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**Rape and Serious Sexual Assaults:
A look into how police investigations of Rape
and Serious Sexual Assaults prioritise
victims**

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate the ability of police forces around the UK and whether the level of training provided addressed institutionalised bias into investigations of Rape and Serious Sexual Assault (RASSO). This dissertation critically examines the role of police bias, both conscious and unconscious, in shaping the investigative process and outcomes in RASSO cases. Through quantitative research carried out with serving officers of an undisclosed police force, as well as reference to qualitative research and national policies, the study explores how preconceived notions about victim credibility, understanding of offender profiling, and the image of an 'ideal victim' can affect decision-making at various stages of an investigation.

The analysis of this research identifies that systemic and individual biases still continue to undermine the objectivity of police responses which often leads to early closures of cases, inadequate evidence gathering and significant attrition rates to cases within the criminal justice system. It also has highlighted how some biases of marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by disbelief or dismissal.

The research also evaluates recent reforms, training initiatives and national policy interventions aimed at addressing these biases, questioning their effectiveness and institutional culture. Ultimately, the study argues that improving investigative integrity into RASSO cases requires not only procedural changes but a deeper cultural shift within policing practices.

This dissertation contributes to ongoing national and local discussions around justice, victim-centered approaches, and the urgent need for the UK Government and individual police forces to hold accountability into the reform of handling sexual violence cases.

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List of Abbreviations

RASSO – Rape and Serious Sexual Assault

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UN General Assembly – United National General Assembly

LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer

CPS – Criminal Prosecution Service

UK – United Kingdom

PACE 1984 – Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

DNA – Deoxyribonucleic Acid

HM Government – His Majesty’s Government

PDS – Police Digital Services

VAWG – Violence Against Women and Girls

ISVA - Independent Sexual Violence Advisors

HMICFRS – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

EEK – Early Evidence Kit

SARC – Sexual Assault Referral Centre

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Rape and Serious Sexual Assault (RASSO) continues to be a world-wide epidemic with every day occurrences of sexual violence affecting over 1 in 10 women globally, an estimate of around 1.2million girls worldwide according to UNICEF (Equality Now, 2017). The term Sexual Assault is referred to any unwanted sexual contact between one person and another, which includes sexual violence or abuse and can include touching of the skin or over clothing. Serious sexual assault can be upgraded when a person is penetrated in the vagina or anus with an object other than a penis, whereas Rape is a legal term and offence given when a person engages in non-consensual penetration of another's mouth, vagina or anus with a penis (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Rape is considered within society as being one of the more extreme offences and therefore within a court of law, a subject can retrieve a full life sentence as a result (Sentencing Council, 2025)

RASSO remains a pressing issue surrounding global health, legal and human rights concerns, and whilst Governments around the world have committed themselves as part of the UN General Assembly in 2015 to eradicate violence against women and girls (United Nations, 2015) there still continues to be complexities surrounding the process of reporting sexual violence, investigation, and prosecution and the prevention of these types of crimes remain a deep-rooted systematic problem in tackling this.

Whilst rape is typically focused on women and girls being the main victims with 1 in 4 women being affected in comparison to 1 in 18 men (Rape Crisis, 2023), the offence can be applied to any person regardless of age, gender or appearance (The College of Policing, 2015). This is typically down to the offence wording of Rape whereby it can only occur to this degree by the penetration of a penis, making men the common subjects of Rape offences. Similarly, victims from minority groups such as transgender, black and ethnic minority communities and LGBTQ are majorly under represented within the criminal justice system, which highlights a need for policy reform and change to encourage survivors of all cases, regardless of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, to report their experiences to police (Walker, S-J et al. 2019).

The police play a pivotal role in investigating these types of offences, however over the decades, police investigations have gone through extensive scrutiny into the effectiveness that the investigations have into securing victim trust in reporting to police and the ultimate prosecution of offenders. Following a systematic review of existing literature, this review highlighted four key areas of focus covering Challenges in RASSO Investigations, Police Culture and Training, and Policy Responses. The aim of the review is to highlight the importance of the investigation process, specialist training and policy reform in order to achieve higher conviction rates and decrease victim attrition.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.0 - Challenges in RASSO Investigations

2.1 - Under reporting

For many survivors of Rape and Serious Sexual Assault, the idea of reporting to police is a daunting and traumatic idea as it requires survivors to often re-live the experience multiple times throughout each stage of the criminal justice system. A survey in 2020 led by Victims Commissioner, Dame Vera Barid QC, showed that there is significant delay in reporting to police due to a range of deeply personal, psychological and systemic reasons (Molina, J and Poppleton, S. 2020). This can be down to fear of not being believed, the treatment and credibility testing of the victim throughout the criminal justice system, social stigma or lack of faith in the police (Molina, J and Poppleton, S. 2020). In 2018 a global movement of #whydidntireport became a social media platform for survivors of RASSO to share their experiences of why they decided not to make a report to police and this was down to a variety of factors, both in and out of the criminal justice system (Fohring, S. 2024) with further evidence from a Crime Survey for England and Wales (2020) showed that only 17% of victims report their experience to Police (Safeline, 2025). Whilst a review of the End-to-end Rape Review by the Government in 2021 showed that there was a 2% increase in the number of sexual offences having been reported to police, the stigma around reporting still remains. The Office of National Statistics in year ending 2020 found that 40% of victims did not report due to embarrassment, a staggering 33% felt that the police could not help them and that a quarter of victims believed that the police would not take their report seriously (Evennett, H. 2025). The consequence of a delay in reporting can mean that significant evidence can be lost and the only information likely to be available is the victims account (IDAS, 2025).

