The right tool for the job: Evaluating police experiences of a pilot tool for responding to stalking

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Introduction

Stalking is an offence that impacts the lives of many in society, with statistics from the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicating that at least 1 in 10 adult men and 1 in 5 adult women will experience stalking behaviour in their life (Office for National Statistics 2019). While this data emphasises the pervasive nature of stalking, experts believe that the true number of people experiencing stalking may be even higher, with official statistics driven down due to intervening factors that create barriers to the policing of stalking (McEwan et al. 2009; Sheridan and Roberts 2011). Research has highlighted the true risks of violence related to stalking with a recent study by Monckton Smith et al (2017) revealing that out of 358 cases of criminal homicide in which the male was the perpetrator and the victim was a woman, 94% involved stalking. The key behavioural frequencies being; obsession (94%), control (92%), fixation (88%), and escalation (79%). It is estimated that at least 10 people die each week in the United Kingdom from interpersonal violence (Monckton Smith et al 2017), and there is a

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significant call for professionals to investigate complaints further and identify all potential charges available to protect the victim.

In 2017, a joint inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) resulted in the publication of the *Living in Fear* report, which found that police identification of stalking was often subjective and open to errors, resulting in courses of conduct indicating stalking being treated as isolated incidents and not recorded correctly (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire and Rescue Services & Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate 2017). A key recommendation of the HMIC/HMCPSI report was for the UK National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) to work toward 'develop[ing] an evidence-based approach to risk assessment in harassment and stalking crimes' (Ibid.: 17). As part of the subsequent response, one British police service commenced the development of a new Stalking Screening Tool (SST) in conjunction with the NPCC and other stakeholders. The SST aimed to support operational police to identify and respond to stalking, including a standardisation and streamlining of victim safeguarding procedures. This research was conducted with the goal of assessing the efficacy of the SST's implementation in two regional police services in the south of England, Surrey and Sussex Police. While the overall project explored several elements of the SST's implementation, this article focuses on one of the most crucial elements of the tool's rollout: the experience of frontline police officers using the SST in suspected stalking cases.

Background and context

Stalking is a multifaceted and highly complex offence. Despite persistent efforts in recent years to categorise, define and create typologies for such behaviour, a general consensus on how to

respond to stalking remains largely elusive. Lack of consensus has the potential to complicate police objectives to develop a consistent, evidence-based response to stalking in the way recommended by HMICFRS/HMCPSI in the *Living in Fear* report (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire and Rescue Services & Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate 2017). These challenges have been further exacerbated by the emergence of cyberstalking. Messing et al. (2020) assert that 'the criminal justice response to stalking has not kept pace with significant cultural shifts that are a result of information communication technologies' (702). Bliss (2019) emphasises the lack of a rigid statutory definition of cyberstalking in the United Kingdom as a key factor in police (as well as government, and technology platform) failures to adapt to this new, tech-facilitated mode of stalking. Koziarski and Lee (2020) note that lack of access to adequate resources or training is an obstacle to the effective policing of cybercrime, causing officers to not give cybercrimes (like cyberstalking) the high priority status they demand — a result of lack of awareness and/or familiarity. Koziarski and Lee suggest that officers do not have positive perceptions of cybercrime, based on the view that investigating such offences is complex and resource-intensive; nevertheless with clear trend toward an increasing prevalence of tech-facilitated crime, there is a strong argument to be made for developing police capabilities in this area.

There are an array of screening and/or risk assessment models currently utilised by police to respond to stalking around the world, predating the rollout of the pilot SST that is the focus of this study. The Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM) has been described as "the first risk assessment instrument designed specifically for the stalking situation" (Kropp et al, 2011, 302). Early data on SAM indicated 'good concurrent validity' when compared to other measures of violence propensity such as the Psychopathy Checklist Screening Version (PCL:SV) and Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG). Later studies by Belfrage and Strand (2009) seem to validate Kropp et al.'s initial findings: a study of the

application of SAM in Sweden between 2005 and 2006 (n=230 cases) determined that not only was SAM an intuitive checklist that was easy for officers to use, but the validity of the tool was also generally strong. The study showed 'a strong correlation between factors included in the SAM and the degree of risk assessed by police officers … the more SAM risk factors coded by the police officers … the higher the risk assessed for repeated stalking and violence' (Belfrage and Strand 2009, 67).

