For the purpose of this paper, the main focus is the code of ‘IPV’, which was then subjected to a specific thematic analysis, presented in this article.

Significantly, IPV was consistently raised by participants, despite not being explicitly alluded to by the researchers’ questions. This indicated the importance and currency of this issue for police. Nearly all participants (80%, or $n=163$) mentioned IPV as an example of their work with victims of crime, with varying degrees of extrapolation on their specific experiences or views in relation to IPV. In relating these experiences, officers revealed much about how their perceptions are shaped by managerial, organisational, political and administrative imperatives that all coalesced around the policing of IPV. Most specifically, the discussion and the findings highlight the potential contribution of extending specialist, dedicated policing units – which currently exist for specific crimes such as homicide, sexual assault and property crime – to the policing of IPV in a consistent state-wide approach. This is brought to the fore in the final section of the article.⁸

Policing, IPV and victimisation

In this study, there was general agreement that IPV⁹ was a pervasive part of routine general duties patrol work. As one officer succinctly explained: ‘we just seem to get domestic after domestic’. In presenting the findings, the context for these attitudes and experiences is simply the sheer volume of IPV cases that police encounter, which is a reality for the majority of general duties officers (but not all, Segrave & Wilson, 2011). The discussion is organised around three interrelated issues: attitudes to victims and the identification of ‘real’ victims, the role of ‘policing’ in IPV and the challenges of responding to IPV within general duties, reactive policing context and finally the processes and policies that police work with and their frustrations given their views and experiences in working with victims.

‘True victims’ and everyone else: The landscape of victimisation

Many participants emphasised that they get called to a large number of domestic incidents, of which only a few warrant IPV status:

I mean you just speak to the people and they’re just unhappy with their lives and expect you to sort it out for them, and the majority of times there’s no assault it’s . . . a verbal argument, and it’s like well why get us to come and sort out your life? . . . 99 domestics out of 100 are just someone’s husband . . . yelling at the wife and vice versa. (Urban Station, Senior Constable, eight years)

Such comments and observations were often reflected in interviews where participants emphasised a clear division between ‘unhappy’ people asking police to intervene to ‘sort out’ an argument (personal), which was distinctly different to a husband ‘laying into’ his wife (criminal):

Working at this station which has the highest number of incidents of family violence in the state . . . A huge proportion of those people will be making vindictive complaints against a partner and it’s only a very small minority of those victims that I . . . believe to be true victims. It’s not that often that you come across a genuine person in real need of police assistance. (Urban Station, Senior Constable, six years)

This view that IPV cases often pertained to interpersonal disputes, and as such were ‘vindictive’, was repeated by officers across the state. This aligned with the articulation by recent recruits and experienced police alike that victims of IPV more often than not fail to fit the ‘ideal’ or ‘true’ victim category: for example, ‘someone that is working at the service station, who gets a knife pulled on them . . . They’re genuine victims’ (Snr Const. [Uniform] seven years with Victoria Police, see Wilson & Segrave, 2011 for more). Overwhelmingly, participants sketched the contours of the ‘ideal victim’ of IPV, which was signalled through labels indicative of authenticity and moral integrity, such as ‘real’, ‘true’, ‘genuine’ and ‘decent’. The authentic ‘victim’ police repeatedly invoked corresponded almost identically with Christie’s (1986) oft-cited notion of the ‘ideal victim’ – someone who through no fault of their own, and in the course of pursuing socially approved objectives, finds themselves a victim of crime. The most remarkable feature of the ‘ideal victims’ alluded to by officers, however, was their almost mythical character. On the whole deserving victims of IPV existed for officers only on a purely hypothetical plane, drowned out for the most part by a steady procession of imposters, liars and time-wasters, presenting what were regarded as highly suspect claims to victim status. Even ‘real’ victims were treated with wariness:

You’re an adult do it yourself . . . if you think he’s going to hit you then leave. Don’t stay around and call us and expect us to come and kick him out of your house and do something proactive about it . . . That’s the most frustrating part about it . . . I refuse to regard them as a victim when they’ve got a say in what actually happens to themselves. (Urban Station, Senior Constable, six years)