2.2 - Evidentiary challenges

There are many contributing factors in securing a conviction for cases of Rape and Serious Sexual Assault, and these heavily rely on strong evidence which proves that there is no reasonable doubt that a perpetrator has committed this offence (CPS, 2022). Unfortunately, many cases of Rape and Serious Sexual Assault are committed between inter-personal relationships, often within the confines of private places, which makes securing evidence difficult for police investigators (Criminal injuries helpline, 2023). RAINN (2025) states that 8/10 cases in America, the perpetrator is known to the victim; whether that be as an acquaintance or by a current or ex-spouse and this raises issues surrounding the element of consent, with 1 in 3 victims of Rape in the UK will experience this in their own home (Office of National Statistics, 2021). The CPS (2020) further expands that the significant neurological response to the trauma of these cases can impair the recollection of a victims account, which can provide room for the defence to challenge a victims credibility to recall the event coherently and provide doubt to the jury. The element of consent is the vital element of proof to cases of RASSO and within the UK Criminal Justice System, prosecutors need to be asking 2 important questions; if the complainant had capacity to consent at the time, and whether they were in a position to make the decision freely without any constraints (CPS, 2024).

During the early stages of an investigation, a suspect will be interviewed and questioned against the complainant's account, allowing the suspected person to give their version to form part of a fair trial as outlined by Code C of Police And Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984 (Home Office, 2023). PACE is the legislative framework which sets out powers and procedures given to police when detecting, preventing and investigating crime. Code C of PACE governs how police treat persons under arrest or detention, as well as the process of questioning of a person (Home Office, 2019). However, in many suspect interviews, the issue of the sexual act taking place is often not the topic up for debate, with many suspects confirming that sexual intercourse has taken place; the issue arises around the element of consent and it is at this stage that police need to question the suspect what steps they took at the time of the offence to ensure consent was provided (CPS, 2024). There are many misconceptions that because the complainant did not say "no", that consent was believed however in the case of *R v Malone* (1998) confirmed that there is no longer a requirement to communicate the lack of consent. Without any independent witnesses or strong evidence such as CCTV or media footage disputing the element of consent, cases are less likely to result in a charge, let alone a conviction. The Centre of Women's Justice et al. (2020) states that there is a 1 in 70 chance that a complaint of RASSO will lead to a charge. Within the Rape Review progress update led by the UK Government in 2022, states that there has been an increase in the number of convictions secured for Rape cases as rising by 65 per cent and boasts that there was 532 convictions in the year ending June 2022 – however whilst the report aims to show the positive work being done, what it does not address is that the total number of sexual offences reported to the police in 2022 was 193,566 (Office of National Statistics, 2023) which still shows a largely disproportionate number of convictions to reports.

With many survivors of RASSO unsure whether they wish to make a complaint or not to the experience they have been subjected to, can often mean delays in the report actually being made. With this, it can have a significant impact on the ability to collect vital forensic and any relevant media evidence which can be lost in this period of adjustment for survivors. As described by Police.uk (2025), forensic evidence of an assault can include body fluids such as semen, condoms, clothing worn by both suspect and victim, as well as any DNA opportunities, and the sooner these are collected, the stronger the evidence is for getting the case through to the CPS. The forensic window is limited with non intimate swabs (finger nails cuttings, hand swabbing and non-invasive mouth swabbing) requiring to be done within 48 hours of the offence, compared to intimate swabbing of the genitals needing to be obtained within 7 days (Faculty of Forensic & Legal Medicine, 2025). This highlights the need to remove the stigma of reporting, and services available outside of the police to empower survivors to seek either a report or forensic sample collecting so that when the time is right for them, the evidence has already been preserved.

Services available are known as Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC). These centres are specialised services designed to provide confidential and holistic care to survivors by offering medical care, forensic examination, emotional support and guidance throughout a criminal investigation should the survivor choose to report the incident. The most important element of the SARC is that these centres can be accessed 24/7 and can be done without the requirement of a report being made to the police. In the year one review of Operation Soteria Bluestone, it was highlighted that there is "...

structural and systemic barriers for organisational health in each force” (Home Office, 2023) which identified each owning force needed to address and challenge to improve the care around victims and survivors of RASSO. During my research, I was fortunate enough to be put in touch with Dr.Webb who is a Forensic Police Medical Examiner working with the three Welsh Police Forces. For the purposes of this paper, the topic of discussion and input from Dr.Webb was around the support they provide to both police forces and survivors of RASSO and the work that they do in order to empower survivors. Dr.Webb detailed that throughout her career, alongside her team of medical professionals, the urgent need and requirement to deliver a holistic service which provided more than just a medical approach to support police investigations but the support and care around survivors and their families was vital. This led to the set up of Nurture Health & Care Ltd which provides a range of enhanced health and care services both within the NHS and the private sector (Nurture Health & Care, 2023). Nurture Health & Care are the contracted providers for the three Welsh Police Forces who provide the SARCs. Implemented within the SARCs are Independent Sexual Violence Advisors whose role it is to provide independent advice emotional support, provide victims with information, support in accessing medical and counselling services, liaison with authorities and if a matter went to court, support throughout court proceedings. Dr Webb explained how the care her and her team offer is based on a trauma informed approach and highlights how that whilst a victims account can be inconsistent, this should highlight the severity and level of trauma someone has experienced and should be used in court to support a victims credibility. SARCs have the medical and forensic ability to also obtain vital forensic opportunities from a victim, and can store these results for up to 2 years; allowing victims to feel in control of when may be the right time for them to report. This element is crucial, as discussed above, to providing evidence to a case whilst ensuring that the victims report this at a time that is right for them.