In a more recent test of SAM's validity, generally positive findings were recorded by Shea et al. (2018), who determined SAM overall had a moderate to good level of discrimination. The study had a major caveat, however: Shea et al. observed that interrater reliability 'was initially poor [when using SAM] but developing a strict definition of stalking currency and rescoring the SAM led to improvement' (2018, 1409). The inference here is that utility of SAM is, in fact, dependent on ancillary training delivered to officers on how to use the tool and, more crucially, clarifying what stalking actually constitutes. The findings support connected research by Viljoen et al. (2018), which also indicates that baseline training before use of a risk assessment tool is a key determinant of efficacy.

McEwan et al. (2011) called for a stalking risk assessment that was more concerned with *variable* dynamic risk factors, such as mapping the temporal distance between threats and actual violence in order to determine level of risk. While asserting the importance of these variable dynamics in stalking cases, however, they also acknowledge the practical difficulties, such as relying on victims and officers to measure and assess in real-time, constantly adjusting and reviewing their response as circumstances shift. This view formed the basis of the development of the Screening Assessment for Stalking and Harassment (SASH) in 2015, designed less as a traditional risk assessment and more as a decision-making aid for police and others working in the field; in this sense, the SASH is one of the most comparable forerunners to the pilot SST. There is evidence to suggest that this tool was largely successful when it came

to guiding police decisions in this area: a study SASH's use in The Netherlands by Hehemann et al. (2017) revealed police filled in the tool in the same way on 80 percent of occasions, indicating that using the SASH streamlined police responses to stalking reports. Recent research by James and Sheridan (2020) supports the need for stalking risk assessment tools that focus on these dynamic factors, especially for frontline, non-expert responders like police officers, allowing them to 'prioritize resources' more effectively (527).

Until recently, the most common screening tool used for stalking offences in the United Kingdom has been the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour-Based violence risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH) and, more specifically, a subsection of stalking-specific screening questions (S-DASH). First developed in 2008 by a multiagency expert panel, the DASH consists of 27 questions designed to facilitate a 'structured professional judgement' as to whether an offender poses low, medium or high risk (Robinson et al. 2016: 2). A study conducted by Robinson et al. on behalf of the College of Policing revealed major problems in the application of the DASH, in spite of there being widespread police support for continued use of the model (or a similar alternative). It was determined that DASH was 'not applied consistently on the frontline' with police often exercising discretion in altering or omitting questions, or not submitting the form at all (Robinson et al. 2016: 1). It was recommended that a new, evidence-based tool be developed to replace the DASH which 'should place greater emphasis of patterns of abusive behaviour … [and that] more thorough risk/needs assessment is best undertaken by those with specialist training' (Ibid.). Again, Robinson et al.'s finding echo those of other researchers who similarly concluded that understanding and application of the tool is vital to success, perhaps even more than the specific design of the tool itself. A regional study of the use of DASH in the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary around the same time yielded comparable results, determining that just four of the 27 risk factors covered by DASH were associated with recidivism or increased

risk: 'criminal history', 'problems with alcohol', 'separation', and 'frightened' (Almond et al. 2017: 58). The remaining risk factors included in the DASH had no correlation with whether or not an offender was likely to reoffend, or continue a course of conduct. This study, conducted by Almond et al. (2017), supports the research of Robinson et al. (2016) and, in turn, explains the push for a new (and improved) SST for use in the United Kingdom.

There are several stages to completing the pilot SST tool that was the central focus of this research. The first stage is to record specific behaviours as reported to police, followed by a section of the SST that requires officers to identify (a) the relationship (if any) between the complainant and the accused, and; (b) if the behaviours reported constitute any of the elements typically associated with stalking — fixation, obsession, unwanted contact, and repeated behaviours. While there is no concrete legal definition of stalking in the United Kingdom, this criteria emanates from the extensive research base on this subject, and is utilised (to some extent) in other similar tools (Robinson et al. 2016; Monckton Smith et al. 2017). Police are then required to identify any 'red flag' behaviours that would trigger urgent action and the development of a risk management plan; the application of this safeguarding protocol constitutes the fourth and final phase of the SST protocols.

