



## **Refocusing rape investigations: a commentary on research supporting Operation Soteria Bluestone**

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# Refocusing Rape Investigations: A Commentary on Research Supporting Operation Soteria Bluestone

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## Abstract

This paper presents a commentary on the academic research that was undertaken in support of a pilot project in Avon and Somerset Constabulary to develop a new rape investigation model, Operation Soteria Bluestone. A five-pillar approach re-oriented investigative practice towards suspect focussed case building whilst maintaining support for complainants. In addition, organisation enablers were developed to enhance specialist training, intelligent use of data, and promoting officer welfare and wellbeing. The empirical papers addressed various aspects of the five Pillars. Proof of concept, conduciveness of the political, economic, and social environment, and connectivity with other associated work were employed as appraisal criteria. There is much to commend in the proposed model but the absence of research on suspects and offenders, given their prominence in the model's new direction, together with the lack of a strong implementation framework, are omissions that hopefully will be addressed in the future.

**Keywords** Rape · Sexual assault · Policing · Police reform · Justice response

## Introduction

The police's response to complaints of rape has been criticized in many jurisdictions over several decades (Jordan, 2023; Kelly et al., 2005; Wentz & Keimig, 2019) and much effort has been expended in designing and evaluating new models of police investigation (Powell and Wright, 2012; Campbell et al., 2020). Yet the academic partners in what are often collaborative efforts with the police remain rather sanguine about the success of these joint ventures (see e.g. reflective essays by Jordan, (2023) of New Zealand attempts at reform and Campbell, (2023) of her work in the United States.

The set of papers in this special issue outlines the first tranche of outputs from a current police-academic collaboration between the Avon and Somerset Constabulary in the Southwest of England and five university research teams. Called Project Bluestone, the central tenet is to improve justice outcomes for victim/survivors of rape. Bluestone is primarily aimed at refocussing police efforts by shifting

the emphasis from victim credibility testing towards directing greater investigative effort at suspect case building. It has subsequently informed the design and delivery of a national programme, Operation Soteria Bluestone, which is working closely with additional police forces to develop a national operating model for policing rape and serious sexual offences.

The stimulus for developing Project Bluestone follows a familiar pattern: growing concerns about low reporting rates, poor investigative practices, and declining conviction rates, often piqued by a particular case that occasions public outrage and loss of confidence in police and demands for reform (Jordan, 2023). As Jordan (2011, p. 245) wryly observed “reviews come, reviews go, and women are still raped. Few cases reach courts and when they do often result in the alleged offender being acquitted whilst the victim today, like victims yesterday, continue to feel as if they are the ones on trial”.

And here we are again. The UK Government's End-to-End Rape Review (HM Government, 2021) states that the criminal justice system (CJS) is, still, failing those experiencing a rape in England and Wales. Whilst prevalence of rape has not changed, reported incidence rates have increased, currently about 43,000, yet only three percent of adult rape offences assigned a police outcome in 2019/20

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were charged or summonsed. The review further states “The criminal justice system has not pursued investigations and prosecutions, which has caused a decline in the number of cases going to court. ... Prosecutions and convictions for adult rape have fallen by 59% and 47% respectively since 2015/16” (p. 3). Similar reviews with common findings have been conducted in New Zealand (Jordan, 2011) and Australia (Powell and Wright, 2012).

What the papers in this special issue do, is to provide the academic groundings for some of the constituent parts of the Bluestone model. The papers do not provide a detailed exposition of process i.e. how the constituent parts fit together as an operational protocol. So, the questions that this commentary seeks to address are as follows:

- What are the recurring problems that need to be addressed in developing a new model of investigative practice?
- Whether the papers provide an adequate evidence base for the constituent parts of the model, and
- Whether the Soteria Bluestone model stands a greater chance of success in overcoming persistent shortcomings than its many predecessors?

## Recurring Problems

Previous reforms in the UK concentrating on upskilling police officers and prosecutors can be traced back to 1982 when the late Roger Graef produced a Fly on the Wall documentary in Thames Valley Police. The broadcast, in which a rape victim was clearly disbelieved, subjected to oppressive questioning by the police to test her credibility, and encouraged to drop her case because of their assumption there was little chance a prosecution would succeed, is unfortunately still in evidence today. The improvements that followed the broadcast included the movement of forensic examinations out of the police station to specially designated Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) the first opening in 1986. Now there are 43 across the country commissioned by NHS England in partnership with Police and Crime Commissioners (Brooker et al., 2018). This reform took 30 years to be embedded across England and Wales. So herein lies one recurring problem: the time lag for good practice to be recognised and rolled out nationally.