2.3 - Evidentiary challenges faced with digital forensics

Often within a Rape or Serious Sexual Assault, the victims phone needs to be seized for download in order to obtain all pieces of evidence relating to the case. The End-to-End Rape review (2021) highlighted the profound effect the removal of a victims phone had on them and reported how this left the victims feeling digitally ‘strip-searched’. The need for evidence from a victims phone becomes a difficult balancing act between evidentiary needs and the privacy rights of the victim, subject and data relating to any other living person. The report highlighted that any data extracted from a victims device must be”... *strictly limited to what is necessary and proportionate to allow reasonable lines of inquiry into the alleged offence*” (HM Government, 2021). In 2021 Operation Odyssey was funded and launched as an initiative by the Home Office and the Police Digital Services (PDS) as a response to high-profile RASSO cases within Gloucestershire Constabulary with the aim to reduce the need to withhold a victims mobile or digital device for lengthy periods of time for phone extractions within a digital laboratory, but instead through specialist data extraction equipment, the data could be obtained at a preferred location of the victims choice all within a time frame of between 20-90minutes. This method also produced the victim with a summary report of the data extracted and allows victims to take control of the relevant data and time parameters required whilst providing transparency over the way their data will be downloaded,

handled and processed. The feedback from victims in relation to this operation was conducted in 2023 which produced results stating that 44% of victims would not have surrendered their device resulting in risk of victim removing support of an investigation had this option not been available to them, and that 85% stated their opinion of the force had improved and were likely to consider reporting a future incident (College of Policing, 2024). This model represents a need for a victim-centre approach to evidence gathering in order to maintain victim support.

2.4 - Police Culture and Training

In order to analyse the effectiveness of the role of a first responder to RASSO complaints, there is a need to review how effective traditional police methods of a “victim-focused” investigation is and why there is an urgent requirement for forces to move to a “suspect focused” approach to managing RASSO cases. Operation Soteria Bluestone was launched in 2021 by the Home Office to tackle the low conviction rates of offenders, as well as to bring a new National Operational Model approach into investigations to create a structured national standard. In the 1 year review in 2022, the key-findings highlighted that there continued to be inadequate training and specialist knowledge within the police about sexual offending, and how impactful the lack of knowledge surrounding offender behaviour can be on investigators understanding the true extent of the offence against a victim, this led to a recommendation of research-informed specialist investigative practice. The report recommended that investigators need to move away from testing the credibility of a victim and instead should centre its investigation onto the tactics used by the offender to coerce and manipulate their victim and how the trauma of such will impact a victims behaviour. The review also highlighted that poor quality of police records through missing or incorrect information such as victim ethnicity, gender or sexuality, means that current data does not give a realistic understanding of the disproportionate outcomes of justice against minority groups (Home Office, 2023).

The Stern Review in 2010 discusses how societal prejudice’s surrounding rape allegations can impact the way complaints are dealt with by the police and the criminal justice system. It addresses that whilst attitudes and beliefs within the police surrounding victims credibility is improving, there continues to be a historic attitude of victim blaming, disbelief and lack of acknowledgment of rape being a serious violation of a persons human rights. However, the police’s decision to rule an investigation as “not in the public interest” does not record or accurately capture the bias victims face from investigating officers, but is deemed down to a lack of evidential value or likelihood of police forces securing a charge prior to CPS advice. There remains a theme that most rape allegations are false, however evidence suggests that only around 4% are found or suspected to be (The Open University, 2025). Whilst The Stern Report identifies the substantial changes being made to provide specialist training to officers, it also highlighted that shockingly only a third of the 43 forces in England and Wales have specialised departments.

The Angiolini Inquiry in 2024 further highlights that the culture of victim-blaming is a theory which continues to be influenced by senior leaders within police forces and extends from the wider problem faced by a misogynistic culture within the police. The Inquiry found that the mismanagement of cases of Violence Against Women and Girls

(VAWG) came down to a combination of increased demands on policing, cultural norms and the lack of funding to secure adequate resources and sufficient training.

These reports highlight the significant need for reform into police culture and training in order to support the public confidence in policing and the criminal justice system in bringing offenders to account. Gekoski, A et al (2023) discusses that victim attrition is at an all time high, with 57% of victims withdrawing from the criminal justice process as a result of secondary victimisation and lack of sufficient funding and training to manage these investigations.

2.5 - Policy Responses

As discussed above, there is a significant amount of work being done to improve the training and development of police forces in order to ensure that all reports of RASSO are treated equally and fairly, regardless of gender, sexual orientation and race. Progressive policies have been developed; such as the Police-CPS Joint National Rape Action Plan (2022) alongside the 2005 implementation into the recruitment of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA) who provide support, advice and guidance to survivors of RASSO, ensuring their needs are met throughout the process (Home Office, 2017). The UK Government published its *Tackling Against Women and Girls Strategy* in 2021, which was subsequently followed by the HMICFRS who produced its own publication of the Police Response to Violence Against Women and Girls – Final Inspection Report in the year ending 2021. In 2023, the Home Office declared VAWG as a ‘National Threat’ within its Strategic Policing Requirement report which further led to the National Police Chief’s Council, in collaboration with the College of Policing, to develop its framework – *Policing Violence Against Women and Girls – The National Frame for Delivery: 2024-2027*. Whilst The Stern Review (2010) deemed that the national policies and practices carried out by public authorities showed positive change, there is concern surrounding the longevity of such implementation due to funding across a national level as well as the capabilities of governance to manage the threat.

2.6 - Gaps in Literature

Through my research I have identified gaps in literature that are crucial to improving investigative practices and increasing victim attrition when dealing with RASSO investigations. Whilst there are many statistical studies which look at rates and outcomes, there is less in depth studies which capture the true voice of the victim; covering the different stages of the criminal justice system, experiences with reporting and challenges faced at the early stages, but particularly on how institutional, procedural and psychological dynamics effect a victims ongoing care and trauma. Research into RASSO cases also predominantly focused on what happens after an offence has taken place, but minimal on prevention and early signs of harmful, escalating behaviour by an offender.