Methodology

This study set out to examine the usability of the pilot SST in practice; to understand how officers responded to the SST; to determine if the tool assisted officers in identifying stalking as a course of conduct; and to assess the consistency with which officers were completing the SSTs and associated safeguarding procedures. To fulfil this remit, a mixed method approach was taken, allowing quantitative and qualitative phases to supplement and complement each other as the research progressed.

The data presented in this article was derived from the second and third phases of the project. The second phase consisted of a survey circulated within the two police force's piloting the SST, and was completed by N=102 police officers. The demographics of respondents included police officers with a diversity of service lengths, allowing for greater ability to evaluate the SST's implementation. The third phase of the research involved one-hour-long qualitative interviews with ten (N=10) police officers with experience using the SST across both of the subject police forces. An equal number of interviewees was chosen from each force (i.e. N=5 from Surrey, N=5 from Sussex). Interviewees were asked a set of twelve (12) questions about their understanding of stalking, cyberstalking and experience using the SST. These questions were developed by the research team in collaboration with the College of Policing, and were informed by the findings of the survey carried out in the first research phase.

The research took place over the period of the Covid-19 pandemic (January 2021 to April 2021) and, as such, the research team was limited by ongoing travel restrictions. All interviews were conducted via teleconferencing software Zoom. The interviews were automatically transcribed using this software in real-time, and manually cleaned after to ensure accuracy. These transcripts were uploaded onto thematic analysis platform Dedoose, a double-encrypted tool used by academic and professional research services. After being uploaded to Dedoose, the transcripts were thematically coded, clustered and analysed. Seven hundred and thirty-nine codes were applied. This process enabled the research team to generate new insights and concepts derived from the data collected from the interview process with front line officers (Radburn et al. 2022). Recruitment involved purposive sampling, with the officers being invited to interview via their forces e-mail account.

Ethics

The research instruments and materials utilised in this study were all designed by the academic research team, in consultation with and with the approval of the UK College of Policing. The

research was conducted in three stages, and for each stage, ethical approval was sought internally, and full institutional clearance granted. Written consent was obtained for the interviews to be recorded, using Zoom, and the identities of officers and key stakeholders anonymised. The research conducted conformed to the ethical guidance of the British Psychological Society, British Sociological Association, and Health and Care Professions Council.

Findings

Data analysis stage:

The research conducted in this evaluation consisted of three phases. The first phase involved an analysis of secondary data supplied by police forces, with an objective to better understand how the rate of stalking offences recorded changed after the piloting of the SST began and data which allowed for comparison between stalking offences recorded and charges laid annually from 2018 to 2020. This data partially informed the subsequent phase, the online survey which is presented below.

Officer Survey:

The second phase of research consisted of an anonymous survey of officers from Surrey and Sussex Police (N=102). This survey covered a range of relevant subtopics related to stalking and the SST itself. When it comes to findings relevant to the current article, Table 2 reflects officer confidence levels in recognising stalking behaviours.

Confidence in identifying stalking

The initial series of questions focused on establishing officer's sense of confidence in responding to stalking reports. In the following table, levels of confidence when distinguishing between stalking and harassment was self-reported by officers, and broken down based on years of service.

<<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

Importantly from a safeguarding perspective, a total of 93 percent of officers responded that they were confident in identifying when a case fell into the category of high-risk, and 97 percent were confident that they knew when to refer a stalking case to a supervisor for further action. Though slightly lower, 70 percent of officers expressed confidence in knowing when to use stalking-specific powers. The lowest confidence rates involved cyberstalking, where only 61 percent of officers were confident that they understood what the offence constituted, and 69 percent reporting understanding of the risks of cyberstalking. Additional questioning further supports this as a challenging area.