The Joint Inspection review by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Crown Prosecution Inspectorate (2002) drew attention to the need to improve officer competencies when investigating rape and for prosecutors to receive additional training. Of note was the review’s observation that undue focus was spent on considerations of the victim’s credibility by officers rather than them playing a more proactive role in seeking information to build a

stronger case against the suspect. A second joint thematic review, published in 2007, still found variations in quality of investigations and inconsistencies in recording practices, especially early ‘no criming’ decisions which effectively discontinued police action. A similar practice was observed in the United States with the exceptional clearance designation whereby police officers choose to close reported complaints where probable cause for an arrest exists but, because of circumstances beyond the control of law enforcement, an arrest is not made (Pattavina et al., 2021) Thus, another recurring problem is lack of investigative effort to improve quality of the evidential bases for case referral to the prosecuting authority (in England and Wales this is the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)). The no criming issue was revisited by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (2014), especially in relation to sexual offences. The Inspectorate reported that the “national rate of under-recording of sexual offences (including rapes) as crimes was 26%, and the national rate of incorrect decisions to no-crime rapes was 20%. In the case of rape, no-crime decisions, [for] 22% of cases there was no evidence that the police informed the complainant of their decision. These are wholly unacceptable failings” (p. 19). The advice then to the Police Service was to design better systems for rape investigation.

In 2015, Dame Elish Angiolini was reviewing investigative and prosecution practices again, this time in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), and again recommending not only strengthening support for victims but also for the investigating officers. The Angiolini review also noted (p. 57) that a police Special Notice from 2002 (11/02) set out the principles of rape investigation which stated that, “it is the policy of the MPS to accept allegations made by the victim in the first instance as being truthful”. This was an attempt to shift from the victim credibility checking approach. Angiolini however cautioned that it is more appropriate for criminal justice practitioners to remain “utterly professional at all times and to demonstrate respect, impartiality, empathy and to maintain an open mind.... [and that] ‘always believing’ the complainant may prejudice the impartiality of the officer’s role and lead to their failing to recognise or give weight to other evidence inconsistent with the complainant’s account.” (p. 57).

The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from these previous reviews is that reforms have not worked. In Stern’s (2010) view, two of the key problems are implementation failure and lack of resourcing. Walby et al. (2015) set out a strategic plan to address such concerns with a whole systems approach. This involves a strategy that encompasses international, national, as well as local levels of intervention. The national action plan should co-ordinate all aspects of service provision; have specialisation for victim/survivors; develop a knowledge base by researching data in order to evaluate policy; and change cultural norms and attitudes.

Brown and Horvath (2023) also advocate the necessity for a conducive economic and political environment in which there is sustainability of commitment to effect and maintain changes over time. Jordan (2011) too suggests that barriers to substantive as opposed to superficial change are the social and political environments within which the investigation and prosecution of rape occur. Jordan argues that the State owes an obligation to those who have suffered violent crime, and should, therefore, preside over an effectively resourced justice system that addresses the needs of victims as well as perpetrators. Those needs include the social validation of victims. The attitudes held within police organisations reflect wider societal beliefs as well as institutional influences. Identification of a widespread culture of scepticism within police organisations was recognised by commentators analysing the New Zealand Police's responses to the multiple allegations of officer sexual misconduct that gave rise to the Bazley Commission of Inquiry (Bazley, 2007). Moreover, when implementing an innovative model in policing, MacQueen and Bradford (2017) conclude that maintaining the fidelity to the model's principles and awareness of the organisational environment are key to success.

Given the acknowledged failures of the CJS in improving its approach to rape some new thinking and creation of a different model is both timely and necessary... enter Soteria Bluestone. The challenge for this model is to overcome these previous shortcomings: Can Project Bluestone.

- inject specialist knowledge that is offender centric whilst simultaneously treating the complainant well;
- specify some theoretical foundational principles drawn from academic inputs;
- provide support for the investigating officers;
- improve record keeping;
- undertake formative research into police rape data;
- transform cultural norms that are inimicable to effective investigation;
- achieve better justice outcomes for complainants/victims/survivors;
- create the necessary implementation conditions for successful roll out.