2.6.1 - Addressing the challenges in RASSO investigations and evidence management

There is little research into the training and upskill opportunities available to frontline and specialist investigators into the evidence management and how it is handled at the early stages of an investigation, and it is largely dependant on the financial funding and officer demand that

is placed on each individual force. Whilst some larger forces may have the specialist skills and departments to offer good quality training and deliverance to its officers, as well as to implement new processes and technology, some of the smaller departments will not have this opportunity and it is important to ensure that if RASSO is considered a national threat, that there is a fair and balanced level of funding across the board. The funding equally needs to be put into campaigns to encourage communities that their local force is willing to listen to all reports, regardless of gender, ethnicity and sexuality, especially highlighting the external and internal support to victims to assure them that change is happening around social stigma's of reporting. Victims or survivors of RASSO may not be aware that they are able to seek support through partner agencies, such as the SARC, on a self referral route, without the need to engage with police in the first instance, or even at all. Having highlighted that many survivors do not report due to mistrust in police and the criminal justice handling, this systematic failing results in people not accessing vital external care.

2.6.2 - Suspect focused approaches and understanding long term impact

There are gaps in the research and longitudinal studies available as to the effectiveness of how trauma informed and suspect focused approaches improve victim engagement throughout the case, as well as the impact this has on the mental health of a victim. This is crucial to understand the data and evidence in order to continue improving best practices.

2.6.3 - Improving police culture and attitude

To assess at a local level the attitudes and perceptions of officers when investigating a report of RASSO and to establish if there is a common theme of stigma still attached and how to overcome this through the improvement a consistent, national force training across the board. This is particularly highlighted when dealing with investigations where the victim may be of a minority group and to increase officer confidence in seeking specialist support from external partner agencies.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.0 - Introduction

In the previous chapter of the study, I identified gaps in literature and areas of review that need to be explored further to support my objectives of this study. In this chapter, I will be using a systematic plan and approach to answer my research questions and objectives by bringing together a range of data collection and further research into how police conduct investigations into RASSO cases. The objectives I identified in the literature review are:

- Addressing the challenges in RASSO investigations and evidence management
- Suspect focused approaches and understanding of long term impact
- Improving police culture and attitude

Research is the formulation of developing questions, hypotheses, collecting and analysis of new data, and the drive to expand knowledge and understanding around a particular topic or

theme (Ashikuzzaman, M. 2016). J.Hox & H, Boeije 2005 explains how there are two main types of research used which are Primary and Secondary; primary research is the collection of original data that is controlled and gathered by the researcher in order to achieve a specific goal. Whereas secondary data is the use of earlier data collected by other researchers for a different purpose and reused for new analysis. Despite there being new and current data available in the research into the investigation of RASSO cases and policing culture, I will be mainly focusing on the use of primary data in order to gather the attitudes and belief of officers within my own police force, as well as the evaluation of how investigations are handled with the view to address and challenge any difficulties.

3.1 - Research Strategy

As discussed above, the two main types of research are Primary and Secondary but within this, there are methods of collection which form the way in which the data is presented; this is more commonly known as Qualitative and Quantitative data. Qualitative methods of data collection are designed to capture a more in-depth representation of a sample groups thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Typical methods of gathering qualitative data is through the use of interviews, open-ended surveys or focus groups (Dovetail, 2024). Where as Quantitative data is gathered through, but not limited to, close-ended questionnaires, experiments and numerical observations. This is then produced in the format of numbers; the use of graphs and statistics to evidence theories and hypotheses. This form of data collection is best used for larger sample groups (Streefkerk, R. 2023). In some research projects, the use of both methods may be beneficial; this is known as 'mixed methods research' and the approach allows the researcher to combine both qualitative and quantitative data results in order to achieve the research objective (Hassan, M. 2024).

3.2 - Data collection

Having considered what I have identified as my research outcomes for this project, I have decided that the mixed method approach of data collection will be the most beneficial to corroborate my findings and help build a well-rounded conclusion to my findings. This will be gathered through the use of a questionnaire designed of both open-ended and closed-ended questions given to a sample group made up of police officers, of various ranks and departmental experience, to gather both individual perspective on the stigma perceived by investigators towards victims of RASSO, as well as to statistically gather data to evidence in a clearer format which will show a generalised understanding by the sample group.

The questions will focus around my topic areas with a view to establish officers understanding on what studies, programmes and national projects are in place to support and encourage victim reporting. To identify the level of training officers have undertaken in order to be sexual offence investigative trained and to identify the interest in developing individual professional development to better support victims. And to assess the level of understanding officers have in being trauma-informed, and lead a suspect-focused investigation, with the view to highlight whether biases and culture within the police around these types of investigations still exist and how this impacts on victim attrition. The results will then be transferred into a variety of data analysis such as number charts, percentages and written literature.

Further to this, I will also conduct interviews and engagement with a range of specialists whose work is driven to improve the services and training available to police forces when investigating cases of RASSO.

3.3 - Data Analysis

3.3.1 Limitations and Potential Problems

I have considered whether I would gather best evidence to support my report from a sample group involving survivors of RASSO however the ethical considerations on this, and the confidentiality towards specific cases, would be difficult to approach. I have also taken into account that the topic of discussion is a sensitive one, and whilst I could signpost and offer external support guidance to participants, I have decided that I do not wish to use a sample group which could cause an ethical dilemma to either myself, police force or the university under which I am studying. I am aware that there is a lot of ongoing research into programmes and policies by agencies such as the UK Government, and partner agencies who support survivors of RASSO, who are more equipped to use this type of sample group.