<<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

Asked how difficult they found it to identify harmful stalking behaviour, 94 percent of officers either disagreed or strongly disagreed, again indicating confidence in this area. However, when asked the same question in relation to cyberstalking, only 72 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed — a 22 percent point drop.

<<TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>>

In-depth officer interviews:

The final phase of research referred to in this article involved qualitative interviews with ten (N=10) police officers with experience using the SST. Twelve questions were asked in these hour-long semi-structured interviews. Sample responses to relevant questions include the following.

Q: How do you use the SST?

In relation to this question, the majority of officers agreed that the tool was a useful prompt, but that much was still left up to an officer's individual discretion.

Responses included:

> *We would probably be overly cautious, and I am. I [have] spoken to officers as well, if you go 'This is a bit borderline so I'm just gonna put in a stalking [report] and someone else can downgrade at later [Officer ID:3]*

And:

> *You know you might be tempted to [...note what the victim says] and then sort of move on, rather than asking too many questions but the tool prompts you to sort of ask the right questions and if there are any ongoing issues, identify them [Officer ID:1]*

Q: In your view, what are the strengths of the tool?

Most officers interviewed believed that, overall, the SST was a positive addition to their professional practice and that it helped to identify stalking and was straight-forward to use:

> *You don't really miss anything ... and [the SST] prompts you to ask questions, maybe [you] wouldn't have asked, or that the victim hasn't thought of being a problem [Officer ID:4]*

And:

> *[It] makes you realize, oh actually [it] is a stalking and maybe you wouldn't have marked as stalking before [Officer ID:5]*

Other comments reflected the majority view that the SST was most useful for officers who were less experienced in handling staking cases, such as:

> *It's very clear cut, so especially [useful] for someone who isn't trained in the complex crime [Officer ID:8]*

Q: What are the weaknesses/limitations of tool?

Responses regarding weaknesses, ranged from a lack of training before using the tool, and the

potential for human error. One officer noted about the SST:

> *It's only as good as what information we're putting in, and then the assessment you make from that afterwards, and it is still going to be subjective to each officer and their kind of rationale [Officer ID:3]*

As in the survey phase of this study, training to use the SST in the first place was also noted as

a shortcoming in the tool's implementation:

> *I don't think we got we got any [training], I'm pretty sure we got an email, and something on the Intranet, saying this new form's coming in, it's a pilot, you need to do it when you go to a stalking... it was just like this is the new thing, go do it, which unfortunately isn't uncommon in policing [Officer ID:4]*

Q: How does the SST enable you to fully understand isolated incidents of stalking to determine an emerging pattern of behaviour and potential increase in risk?

Officers were divided on whether or not the SST assisted in the practical identification of

patterns of behaviour indicating stalking. Officers who believed it was not useful were of the

general opinion police should not have to rely on structured tools to guide their investigatory

process and, as such, the SST was not a necessary addition to frontline policework. However,

officers who agreed with the proposition made in this question noted that the tool was useful

insomuch as it helped frame their questioning by providing explicit prompts for further

investigation:

> *I think, because the questions are asking ... about the previous things, and any other things have been going on, so sometimes you get sucked into what's going on right now. You know you might be tempted to just sort of take that and then sort of move on, rather than asking too many questions but the tool prompts you to sort of ask the right questions and, if there are any ongoing issues, identify them [Officer ID:4]*

Discussion

Whilst acknowledging the external factors that have impacted on this study (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic), the results indicate that, though the reporting of stalking has increased since the SST's introduction, charge rates across the sample forces have decreased by between 2 percent and 10 percent over the three years since 2018. While it is difficult to ascertain the impact of the SST's implementation on this data, due to the short period in which it has been in use, there is nevertheless a number of potential explanations for this data. The rise in recorded stalking reports may suggest that a greater awareness and confidence generated across officers of all experience has had an impact on police outcomes, resulting in more reported cases being identified and subsequently recorded as stalking rather than as another offence, such as harassment. This greater awareness among police was no doubt enabled (at least in part) by the emphasis placed on stalking within British policing after the release of the HMICFRS/HMCPSI *Living in Fear* report in 2017. Historically speaking, prior to recent amendments in Home Office counting rules (Office for National Statistics 2021), the police were able to record first or, otherwise, less severely perceived instances of stalking under the offence of harassment, as defined under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (Home Office 1997). The burden of proof required under this act is easier to meet and, importantly, it does not rely on specific knowledge of the stalking offence. However, despite this change, and despite a clear increase in reports of stalking, these reports have not translated into a proportional increase in stalking charges.