Before addressing these issues, the next section provides a brief description of the model.

## The Five-Pillar Approach of Project Bluestone

In the opening paper, Hohl and Stanko reiterate the failings of the present investigation models. They propose the way out of the impasse of the Jordan review-go-round is to change the question from why is rape so difficult to

investigate to why do police find it difficult to investigate? This change of orientation leads to the proposed five-pillar approach, namely changing the focus of policing investigative practice by placing greater emphasis on the suspect (pillar 1) and disrupting repeat offenders (pillar 2), together with greater complainant engagement (pillar 3) and by adding organizational enablers, i.e. a focus on officer learning, development, and wellbeing together (pillar 4) with an intelligent use of data (pillar 5).

The substantive articles lay out the theoretical and evidential basis for three of the five pillars. Greater complainant engagement is underpinned by principles of procedural justice aiming to give voice, dignity and respect, neutrality, and trustworthiness to a police investigation, which as noted above were found to be partial at best or absent at worst (Hohl, Johnson and Mulisso). Officer learning was examined through a review of the current state of training which was found to be generic rather than specialist. Support for officers was patchy and there was little time given for continual professional development (CPD) (Williams et al.). Data usage was explored by analysing pinch points which prolonged the complainant's journey through the justice system (Lovett et al.). They found record keeping was incomplete and inaccurate. Specialism was identified as most appropriate for officer learning (Dalton et al.) who also laid out the broad parameters for the new investigative model. Reflective practice is proposed as the means to develop on-going expertise and support investigators (Norman et al.). They define reflective practice as providing opportunities for professionals to consciously learn from experience, prompting analysis of problems to provide solutions drawing on knowledge already possessed. They also suggest that reflective practice should operate at the individual level as well as wider by considering the societal, culture, and institutional constraints in which they work.

The studies are very much 'work in progress' providing the grounding for the model rather than an evaluation of its efficacy or its cost effectiveness. However, there is much that holds the promise of addressing the shortcomings enumerated earlier, especially enhanced analytics to aid investigations, reflective practice to disrupt adverse aspects of the police occupational culture and the provision of emotional and supervisory support for officers. But there is a sense of déjà vu and some significant omissions. Pillar one re-directs investigative focus towards the suspect and Pillar two is aimed at disruption of repeat offending i.e. the offender-centric approach. When James Daly MP was questioning Max Hill the Director of Public Prosecutions during the Home Affairs Select Committee investigation into rape, he rather incredulously said:

“When you come in front of us and say that the police should have an offender-centric approach and that's

a revolution—an offender-centric approach? I am staggered that that hasn't been the way these matters have been approached for the last however long it has been. If you do not take into account the nature of the offender—and one of the things that you actually said, which is extremely significant, is that you seemed to suggest that instead of actually concentrating an investigation on what the offender has done, the police seem to be concentrating on the character and nature of the complaint".<sup>1</sup>

Vera Baird, the UK's Victims Commissioner is of the same view (2021, p. 12) "it remains remarkable to me that police need to be instructed to investigate the suspect, not the victim". This was identified in the Roger Graef's documentary forty year ago and a switch of focus was commented up by an HMIC review in 2002, twenty years ago, and still this practice persists. Given that offender-centric investigation is such a critical part of the Bluestone 'revolution' and the apparent intractable task of shifting the police's investigative focus, the omission of papers covering these aspects is serious and regrettable. Whilst the paper by Lovett et al. undertakes secondary analysis of the timeline in the investigative stages, (use of police data as suggested by pillar five) there is nothing that explores and exploits the considerable knowledge about suspects and offenders embedded in the data (pillar two). Analysis of this asset will discover more about patterns of offending and characteristics of the offender and yet this was not part of the early projects. Similarly, profiles of victims/survivors and a matching of these profiles with suspect characteristics would have been critical plank in the refocussing of investigative practice.

The remainder of this article tries to assess the necessary conditions which would herald the success in improving justice outcomes by means of the Bluestone project namely:

- Proof of concept (does the Bluestone concept work?)
- Conducive environment (are the political, economic, and social conditions aligned?)
- Co-ordination (has communication within policing as well as externally been optimized?)