Alongside this, I also need to take into consideration that some of my sample group of officers and colleagues, may also be survivors of RASSO and my questions may be triggering and upsetting to them so I need to be aware that ongoing support and signposting will also need to be offered to them. I will also ensure that participants understand that the survey will be done with full anonymity and offer breaks in the survey with reminders of support services available to ensure that participant welfare is considered throughout. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of my project, my sample size may be limited which could make it difficult for me to make a generalized assessment however, I feel that surveys offering confidentiality will give me a higher number of participants compared to focused group interviews.

3.4 - Summary of Chapter

This chapter has considered and taken into account a variety of research methods available and carefully chosen the one most suitable and appropriate to achieve the objectives of this project. The next chapter will be used to analyse and present the data I have collected.

Chapter 4 - Analysis of Data

4.0 – Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the data collected through a survey, aimed at addressing the central research question: *‘A look into how police investigations of Rape and Serious Sexual Assaults prioritise victims’*.

This survey data offers a valuable insight into current attitudes, perceived barriers and routine practices within RASSO investigations. The analysis that follows is structured thematically, highlighting how officers balance investigative priorities with victim welfare, the extent to which procedural justice is maintained, and how institutional and cultural factors influence frontline decision making.

4.1 - Officer bias toward victim credibility

One of the primary themes emerging from the survey responses was the presence of varied perceptions among officers regarding the credibility of the victims reporting RASSO cases. A significant portion of respondents highlighted that implicit biases sometimes influence how they assess the initial credibility of complainants. Several officers indicated that factors such as the victims engagement, social stigma surrounding false allegations of RASSO and inconsistencies in a survivors account could affect investigative priorities. For example, when participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the statement ‘*some victims lie or embellish the truth for personal gain*’ (1 being strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree), only 30.4% of participants stated that they disagreed with this statement however 26.1% agreed whilst a further 39.1% remained neutral which in interpretation leans towards the bias that majority of respondents felt that allegations of RASSO are reported by victims for personal gain. Further to this, respondents were provided with the statement of ‘*false allegations of rape are common*’ to which a total of 26.1% either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with a total of 30.4% either agreeing or disagreeing and nearly half of respondents (43.5%) remained neutral to this statement.

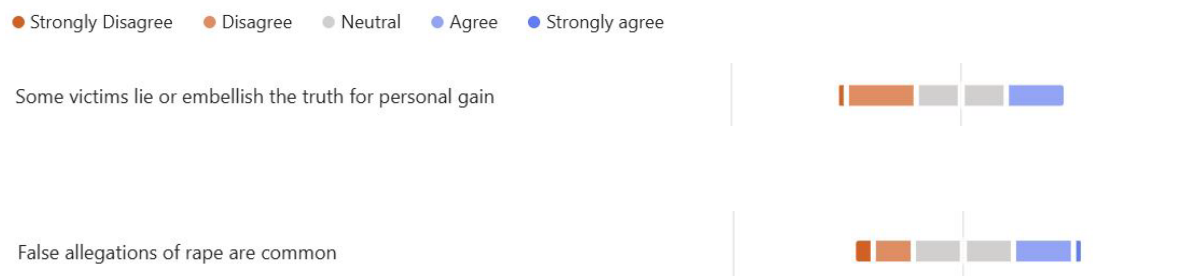


Figure 4.1.1 – Statements relating to Officer bias towards Victim Credibility (Source: Robinson, 2025)

Further to this, when asked if participants have ever witnessed bias by a colleague into a RASSO investigation, majority of the respondents (15 people, 68%) stated “no”, whilst 23% stating that they have. This question gave participants selecting “yes” to the question to further expand in free text to help identify the biases that have been witnessed. A common theme to these responses were down to the sexual history of a complainant with one response stating “*I have noticed in cases where the victims are sex workers, some officers will form a preconceived idea that it is unlikely it has happened the way they have reported and is often because they haven't been paid etc.*” as well as the level of intoxication of the complainant at the time of the offence with another participant reporting that “*I have before witnessed officers outright refuse to believe an alleged victims account purely due to their level of intoxication...*”. Whilst some officers have witnessed officer bias towards a victim based on their level of intoxication, and therefore the early decision making on prioritising these cases as unreliable, an earlier question posed on whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement that ‘*intoxication through drink and/or drugs reduces the credibility of a victims allegation*’ proved that more than half (73.9%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

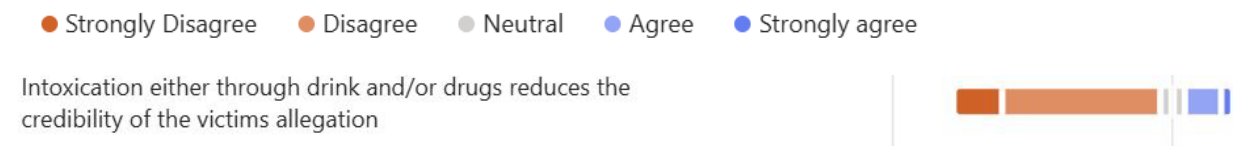


Figure 4.1.2 – Statements relating to Officer bias towards Victim Credibility (Source: Robinson, 2025)

4.2 - Resource Demands and Challenges in Investigations

Another significant theme identified in this survey related to the practical constraints officers face when investigating RASSO cases. Majority of survey participants, as shown in the table below, agreed that limitations within the job – including low staffing resources – as being key barriers that hinder the early evidence gathering and victim confidence in providing a thorough investigation. 81.9% of respondents agreed that low resourcing contributes to the challenges faced by front line officers in gathering the appropriate Golden Hour enquiries with a further 76.2% agreeing that officers are unable to provide adequate care and time with a victim at the point of initial contact due to other policing demands.