It could be that evidential decision-makers – those that can confirm stalking charges – are not satisfied with the quality of evidence available, that police discretion is used in these cases (Schulenberg 2015) or that stalking suspects are undetectable because their identities are unknown or unclear. This was a point noted by officers who were interviewed in the current study: several registered frustration about the difficulties of obtaining evidence to sustain

stalking charges, as well describing 'a lack of awareness as you move through the criminal justice system of what we can actually get in terms of the evidence … we try [to] get everything and then there's obviously a lot of drop off [after handing over the prosecutors]' [Officer ID:3]. Equally, legislative changes, such as the introduction of controlling or coercive behaviour as a statutory offence in December 2015, also effected how specific reports were categorized, particularly when it comes to offender-victim relationships where an intimate relationship previously (or, even, currently) existed (Home Office 2021). The lower charge rates may correlate to a lack of a digital evidential awareness – needed to reach the charging threshold (Watt and Slay 2015). The culture of police teams working in these role-related silos are likely to have an impact on the SST's functionality too, potentially increasing the risk to victims as well as undermining the aims of the tool and hindering stalking investigations in the longer term (Kenney, White, and Ruffinengo 2010).

Open to learn?: The question of experience and heuristics

In the interview phase, a majority of police officers suggested the SST was more appropriate for officers earlier in their service. In most cases this indicated officers within their probationary period, ranging from zero to two years' service, but some participants clarified suitable application beyond this timeframe, up to five years' service. The common narrative expressed for this perceived inadequacy during the interviews was that police officers with more service had a better grasp and understanding of stalking legislation and, therefore, had less need of a tool intended to enhance awareness — a core aim of the SST. This rhetoric was largely consistent across officers who participated in this phase of the study, regardless of their own length of service. The belief that longer-serving officers already held a strong ability to identify and respond to stalking is at clear odds with the HMICFRS/HMCPSI *Living in Fear* report, which found that 'stalking in particular was misunderstood by the police and CPS

[Crown Prosecution Service] … As a result, it often went unrecognised' (2017, 7). This would indicate that – as recently as three years before the current study – the relationship between experience and ability to respond to stalking was not in evidence, counter to officers' prevailing views.

Of those surveyed in Phase Two, 13 percent were probationers and a further 31 percent had under five years' service. Considering the officers' claims in later interviews that the SST was most appropriate for newer officers, this means that 44 percent of those surveyed were within the desirable demographic. Further interrogation of the survey data revealed a disparity with the perceptions expressed in the interviews with serving police, with probationers self-identifying as more confident in recognising stalking behaviours. Conversely, one 'more experienced' officer asserted that some probationers take a formulaic approach of asking 'bare basic' questions and moving on swiftly, whereas experienced officers were more likely to ask follow-up questions that could offer additional relevant insight on the events being reported [Officer ID:1]. From this officer's perspective, this was a practice that came from on-the-job experience, in contrast to the more conceptual knowledge of stalking that is developed in a formal police education setting.

Learning to use the tool: accounting for police training to use the SST

The majority of officers claimed to have received very little training in using the tool. In fact, 50 percent of officers surveyed claimed to have received no training whatsoever on the SST from their force. This may seem remarkable when the higher confidence levels, described previously, are considered; however, officer confidence may not necessarily translate into desirable policing outcomes – especially when, judicial outcomes such as reports-to-charges conversion rates in the pilot forces are on the decline. The majority of those who received force-

led training were trained using an e-learning package equating to 36 percent of officers surveyed, leaving just 14 percent of officers who received trainer-led, face-to-face, or webinar sessions. The implications and effectiveness of using e-learning as a primary means of training delivery are well documented (Elkins and Pinder 2015; Lee and Duncan-Howell 2007) and this could have had a significant impact on the research findings. In terms of perceived operational effectiveness in the application of training, 46 percent considered the training they received to be ineffective for their role, with a further 26 percent describing it as somewhat effective.