## Proof of Concept

The Bluestone investigative model being proposed draws on and strengthens trace elements that can be found in previous reviews and enquiries such as specialised knowledge (Ashworth & Gee, 2011; Westmarland et al., 2012); emotional

support for officers (Angiolini, 2015); care for complainants (Stern, 2010); proactive case building for forwarding to the CPS (HMIC/HMCPI, 2002); exploiting data to create new knowledge (Walby et al., 2015); and improving crime recording practices (HMIC, 2014). The novel aspects of the proposed model are to bring all these elements together built on strong theoretical underpinnings, procedural justice, and to inculcate reflective practice into the working model.

The Queensland Community Engagement Trial showed that principles of procedural justice (PJ) can not only be taught, but also alter officers' style of interaction and communication to positively influence attitudes towards the police (Mazerolle et al., 2012). Yet transferring PJ principles into learning and application to practice do not always work (MacQueen & Bradford, 2017). They were instrumental in applying a PJ influenced intervention for safer driving over a Christmas period in Scotland. However, the intervention failed to reproduce the Queensland positive results. MacQueen and Bradford found that programme fidelity problems and failure to appreciate the organisational context featured in the unsuccessful implementation. Programme fidelity requires appropriate adherence to the planned design; amount of exposure to the proposed model; quality of the delivery of the new learning; participant responsiveness; and completeness of the information about the new model. At the time of their trial, Police Scotland had been re-organised and had been subject to external criticism for operational failures. A staff survey revealed officers felt under-resourced with a poor work/life balance, undervalued with senior management failing to recognise staff contribution or showing concern for staff wellbeing. As such there was a reluctance to take on new ways of working that deviated from usual custom and practice.

Programme fidelity issues did not feature in considerations within the present suite of papers. Reference is made to the criticisms of the MPS in its failures related to the rape and murder of Sarah Everard and its mishandling of a vigil in her memory. The present papers give no detailed steer in how to mitigate the impact of these and other criticisms. Similarly, the police service has been through a difficult period as a front-line organisation in policing the pandemic. Brown and Fleming (2021) show that officers felt under pressure, undervalued, and unappreciated by their senior management, circumstances similar to the experiences of Police Scotland officers. These organizational factors seemingly were not considered when endeavouring to embed the new investigative model. So, whilst there is supportive research showing the positive benefits of PJ principles in policing encounters, it is important to factor programme fidelity and organisational context into an articulated implementation framework, especially when considering the national roll out.

<sup>1</sup> Home Affairs Committee Oral evidence: Investigation and prosecution of rape, HC 193 Monday 13 December 2021.

Does the new model work? The literature review by Dalton et al. offers research evidence that demonstrates the importance of screening staff, co-location of investigating and prosecuting personnel, and adequate resourcing of dedicated units. These were found to be crucial elements in the success of an innovative model of sexual assault investigation adopted by the Victoria police in Australia (Powell and Wright, 2012). Williams et al. reiterate the importance of officer wellbeing and time allowances for continuing professional development (CPD), and Norman et al. promote the use of reflective practice as a learning style. In her conversation with Betsy Stanko (this volume) Sarah Crew, now the force's Chief Constable, explained that Soteria Bluestone was a concept she knew having worked with its earlier prototype, Bluestone 1.

Bluestone 1 ran from 2010 to 2014. In October 2008, the Avon and Somerset Constabulary (i.e. the same force in the present pilot) became a research site to evaluate a Home Office (HO) commissioned project on dedicated investigative response to rape. The HO evaluation (van Staden & Lawrence, 2010) reported greater consistency in investigations, knowledge sharing amongst team members, compressed time scales for executing time-sensitive investigative actions, reduced risk of not collecting evidence and development of specialist investigative skills. Analysts attached to the project identified patterns and escalation of known and suspected offenders. The work of the analysts, the close working partnerships with the CPS, and co-location of a rape specialist lawyer contributing to high-quality investigation files being delivered by the Bluestone team were commended as good practice (Ashworth, 2010). The team also had good working relationships with the Bridge, a bespoke SARC. An Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) post was established in February 2009. In addition, for all staff, there was a mandatory appointment every six months with the force welfare officer. Of note was improved services to sex workers who became the victims of sexual assault. This was symptomatic of a change in orientation in accordance with respect and dignity to all victims.