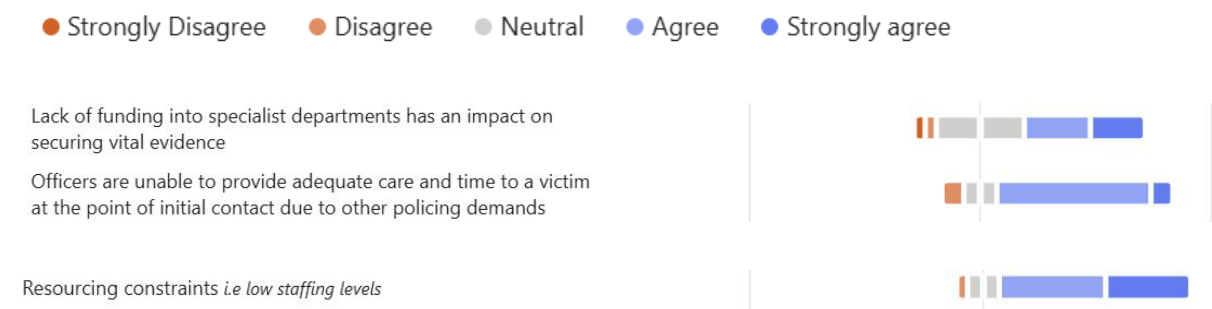


Figure 4.2.1 – Challenges faced by officers during Golden Hour Enquiries (Source: Robinson, 2025)

Furthermore, only 4.8% of respondents felt that front line teams of officers were young and inexperienced, and lacked the knowledge that is required in dealing with RASSO cases. Majority of respondents strongly agreed that this is a major contributing factor into victim attrition and early evidence gathering to secure a case.

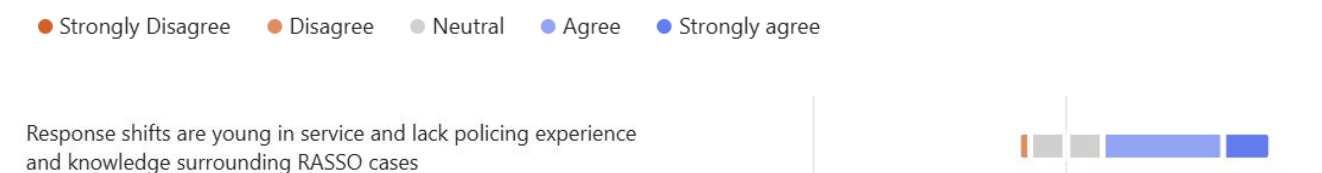


Figure 4.2.2 – Challenges faced by officers during Golden Hour Enquiries (Source: Robinson, 2025)

4.3 - Training to Investigate RASSO Cases

Training emerged as a critical factor influencing officers' confidence and competence in handling RASSO investigations. Survey results indicated variability in the extent and quality of training received, with some officers reporting comprehensive specialist training, whilst others described minimal or outdated training. One officer shared *"Training is basic and has no practical exercises for officers to attempt to deal with victims of the offences or on how to actually gain the evidence required to obtain convictions. Training is purely PowerPoint led and we are told just read the instructions on the packet of an EEK (Early Evidence Kit)"*, which appeared to be a common recollection of respondents experiences of their initial RASSO input. Those who detailed more thorough training, were officers who had either independently sought further training, or who were given specialised training as part of their role in dedicated departments.



Figure 4.3.1 – Additional RASSO training (Source: Robinson, 2025)

The sample pool of respondents were asked how they would rate their experience of RASSO input during initial training, which scored an overall average score of only 2.35.

6. Please rate your experience of the RASSO input during initial training (1 star being Poor and 5 star being excellent)



Figure 4.3.2 – Officer experience of RASSO input during initial training (Source: Robinson, 2025)

4.4 - Understanding of National Policy and Trauma Informed Approaches

Findings indicate that frontline officer's understanding of national policies such as Operation Soteria Bluestone and broader RASSO national policy is inconsistent. While supervisory and senior leaders who participated in this survey appeared generally aware of policy goals – such as suspect-focused and victim-centered approach – this understanding is not always effectively communicated or even embedded at an operational level. Many officers remain unclear about what a "suspect-focused" investigation entails and when asked if their training to date was

delivered as a “victim-focused approach” - which is an investigative method which tests the credibility of the victim rather than focuses on the tactics used by a perpetrator in carrying out their abuse - 48% answered yes with a further 26% being unsure which indicates that their training has been basic and unable to support officers in identifying the difference between “victim-focused” and “victim-centered”.

Whilst 73.9% of respondents stated that they recognised RASSO as being a national policing priority, only 8 respondents stated that they were aware of Operation Soteria Bluestone; majority of these 8 were from specialised departments who had also selected that they had received further and more specialized training into RASSO investigations.



Figure 4.4.1 – Officer awareness of Operation Soteria (Source: Robinson, 2025)

Participants were asked to rank in order what they individually believed to be the reasons why victims/survivors of RASSO do not report to police; many participants placed perpetrator influence and control over the victim, as well as trauma and self-blame lower ranking than the faith in the police.

19. In your opinion, please rank what you believe to be the main reasons for why victims do not report incidents of RASSO? With 1 being the main reason, and 10 being the lowest influencing factor

21 Responses



Figure 4.4.2 – Perceived contributions as to why victims of RASSO do not report (Source: Robinson, 2025)

4.5 - Conclusion of data

The results of this analysis show that officer bias still remains and that there is a main focus on victim credibility when assessing the reliability of a complaint. The data has further highlighted that training delivered is inadequate and does not provide officers with appropriate training to provide a service of good quality to victims, as well as lack of funding and resourcing to enable officers to progress their knowledge with professional input.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

5.0 – Introduction

This final chapter concludes the dissertations examination of police responses to Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO), with a particular emphasis on the integration and impact of trauma-informed practices. The research set out to explore how police forces engage with victims of RASSO, the extent to which trauma-informed approaches are embedded within current national policing frameworks, and the implications of these practices for both victims and the justice process.