More often, it was indicated that ‘true’ victims were those who cooperated with police, took responsibility for the situation and followed through with the criminal justice process, and, ultimately, had limited contact with police, as their response to their abuse was immediate and definitive. But as this officer explained, this is rare:

It comes to the intervention order hearing at court, she withdraws it and ‘he still loves me, he says he’s sorry’ and ‘I’ve gone back to him’. Two weeks later you’re back there again. Each time you go back there you are less and less inclined to go to that extra step because you know that they are perpetuating the problem themselves to some degree, it’s not all their fault but they’ve got to accept some sort of responsibility for what happens to them. (Urban Station, Senior Constable, seven years)

Such comments highlight the way in which policing can ‘tick a box’ but the individual officer can lose all hope of contributing to protection or prevention, as discussed further below, but it also points to the consistent frustrations with ‘domestics’ – as a crime that takes up significant policing time and resources.

Is this policing? The persistent myths and expectations of what police work entails

Classic ethnographic studies (Edwards, 1989; Holdaway, 1983; Young, 1991) and more recent, significant gender-focused studies (see Heidensohn, 1995; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000) have indicated the lowly status of ‘domestics’ which, as already alluded to, were denigrated as ‘rubbish’ calls that represented an inversion of the lauded enterprises of thief-catching and crime control. Moreover, calls to IPV incidents also had a powerful symbolic resonance, threatening to expose the often banal ‘backstage’ world of policing and its true form as a ‘secret social service’ (Punch, 1979) intervening in complex, messy and often intractable individual problems. The prominence of IPV as a topic of discussion amongst participants possibly indicates its pivotal – and emblematic – role at the centre of the police’s ‘impossible mandate’ (Manning, 1978, p. 13) between ‘real police work’ and the plethora of mundane tasks that occupy most officers time. Recent developments in pro-arrest policy, and in victims’ policy more generally in Victoria, have made this considerably more nuanced. It is no doubt the case that the traditional ‘cult of masculinity’ associated with police culture is still alive (Loftus, 2009, pp. 96–98, see also Westmarland, 2001), and that a sizeable portion of general duties officers see their role as primarily crime-fighting (Wilson & Segrave, 2015). Nevertheless, not all officers subscribed to the masculinist ethos of policing, nor did they all similarly dismiss IPV calls and their associated procedures as ‘rubbish’. The variation in attitudes was neatly encapsulated by one Senior Sergeant:

Family violence is... a love or hate thing, people [police officers] are either fine to do it or they hate it. Because it’s a grey area and it’s not that fun like it is to go and catch a crook... It’s not as black and white. (Regional Station Sergeant, seven years)

While we noted above the developments with regards to procedural processes, participants spoke less in these terms and more in relation to expressing frustration and animosity towards members of the public who were decried as 'inauthentic' and suspected of 'playing the system', or were simply criticised for failing to exercise individual responsibility. Often IPV cases were used to illustrate these concerns. Within these critiques resided a world-weariness, cynicism and suspicion which have long been identified as central traits of police culture (Neiderhoffer, 1967; Reiner, 1978).

For many officers, IPV cases do not represent 'real police work' but rather one aspect of the 'dirty work of society' police are often called upon to perform (Bittner, 1990). IPV cases also function metaphorically within police discourse – they are in a sense the archetypal form of *not* real police work. Moreover, it is in relation to IPV cases that elements of police culture are mobilised – a sense of isolation, hostility towards segments of the public and a generally suspicious demeanour – the key elements of the 'working personality' of the police officer famously outlined by Skolnick (1966). Perceiving themselves as besieged by a hostile public, remote policy processes and a decaying social fabric, many officers develop a cynical disposition to cope with the barrage of misery and degradation they are routinely confronted with (as sketched by Van Maanen (1978)).

This broader operational culture and individual expectation of the idea of police work compared to the reality of policing IPV suggests that there is a need to articulate how the response to IPV, as a specific and high volume crime type, can be wholly transformed to bypass the persistence of the traditional expectations of general duties policing. We argue that a significant demarcation of specialisation at the reactive, general duties level is essential. This is highlighted as we examine below specific frustrations of participants, with regards to what they see as a mismatch between expectations and policy regarding what police should be doing, and what police want to and recognise themselves as able to do in the context of IPV.