One hypothesis arising from this research is that probationary and otherwise less experienced officers, having recently attended their initial training, have more recently studied relevant stalking legislation and this could, therefore, account for their increased confidence levels on stalking cases, in spite of the shortfall in specific instruction on the SST itself. However, an examination of the training curriculums for those police forces who participated in the pilot revealed that stalking legislation and behaviours are not directly covered for new officers. A subsequent inference is that probationary officers are more open to learning and development and, as a result, engage with the process more easily. The Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) applies to all police forces and requires student police officers to study to at least degree level over their first two-to-three years after joining the force. This professionalization of the workforce aims to prepare officers for the complexities of modern policing (College of Policing 2020). Previously, this was not a requirement for traditional police entry routes and, thus, more experienced officers may not have such an established grounding in practices such as applied critical thinking.

For balance, some research suggests inadequacies in police training, suggesting that formal police training or academic attainment has little impact on the application of initiatives (Brown 2018; Fielding 2018). Also that police officers will often claim to have received inadequate training when facing criticism over professional errors like the failure to identify risk and

provide adequate safeguarding for victims (Porter and Prenzler 2012), which has particular relevance to stalking cases. Despite challenges in police training, there is little doubt that the reported training provision for the SST calls the efficacy of the tool's rollout into doubt — with so many officers receiving little, if any, direct training. Thus it is difficult to ascertain if shortcomings of the tool are attributable to its design, to the officers applying it, or an institutional failure to appropriately train those officers to use the SST.

Filling the gaps: identified areas for strengthening the SST

As with any empirical measure, the SST presents a risk that gaps in its design may impact on its validity and reliability. While it is impossible to account for the multivariate nature of stalking entirely in an operational tool like the SST, this research revealed several notable omissions in the tool's design that had a practical impact in frustrating the ability of officers to accurately complete the document and, in some respects, shaped which specific types of stalking are flagged during the screening process and (conversely) which stalking modes may be at risk of being overlooked by frontline officers because they are not included in the very instrument they are asked to use to identify the offence. One of the first areas probed in the SST is the relationship between the victim and their alleged stalker, with the tool offering a selection of four specific 'relationship types' that officers may choose from: ex-intimate, acquaintance, identified stranger and unknown. The importance of relationship types to stalking is well-documented, and establishing previous or existing connections is a routine aspect of risk assessment in this area (McEwan and Davis 2020).

Qualitative interviews with officers using the SST revealed a division between those who believed the current four relationship subcategories were sufficient, and those who believed they could be improved. Of those who believed this area of the SST could be enhanced,

concerns were raised that the existing subcategories did not account for types of stalking relationship that were encountered by frontline officers and, in particular, did not recognise stalkers who had an existing relationship with the victim, such as a current partner or family member. Officers indicated that the prescriptive nature of the check-box design here didn't 'allow you to put in that they are still in a relationship … which I think is quite informative that that person is often going to still be at risk of further stalking' [Officer ID:2]. Confusion around how to categorise behaviours where an ongoing or previous intimate relationship exists may be further complicated by changes to the law included in the Domestic Abuse Bill 2020, in which the parameters of coercive control were extended to include former partners, not just current relationships; though there is a reasonable rationale for this amendment, a supplementary impact may be further officer confusion over whether behaviours occurring in the context of an existing relationship should be categorised as stalking or not.

Though officers raised concerns about the prescriptive structure of the relationship categories featured in the SST, previous research suggests police use of freetext sections on instruments like the SST has been inconsistent in the past: in Myhill and Wire's (2018) study of a pilot domestic abuse frontline assessment tool they found that providing more opportunities to clarify using freetext did not result in more rationale being provided, indicating that simply adding the option to clarify was not a viable solution. Again, it is impossible to include an exhaustive list of relationship types in a screening tool such as the SST, yet the inclusion of a broad subcategory recognising an ongoing, current relationship that goes beyond 'Acquaintance' would not be an onerous addition and, perhaps, address the risks presented by existing gaps.