This chapter summarises the key findings and their relevance to policing policy and practice, outlines the study's contributions to the wider conversation on trauma-informed justice and offers recommendations for future development. It concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of improving police responses to RASSO; arguing that effective RASSO investigation require more than procedural compliance; they demand a shift in culture, practice and mindset. Police play a central role in driving that change and by embedding national standards consistently across all teams is essential to restoring public confidence and delivering justice for victims.

5.1 - Main findings

Drawing on policy review of national policies such as Operation Soteria, previous qualitative and quantitative data available, as well as referring to my own research project, the overall study has highlighted the critical link between trauma, victim engagement and investigative outcomes. It has also revealed continuous issues between procedural priorities and victim-centred approaches, highlighting areas where current practices fall below what is expected within national guidance and best standardised practices.

By conducting my own research study utilising participants of serving police officers in a local policing force, I was able to identify that whilst many officers strive for impartiality; structural and cultural factors within policing may inadvertently provide scepticism towards a victims report. The responses provided, highlighted systemic challenges within policing structures that can contribute to delays, attrition, and inconsistent investigative quality. The data underscores

the need for dedicated resources and specialist teams to manage the unique demands of RASSO cases effectively.

This further highlights that even where officers are aware of national principles, findings show a disconnect between understanding and consistent application of policy. Victim credibility continues to be scrutinised early on in an investigation, despite national policy guidance discouraging this, and that investigations remain reactive and victim-led rather than proactively targeting suspect behaviour and patterns. This suggests that policy principles are not fully integrated into routine investigation decision making.

Whilst Operation Soteria Bluestone sets out a clear national vision for improving RASSO investigations, frontline officer training and understanding remains inconsistent. In order to close the gap between policy and practice, these results highlight the needs for a standard and mandatory RASSO training which aligns with national strategy, given across all 43 UK police forces, and that there needs to be a greater emphasis on cultural change and trauma informed methods. Without these, the potential impact of national policy will continue to be limited at ground level.

It has been identified that police forces are making progress, yet significant work remains to ensure that national RASSO policy is embedded in day to day practice. Officers at all levels are working in complex environments with increasing operational demands, yet are not always adequately supported to meet the expectations as set out in Operation Soteria Bluestone. Many investigations still place weight on victim credibility and willingness to pursue a case, rather than focusing on suspect behaviour, patterns and evidenced based decision making. This approach continues to attribute to low victim engagement, reduced reporting and high levels of victim attrition.

This theme reflects a broader concern about the adequacy of training programs to equip officers with the skills needed for sensitive interviewing, evidence collection, and victim support. The findings suggest that enhancing specialised training could improve investigative outcomes and victim experiences.

5.2 Recommendations

I have identified through my research that in order to deliver a consistently high standard of RASSO investigation, police forces must:

- Embed consistent and mandatory RASSO training across all ranks, ensuring it is aligned with national standards and operational guidance
- Implement more resourcing and funding into specialist roles and departments to ensure continuity and victim relationship building for higher engagement rates
- Ensure officers receive trauma-informed led training to shift the cultural change in officer bias

5.3 Limitations

Whilst I have been able to conduct a research paper which has captured further recommendations and writing, due to the highly sensitive nature of RASSO investigations,

research into these cases pose numerous ethical challenges which has limited my research project and participant field. Ethical concerns regarding privacy, consent and the potential for traumatization of victims made it difficult for me to gather qualitative data from victims of RASSO, which I believe would have assisted with identifying the real essence of this study; the voice of the victim. Victims may be unwilling or unable to participate in research due to fear of re-living the trauma or concerns regarding confidentiality and safety.

This further produced limits for my research to navigate through complex and sensitive data by accessing records such as medical reports and police records which would give a more direct and reliable result in capturing the issues raised within police RASSO investigations.

5.4 Conclusion

The research surrounding RASSO investigations is crucial to understanding and improving the way in which sexual offences are handled throughout the criminal justice process. However, there are a number of ethical and privacy considerations that limit research capabilities which must be acknowledged and addressed. Under reporting, bias, inconsistent police practices and the ethical challenges all contribute to the difficulties for a deeper, more informed level of research. Understanding these limitations is essential for developing more accurate, comprehensive, and meaningful research that can inform policy, improve investigative practices and ultimately contribute to better outcomes for victims of RASSO cases.

Throughout this paper, I have examined the operational and policing cultural dynamics that underpin RASSO investigations. Whilst it is evident that there have been advancements of note in recent years, through early investigative procedures and a victim centred policing approach, there are still significant challenges which persist.

Victim engagement and support emerged throughout this research project as being a core theme, with continuing high attrition rates causing concern. It further highlighted that the move towards a multi-agency collaboration between police, the CPS, health care professionals and specialist support services, has shown a move in the right direction. However, the consistency of adequately trained professionals vary across each authority, highlighting the need for standardisation, resourcing and continuous professional development.

In respect of investigative culture, the shift from suspect-led to a victim-led approach, as promoted by the Home Office and endorsed in national policies such as Operation Soteria Bluestone, signals a progressive change. However, cultural change within police organisations does take significant time. Investigators, particularly from a drive at leadership level, must continue to challenge outdated attitudes, embrace reflective practice and uphold ethical standards to ensure justice is done and that victims remain at the centre of any investigation.