Policy and process: The absence of discretion in the midst of despondency

Frequently expressed was the frustration with the limitations placed on police discretion. This frustration was based on two grounds, first that the legal definition of IPV was too expansive and facilitated spurious and trivial complaints, as described above. The *Victims' Charter Act* and other changes were seen by participants to prevent police from making 'common-sense' or discretionary decisions based on their professional experience and operational assessment. Second, that the process itself was frequently futile, draining time and resources from 'real police work':

You have to attend at court, whether they [the victim/witness] go or not, in relation to a safety notice. So that means there's another police member down, because if you attended that domestic the afternoon shift before, you go to court the next day, and if you're on a van shift, there's no van shift, you've got to come off the van. It takes up a lot of resources... [the] new online reporting systems [mean]... in fact, we do more. (Urban Station, Senior Constable, nine years)

At the heart of both of these frustrations resided the victim and the cycle of violence, perceived as preventing an outcome that would change the situation:

On the vans it's basically all domestic-related . . . It's all right if you're actually helping the one per cent because that . . . feels like that is actually going to do something . . . The system works as long as the victim abides by it. Like . . . getting an intervention order, that will work if the victim reports the breaches, but they never do and when they do then they change their mind, it's just a vicious circle. It's very frustrating, you just get sick of it. I think "Don't call me, I don't want to be involved until you're willing to actually use the service that we provide". (Suburban Station, Constable, three years)

These findings parallel Rowe's (2007) UK-based study, which reported that police procedures and actions were seen to be ultimately futile with the exception of 'real' cases which included victims who would act (i.e. leave and not return to the abusive partner). In part, this reflects the general frustrations of work in public services and of attempting to solve problems that for police appear 'unresolvable' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 78). This sense of alienation, cynicism and futility appeared to circulate around the issue of IPV. One participant referred to the 'never-ending story' of victims who:

never want to do anything about it or who initially want to do something about it and so you do all the paper work and they don't turn up at court . . . or, they'll get the intervention order in place, and then they'll invite the defendant back. (Regional Station, Senior Sergeant, 37 years)

This sentiment was captured further in these particularly despondent reflections:

Family violence is just continuous. It's just on and on and on. And regretfully . . . a lot of times . . . she'll get bashed, we charge him, we do all the right things and then she loves him again the next day. (Regional Station, Sergeant, 15 years)

When you go to some domestic which you've been to fifty times before, you've done everything you can for this person, they refuse to do anything to help themselves . . . sometimes you're not going to make them top priority to give them feedback . . . You do what you have to do and what you procedurally have to and probably nothing more. (Urban Station, Sergeant, nine years)

We consider these resigned dispositions towards IPV cases to be important. IPV was decried as 'frustrating', 'annoying' (Urban Station, Constable, two years), or 'time consuming', with 'uncooperative' victims (Urban Station, Constable, one year) in situations described as 'recidivist type' (Urban Station, Senior Constable, 28 years) or 'repetitive', where police felt they were dealing with 'the same old thing every time' (Regional Station, Senior Constable, four years). We report this not to criticise police. The harbouring of such views does not by default mean police were necessarily unsympathetic or unprofessional in their response to cases. Nevertheless, many identified that hiding their

cynicism could be challenging, and that sympathy could slowly be replaced by frustration. As this officer from regional Victoria explained:

you rock up, and you've got to be patient obviously every time and you've got to follow protocol and then they just start abusing you and they're the ones that are ringing you, and you give them that much patience and you try to be as professional as you can but they pretty much spit in your face really and they're the victim. (Regional Station, Senior Constable, four years)