A further evaluation of Bluestone 1 was carried out by Rumney et al. (2020). Here they undertook a comparison between Bristol Bluestone and a non-specialist rape investigation comparator. Bluestone had more favourable case progression and outcomes. Bluestone stranger rape cases had a conviction rate of 35%, whereas none of the comparator stranger rape cases got beyond the investigative stage. Bluestone was more likely than the comparator to deal with cases in which the complainant had multiple vulnerabilities (23% compared to 12%). Bluestone officers made more referrals to the ISVA (73% versus 42%) and they recorded allegations more accurately.

These evaluations present strong evidence that the Bluestone concept works, are sustainable and that synergies

were achieved between the police, the CPS, and forensic recovery. Soteria (Bluestone) has much of the ingredients of Bluestone 1 so it can reasonably be inferred that not only is the operational concept sound, but also degrees of internal and external co-ordination can be achieved. The new Bluestone has the added value of a theoretical basis, an evidence-based approach, and inclusion of reflective practice. As Chief Constable Crew (who had been involved in the earlier Bluestone prototype) said in her conversation with Betsy Stanko:

“I guess when I first read it, it told me a bit of what I knew but in a way, I hadn't yet articulated for myself. It made sense of and put together these elements in a way that dealt with both the investigative process and underpinnings issues as well. It made it much easier to communicate the process to the team who were involved in the project. So, it really provided me with an approach, a framework, rather than an intuitive sense of what works, which is what the academic mindset brings to the process. The five-pillar approach seeks to codify, understand, and classify things which is a very scientific approach and something which I don't think policing does at the moment”.

Reflective practice (RP) is a new departure for policing. This presents a considerable challenge to the ingrained working practices of rape investigations that have proved so difficult to change. Norman et al. (this volume) point out the benefits for policing but they do not caution against some of the undesirable unintended effects. Finlay (2008) argues that to teach and inculcate RP is both taxing and difficult, and there are dangers that over extended staff may retreat to recipe-driven check lists. RP can be very challenging and may lead to rationalizations such that staff retreat to past custom and practice. This has been a particular problem for police in their resistance to previous attempts at reformulating rape investigative practice. Finlay suggests several features to avoid these potential negative aspects: present RP principles with care; provide adequate support; ensure appropriate tools and training in critical analysis. Done well, Finlay suggests that RP can allow staff to step outside the dominant ideological context, avoid colluding with negative stereotypes, assumptions, and practices; challenge inequality and oppression, particularly when these are enacted in subtle, unseen ways. RP may well be the antidote needed to challenge the broader problematics of police culture itemised by Hohl and Stanko. Some further work on the conditions that will facilitate the embedding of reflective practice would be extremely helpful as there is a wealth of research to suggest that police working practices are enmeshed in the occupational culture that are resistant to change (Loftus, 2009; Chan, 1996).

## Conducive Environment

Jordan (2011), MacQueen and Bradford (2017), and Brown and Horvath (2023) specify that policing innovation requires a conducive environment. To some extent, this is out with the powers of the present Soteria Bluestone teams to influence. But in gauging the likely success of the new investigative model, it is important to assess the political, economic, social, and occupational cultural environments in which it will land.

## Political Environment

The UK Government's End-to-End Rape review unusually began with an apology from the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Attorney General who are the key ministers of State responsible for the Criminal Justice System as well as a statement of intent to do better. This together with a national action plan and regularly reporting on progress and the availability of research funding augers well for the political commitment to developing and rolling out the proposed investigative model. The police too have made violence against women and girls (VAWG) a policy priority. Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blythe has been appointed national co-ordinator and was responsible for a new national framework<sup>2</sup> with a three-pillar approach: building trust and confidence; relentless perpetrator pursuit; and safer places (i.e. better prevention and communication).

She says in the foreword:

“This framework requires a fundamental shift in culture to prioritising those crimes that are VAWG-related. The framework for delivery reflects that VAWG must be a strategic priority for all forces and will be assisted by a new local duty to tackle VAWG as part of any response to violent crime.”

The rhetoric of Government to reform the CJS's handling of rape without adequate funding is met with cynicism by Jan Jordan (2011) when reflecting on reviews conducted in New Zealand and echoed by Victim Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, in her annual report (Baird, 2021, p12). Notwithstanding her criticisms of the UK government's end-to-end rape, she states

“its action plan represents the government's proposed route out of the crisis. While it undoubtedly has serious limitations, it is and will remain the only show in town...What is encouraging is the presence in the review of a powerful apology from the government...”