In conclusion, by strengthening the investigative framework alone is not enough. It continues to demand a cultural commitment to change the way in which policies, ethical bias and investigatory procedures are followed and as research into practices continue to evolve, the ultimate goal of delivering justice whilst minimising harm must remain central. Only by listening to victims, empowering investigators and ensuring accountability at all levels can the system earn and retain public confidence in tackling VAWG and the trust into the management of RASSO cases.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Blank questionnaire form

Rape and Serious Sexual (RASSO) investigations

5 Oct 2025

The purpose of this survey is to help create an understanding of police investigations into RASSO cases, and whether stigma's within the police still remain and contribute to victim attrition.

DISCLAIMER

The purpose of this study is to identify whether officer bias (conscious or unconscious) still remains when dealing with cases of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences, and if these bias's are a contributing factor into the quality of investigation and victim attrition (*the withdrawal of victim support from a police investigation and criminal justice prosecution*). This topic of study is sensitive and may cause participants to feel distressed. If any of the questions cause discomfort or upset, please discontinue the survey and where applicable, contact Occupational Health or TRiM (Trauma Risk Management) where further support is available to officers.

This survey is completely anonymous.

1. Are you happy to proceed with the survey? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

About you

Your information is highly confidential, the following information is for internal research purpose only, all information will not be shared externally.

2. What is your gender?

☐ Woman

☐ Man

☐ Non-binary

☐ Prefer not to say

3. What is your age?

☐ 18 - 25

☐ 26 - 35

☐ 36 - 45

☐ 46 - 55

☐ > 55

4. How many years service do you have in the police? *

☐ 0-6months

☐ 6-12months

☐ 12months - 2years

☐ 2-5years

☐ 5-10years

☐ 10 years +

5. What is your current rank? *

☐ Constable

☐ Sergeant

☐ Inspector

☐ Dectective

☐ Other

Training

6. Please rate your experience of the RASSO input during initial training (1 star being Poor and 5 star being excellent)



7. Please briefly explain the reason for your answer.

8. Have you received specific RASSO training other than from initial training? *

- ☐ Yes, within the last year
- ☐ Yes, more than a year ago
- ☐ No

9. If you have attended specific RASSO training, please detail below the courses or accreditation you have received.

10. Have you ever in your career, been a first responder to a Rape or Serious Sexual Assault (for example, Digital Penetration, Child Sexual Offences, Historic Sexual Abuse etc)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. Has your training to date been delivered on a 'victim-focused' approach? *(This is an investigative method that tests the credibility of the victim rather than focus on the tactics used by an offender in order to identify the true extent of their abuse)*

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Attitudes and Beliefs (Likert Scale)

Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

12. Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) *

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral
Victims of Sexual Assault are often reluctant to report an incident	☐	☐	☐
Some victims lie or embellish the truth for personal gain	☐	☐	☐
A victims previous sexual history should be considered when assessing credibility	☐	☐	☐
Intoxication either through drink and/or drugs reduces the credibility of the victims allegation	☐	☐	☐

Male victims of RASSO are taken as seriously as female victims

☐☐☐

False allegations of rape are common

☐☐☐

All victims of RASSO react to incidents in the same way (*i.e. visibly upset, distressed, and signs of emotional or physical trauma*)

☐☐☐

RASSO does not occur within interpersonal relationships

☐☐☐

Investigation

Please tick all that apply

13. What factors influence your decision to pursue a criminal case when dealing with an incident of RASSO? *

- ☐ Consistency of victims account
- ☐ Physical evidence
- ☐ Forensic evidence
- ☐ Witness accounts
- ☐ Suspects criminal history
- ☐ Date, location and time of incident
- ☐ Victims initial reaction to an incident
- ☐ Sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender or disability of victim
- ☐ Capacity of victim at the time of the alleged offence (*i.e. Intoxication, mental health and life style choices*)

14. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a colleague showing bias during a RASSO investigation?

- ☐ Yes.
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

15. If yes, please explain what you have observed

16. What challenges do front line officers face when completing initial Golden Hour enquiries into RASSO cases? *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral
Resourcing constraints <i>i.e</i> low staffing levels	☐	☐	☐
RASSO cases are not given adequate emergency response times	☐	☐	☐
Lack of funding into specialist departments has an impact on securing vital evidence	☐	☐	☐
Officers are unable to provide adequate care and time to a victim at the point of initial contact due to other policing demands	☐	☐	☐

Victims are
unwilling to
engage

☐☐☐

The gender of
the officer
influences the
level of
engagement
with a victim

☐☐☐

The level of
training given
to officers is
inadequate

☐☐☐

Officers lack of
interest into
RASSO cases

☐☐☐

Response shifts
are young in
service and lack
policing
experience and
knowledge
surrounding
RASSO cases

☐☐☐

17. Do you know what Operation Soteria Bluestone is?

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral
RASSO investigations are a national policing priority	☐	☐	☐
There is still a misogynistic attitude within police culture, surrounding the dealing and management of RASSO cases	☐	☐	☐
The Criminal Justice System re-victimises survivors of RASSO throughout the process	☐	☐	☐

Victims attitudes and beliefs into reporting

19. In your opinion, please rank what you believe to be the main reasons for why victims do not report incidents of RASSO? With 1 being the main reason, and 10 being the lowest influencing factor

Fear of not being believed
Social stigma and influences within communities <i>i.e Cultural beliefs, ethnic minorities etc</i>
Perpetrator influence and control
Trauma or self-blame
Lack of trust in the Criminal Justice System and Police
Fear of being re-victimised and their credibility being tested
Investigations are lengthy and require the victim to relive their experiences repeatedly
Physical constraints <i>i.e lack of childcare, transport etc</i>