IPV cases do then, at least for general duties officers, embody much that is perceived to be wrong with policing and the public. However, despite a sense of resignation and futility about responding to IPV calls, officers reported complying with policy (although whether this happens in practice is another matter), even as indicated above, if it was strongly suspected that the results would be negligible. On the one hand, this seems at odds with other research that indicates how police avoid following policy in this area.¹¹ However, within the broader context of our research, our findings pointed to managerial scrutiny being a key concern for officers, and that 'ticking the boxes' of forms, including the specific IPV forms, was discussed as a frustration of the job, but one which officers were under considerable compulsion to comply with (see Wilson & Segrave, 2011). One senior constable, for example, was adamant that 'nothing is going to happen' in a particular case, but nevertheless described having just finished a shift where he had spent 4 hours on a complaint warrant even though he candidly suggested it was 'a waste of time' (Urban Station, Senior Constable, six years). Indeed, our findings echo Rowe's finding (2007) that the awareness of the external and internal scrutiny attached to victim and IPV policy placed a high degree of accountability on police actions. Officers were keenly aware that, while most would not, some IPV incidents could escalate creating enormous workplace difficulties should they garner attention: '[Y]ou've got to be seen to be doing something because if they wind up dead two days later, guess who's going to be criticised' (Urban Station, Senior Constable, Crime Desk, nine years). Avoiding trouble – either at the individual or organisational level – was therefore a powerful motivation and procedure often followed simply to 'cover your ass' (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 127) rather than because of belief in the policy or its potentials. One consequence of this is that few officers expressed any willingness to go further than basic adherence to policy, in order to avoid further onerous tasks or unwelcome scrutiny from senior management. We move now to consider how these findings lay the groundwork for reconsidering the current recommendations and strategies being pursued in Victoria.

A platform for rethinking the police response to IPV: Towards dedicated specialisation

These findings, as indicated at the outset, arose from a project that was not focused on IPV but on policing and victimisation more generally. The findings largely reveal and emphasise the persistence of a culture and attitude that has been well researched. It also reiterates what we know: that there is an intrinsic problem of applying reactive policing

strategies to the issue of IPV, which cannot be responded to on an ‘incident-based’ approach, as context is critical. What is apparent is that the policing of IPV remains a highly problematic area for complex reasons of organisational culture and wider social power structures. It is worth asking, therefore, whether policing IPV should predominantly be the charge of general duties police.

At the time of the research there were a range of ‘specialist’ services in place across Victoria, broadly defined. The approach to specialist policing differs across Australia and there has been a growing awareness in recent years of the value of dedicated specialists (ALRC/NSWLRC, 2010; George & Harris, 2014). We recognise that there are significant studies of specialist services in this area. The aim here is not to offer anything new in relation to that research, rather we aim to highlight that while it remains not implemented consistently or comprehensively across Victoria or anywhere in Australia, that these findings reiterate the importance and potential contribution of dedicated specialist IPV units, that could ease the congestion of general duties and result in a targeted, more informed and better managed policing response to IPV.

Our research with ‘specialised’ family violence officers and those who had worked in stations where such services were in place was limited. We spoke to six participants who held a specific family violence role: ranging from a liaison position (where this officer was responsible for liaising with families and police informants, providing support to victim/survivors before, during and after court hearings) to a dedicated officer who assumed the management and progression of IPV cases. The range of interpretations of ‘specialisation’ reflected more broadly the absence of any consistent approach to specialised IPV policing across Victoria at that time. Indeed, when the research was conducted only a few stations across the state had a dedicated FVU (and only two were included in this study, though there are now 30 FVU) that operated with more than one staff member and which allowed the policing process – either to respond to a call, or to have a case transferred after police had responded to a call – to be managed by dedicated, specialist IPV police personnel. While this has since changed, as noted above, there continues to be an inconsistent implementation of specialisation. While the Royal Commission (2016) has made police-targeted recommendations for further education, some specialisation and information technology improvements, there remains a focus on general duties officers. In contrast to such organisation-wide initiatives, we would argue, it may be preferable and more efficacious to direct support towards a more clearly defined form of specialisation.