Aside from the potential gap in the relationship subcategory section, perhaps a more concerning omission is explicit reference to technologically-facilitated offending, or cyberstalking. This was an issue initially raised in the early quantitative survey phase where it became apparent

that officers who responded were significantly less confident in handling cyberstalking cases than they were with traditional, proximal stalking: whereas 94 percent of officers reported being either extremely confident or confident in identifying stalking offending behaviours, this number dropped to 61 percent confidence when asked about cyberstalking specifically. In subsequent qualitative interviews, officers identified the constantly changing landscape of cyberstalking as a key reason for lack of confidence when it comes to this specific version of stalking: one officer noted that, unlike proximal offending, cyberstalking is 'changing and it's becoming more sophisticated and we, the police, are always three or four steps behind' [Officer ID:7]. In addition to identifying particular digital platforms which have, in the officers' experience, posed challenges for stalking investigations (such as SnapChat, where messages automatically delete) there was also concern raised that cyberstalking is perpetrated by a fundamentally different type of offender to that which police are used to: as mentioned previously, police are most used to dealing with ex-intimate stalkers but note that 'the stranger element' of cyberstalking is what 'scares' them most about this emerging offence type [Officer ID:2]. The police view that cyberstalking is more prone to the stranger-stalker subcategory is at odds with Cavezza and McEwan's comparative study, which found that cyberstalkers were more likely to be ex-intimate partners at a rate of 75 percent of cyberstalkers versus 47 percent of proximal stalkers (Cavezza and McEwan 2014). Further, the perception of the cyberstalker as a distinct offender type is also at odds with research conducted by Messing et al. (2020) which suggested overlap of in-person and tech-facilitated behaviours in (ex-)intimate partner stalking cases. This is an area worthy of further exploration, to determine whether the demographic characteristics of cyberstalking have begun to shift since Cavezza and McEwan's study, or whether false perceptions about the profile of a cyberstalker exist among police.

Apart from recommending further training on cyberstalking, officers also openly said that 'there needs to be a question about cyberstalking in the SST and then it might lead them [the

responding officer] to different questions' [Officer ID:4]. It seems here that the officer is alluding (intentionally or otherwise) to a tool with a comparable structure to the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour-based violence (DASH), also used by police to address stalking. In the DASH, a further tool called the S-DASH is used when stalking is initially identified, allowing for a more directed and offence-specific probative inquiry (McEwan, Pathé, and Ogloff 2011; Robinson et al. 2016) Although the S-DASH was criticised in the HMICFRS/HMCPSI *Living in Fear* report for not reflecting the real impact of stalking behaviour and subsequent safeguarding needs (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire and Rescue Services & Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate 2017), the absence of reference to cyberstalking in this SST risks achieving the same result and, as such, the police suggestion of an ancillary cyber-specific instrument in the stye of the S-DASH, triggered by a question in the initial screening tool, should certainly be considered as a way to resolve this gap.

Conclusion

For both police and victims, the efficacy of this tool is of considerable importance: as a mandatory mechanism for officers to use in suspected or reported stalking cases, a well-designed tool will likely result in improved outcomes and risk mitigation that will protect the safety of stalking victims. Conversely, if the SST were ascertained to be poorly designed, the negative impact may hold equally detrimental implications for victims and, indeed, place them at a greater level of risk. One of the key elements identified in this study was the foundational question of who benefits most from the use of a guided screening tool like the SST being piloted. Whereas interviews with officers (many of whom specialists in stalking offences) indicated the overwhelming perspective that the SST was of more use to a less experienced officer than their senior colleagues, the results of the larger survey suggested otherwise: this

data suggested that probationary officers and those with less than five years' service were considerably more confident on these matters than those with more experience. Further research is required as to whether the confidence of junior officers in handling stalking cases is reflected in practical outcomes, particularly when compared to before the SST was introduced.