The inference we make from this research is that there is an opportunity to rethink how Victoria Police and other policing agencies develop an innovative response to IPV and FV more broadly. What we know is the following: that research such as this, and more specific, detailed research, suggests that despite efforts to train police and counter the expectations of officers regarding policing (to undo the reactive, crime fighting expectation), and IPV policing more specifically, there remain significant challenges in overcoming predominant understandings and expectations. Policing, particularly general duties policing, remains focused on reactive, incident-based responses. As our research indicates (see Wilson & Segrave, 2011), police experienced significant pressure to respond to ‘jobs’ quickly, and identified time and recourse constraints as impacting upon their work. IPV, generally, is a crime type that is not well responded to within this context.

There are certainly precedents for specialisation by crime type. Dedicated police organisational units are already specifically trained to respond to sexual assault, homicide/murder and forms of property crime. FV is a significant, high volume crime type for police. It is also a crime type that requires a very different policing response in comparison to other significant aspects of general duties policing (such as, but not limited to, crimes against the person, drug-related crimes, property crime). To truly build specialisation would require rethinking how a significant restructuring of Victoria Police (the focus of our research but it could be any police force) within General Duties. It is possible to dedicate a percentage of every station to form a specific unit that solely works in this area, with numbers adjusted according to crime and victim data. This would also facilitate immediate response and ongoing support provided by the same, specialised team. It would allow a clear separation of responsibilities and support skilled officers whose performance can be judged specifically within targets that accord with the area of specialisation.

We would also argue that the potential benefits are far greater than simply the improvement of police responses to IPV and FV. Clearly, specialisation that involves a clear and significant demarcation of dedicated police working exclusively on IPV cases enables greater efficiency in policing and, we would argue such specialisation has the potential to increase satisfaction with police work as those who find this work rewarding can commit the time and resources necessary to respond appropriately, while those who prefer the cut and thrust of general duties responsive work can largely do away with the responsibilities and intensity of IPV cases. So too, promotion and recognition of the work within specialised FV units needs to be equal to that of all policing, such that FV policing is not tarnished by the ‘community policing’ brush that results in the work being sidelined and dismissed as ‘soft’ policing (Foster, 2003). The potential benefit of such a form of IPV specialisation may also be the development of a nuanced understanding of the experience of the criminal justice process and policing, specifically from the victim’s position, and why this experience may not necessarily work well or be experienced positively by victims (ALRC/NSWLRC, 2010).

While there is limited empirical research available in Australia documenting the effectiveness of specialised police responses to IPV (ALRC/NSWLRC, 2010), the US experience (see Klein, 2009), coupled with the findings of this research, points to the need to examine the value of a specialised response and to monitor and evaluate its implementation. We believe there is an opportunity to take this further. This is particularly important in the present climate where dedicated units are being established across Australian jurisdictions in myriad, inconsistent forms. The findings above indicate that for police and – we can extrapolate – for the community, there is potentially great benefit in pursuing a model of specialised IPV policing that values and professionalises a consistent approach to IPV.

Conclusion

The broader remit of this research was to examine police attitudes and experiences in working with victims of crime. At the heart of this paper is a recognition that the participants in this study have a unique and rich insight into and experience with IPV and the range of domestic disputes that occur every day. Currently, we see limited

evidence-based policing initiatives in Australia that reflect Australian police experiences. We believe this research offers significant and timely insights for Victoria police, and more broadly for recognising the persistence of some key issues that have long been acknowledged in this field of study. Such insight is particularly timely given that as an organisation Victoria Police is now tasked with responding to the raft of policing recommendations contained in the RCFV (2016) report.

While it is not new, it is arguably somewhat alarming that many police continue to express profound cynicism and weariness about IPV cases and the members of the public who bring them forward. We noted that for some young constables, the dissonance between their view of a respected and exciting profession and the quotidian realities of endless band-aid solutions to a beguiling range of human problems, often in the face of public contempt, leads to a profound cynicism and sense of futility in the policing of IPV. This impacts their view of policing overall and requires important reflections on the way we police and the way we manage police today in places such as Victoria, Australia. As we made clear, our research indicated police attitudes to IPV do not mean organisational policies are not followed. Officers were aware of and strove to meet standards, and they were acutely conscious of the negative impact any complaint or procedural irregularity may have upon their careers. Nevertheless, they may be frustrated, unsympathetic, hurried and dissatisfied with their job, and this potentially impacts upon how policing is experienced by victims. These are critical issues for police but also for those working to create momentum for change. We argue these findings point to the need for a very specific change in policing in the area of IPV – that of specialisation.