Additionally, the research revealed a concern about the training that accompanied the introduction of the SST. A considerable number of officers did not receive any training to use the SST, while only a minority of 14 percent received direct instruction (as opposed to e-learning packages). Questions over the effectiveness of police training aside, the result of this was a sense of unpreparedness among officers which undoubtedly influenced their view of the SST itself, and their confidence in it as a tool which could assist in their duties. In the view of the officers who participated in this research, a more concerted effort to provide adequate training to use tools like the SST would increase understanding of the topic, as well as (importantly) investment and understanding of how it may assist them in a practical setting. Finally, exploration of officers' experiences using the tool revealed several areas of the SST's design which obstructed frontline responders from documenting the facts of the case they were dealing with in a full and thorough way. Of particular note was the omission of an 'Existing Relationship' category from the SST's relationship types, to account for stalking carried out by offenders who were current partners or family members of the victim, which was not included on the pilot version of the SST. Further, officers expressed concerns around the SST's lack of focus on non-proximal behaviours like cyberstalking, which they noted was one of the key methods of stalking in their practical experience. Lesser understanding of cyberstalking, compared to traditional proximal stalking, was registered in the survey phase of the study, emphasising the need for its inclusion in a guided decision-making tool like the SST.

Overall, the reported experience of officers involved in piloting the new SST discussed in this article indicates a clear willingness to engage with new tools designed to improve police responses to stalking. However, in spite of this, there remain barriers to full investment in the tool. These barriers include the perception that the SST is primarily (or, even, only) useful to less experienced officers, as a substitute for discretion rather than a useful tool for guided decision-making for all officers, no matter their length of service. Another barrier is the officers' common perception that they had not received adequate training on the use or purpose of the SST. While there may still be debate over the efficacy of police training (or the effectiveness of e-learning versus in-person instruction), what there is little doubt about is that when police officers self-report that they feel undertrained, their confidence and investment in using a tool like the SST is impacted as a result. Finally, there is an opportunity to learn from the experience of officers piloting this version of the SST, and to attend to their feedback on potential gaps in a revised version of the tool. This is, ultimately, the purpose of a pilot program and, as such, it is imperative that this feedback is taken into account. Should this be the case, the result will unquestionably be an SST that is improved based on the feedback of those practitioners in the unique position of having used it in a real-world context, emphasising issues that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. To learn from law enforcement practitioners in such a way is invaluable, and will prove of great benefit not just in terms of improving the SST, but also in improving outcomes for victims of stalking through empirical, evidence-based police research.

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Figures and Tables

Length of service	Extremely confident	Confident	Unconfident	Extremely unconfident	Grand Total
Probationers	4%	9%	0%	0%	13%
Under 5 years	10%	19%	1%	1%	31%
5 - 10 years	4%	11%	0%	0%	15%
10 - 15 years	4%	14%	0%	0%	18%
15- 20 years	3%	12%	0%	0%	15%
20 + years	0%	6%	1%	0%	8%
Grand Total	**26%**	**71%**	**2%**	**1%**	**100%**

Table 1: Level of confidence in identifying stalking behaviours

How confident are you	Extremely confident	Confident	Unconfident	Extremely unconfident
The difference between stalking and harassment	28%	68%	2%	2%
The legislation relating to stalking and harassment	19%	73%	7%	1%
When to use Stalking Specific Power	16%	55%	28%	1%
When a reported case is high risk	46%	49%	5%	1%
How to identify patterns in stalking offending behaviours	32%	62%	5%	1%
Cyberstalking	16%	45%	35%	3%
Risks of cyberstalking	13%	56%	25%	3%
How stalking reports are managed by your force	24%	54%	16%	5%
When to refer a case to your supervisor	48%	49%	2%	1%

Table 2: Level of officer confidence

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I find it difficult to identify harmful stalking behaviour	0%	6%	72%	22%
I find it difficult to understand cyberstalking behaviour	1%	27%	59%	13%
I find it difficult to determine levels of risk when conducting a risk assessment	1%	10%	63%	26%

Victims are given unrealistic expectations	7%	30%	57%	3%
Legislation limits my police powers to act	11%	22%	59%	7%
I find it difficult to know when to do a safeguarding plan	0%	7%	56%	37%

Table 3: Barriers to effectively responding to stalking reports