Creating a significant demarcation of specialist responders, to work largely independently of general duties officers (i.e. to be first responders, always, and to stay with the case through the justice process) offers a way forward to a more effective and impactful policing response strategy. It can enable specialisation and professionalisation that would see the ‘soft’ policing work that is part of IPV into an area of policing that is respected and rewarded, where the focus is not on quick responses and closing jobs. Policing alone will not stop or prevent IPV. However, there is an opportunity in this moment to be more imaginative and bold in creating truly realised specialisation, that has the staffing and resources that reflect the significance of IPV within police practice and that will have unprecedented positive impacts – for police, victims and the general community.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article we make reference to IPV, a term that describes violence between current and former partners, including married, de facto and boy/girlfriend and dating relationships (Cussen & Bryant, 2015). We view references to domestic violence or family violence as essentially capturing IPV and when quoting directly from research or participants where the term domestic violence is used we make no amendment to this.
2. A 'general duties' police officer is a 'first responder' and the role requires all elements of general (i.e. not specialist) policing. The majority of Victoria Police are in this role, it is the entry point role for policing careers (<http://www.policecareer.vic.gov.au/police/about-the-role>).
3. This approach has sought to address concerns surrounding police inaction in IPV cases, as well as recognising that victims have often been unwilling to pursue charges against a family member or intimate partner, even where an act of violence has clearly been perpetrated (Stewart, 2001; VLRC, 2005). We note that while this approach arguably has more flexibility than mandatory arrest policies (though it can have counterproductive impacts also, see Braaf & Sneddon, 2007), our concern is not with arrest policy debates (see Braaf & Sneddon 2007; Hirschel, Buzawa, Pattavina, & Faggiani, 2007 for discussions of how other international jurisdictions, including Canada and the US, have introduced mandatory arrest policies for family violence), but to consider more broadly police experiences when responding to IPV, and on this basis to consider what might best enhance policing practice for the benefit of the community and for police.
4. This is similar to approaches adopted by other Australian jurisdictions (Braaf & Sneddon, 2007) and is underpinned by an understanding that 'the primary response of police in reports of family violence is the pursuit of criminal charges where appropriate', whereby investigation and evidence gathering are a priority and decisions relating to arrest should not be influenced by the desires of the victim (Victoria Police, 2004, para 4.2.1-5).
5. This has occurred at the same time as Victoria Police has introduced liaison positions to work specifically and proactively with LGBT communities, Indigenous communities and migrant communities across the state (VLRC, 2005).
6. As detailed by the Commission, Victoria Police had close to a 90% increase in family violence incidents between the 2009–10 and 2013–14 recording period (n = 65,000 incidents) (RCFV, 2015, p. 4).
7. As part of this project, a pilot survey was also implemented which was designed to identify the main issues regarding police and victims of crime (see Segrave & Wilson, 2011). The responses to the open-ended questions in the survey pointed to the need to explore in more detail the rich and diverse views and experiences expressed by police across Victoria which led to the semi-structured interview research design. The full report of the study can be found here (Segrave & Wilson, 2011).
8. For the analysis that follows we have attributed quotes not to individuals (i.e. we have not used pseudonyms) but instead to the rank, role, station type (which we classify as urban, outer urban, major regional and regional), and numbers of years' service with Victoria Police to contextualise the data. We believe this offers some insight into the experience and perspective of the professional perspective.
9. While some police spoke of family violence, we divided family violence and IPV (where participants spoke directly of a partner/former partner and a victim/survivor context), as they speak to some different issues (e.g. situations where young adults perpetrate violence against parents/guardians are quite different and were discussed differently, to IPV) and the predominant focus of participants was IPV. While some police used the term 'domestic violence' we have not changed this, but note that we use the term IPV for specificity and clarity.

10. See, for example, Cross and Newbold (2010) on FV law and policing policy developments in New Zealand and policing practice.

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