Probably the best proposal is to further pilot a policing programme, first run in Avon and Somerset police as ‘Project Bluestone’. [The changes proposed by the academics who worked with the force [whose papers are the subject of this special issue] and the commitment of force leadership has shown real potential to be transformative and to radically improve victims' experiences. My concern, however, is that there is only funding for one year's rollout and to just a further four police forces. The Lord Chancellor assures me that all criminal justice ministers will be pressing for it to be fully funded in the Spending Review. I will hold him to that.”.

Given the current political volatility in the U.K., reliance on Dame Vera's formidable and forceful personality may not be enough in the encroaching storm of the pressurised economic environment discussed next.

## Economic Environment

The pandemic and the Ukraine war are having worldwide adverse economic effects (Harari et al., 2022). Gas, electricity, and petrol costs have risen. The Office for National Statistics state that the UK's withdrawal from the Single Market and Customs Union reduced trade by 15.7% resulting in a £12.6 billion loss. It is likely that the ensuing economic squeeze will have an impact on policing budgets and expenditure. We might infer from the fate of the earlier Bluestone experiment in Avon and Somerset which closed following the years of austerity as part of cost saving initiatives, that establishing and sustaining the necessary funding for the Bluestone model may well be under pressure.

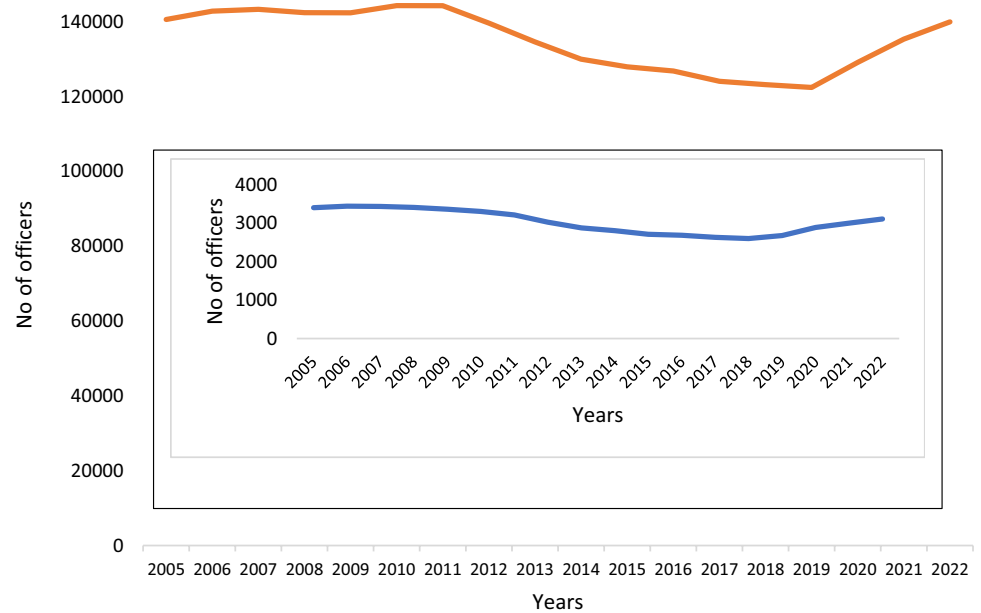
Figure 1 shows the steep decline in all officer numbers from 2010, the beginning of the UK's Coalition Government's austerity years with a similar pattern in the inset showing equivalent data for Avon and Somerset. For that force between 2010 and 2014 (the year Bluestone 1 was terminated), there was a loss of 14% of officers and a six percent decrease in the force's budget.<sup>3</sup> The Government's contribution to the police grant was 68.5% in 2010/11 and is now 59.8%. This means the hard-pressed local authority must contribute 40%. Figure 1 also shows, despite the Government's commitment to increase officer numbers, that the present force establishment both nationally and for Avon and Somerset have not yet returned to pre austerity levels.

Rumney et al. (2020) suggested that in the context of austerity and cuts in funding, the police were forced to re-assess their strategies regarding sexual offences specialist units.

<sup>2</sup> Policing violence against women and girls—National framework for delivery: Year 1 (npcc.police.uk).

<sup>3</sup> Police Budget and Officer Headcount from 2010 | Avon and Somerset Police.

**Fig. 1** Number of police officers nationally and inset for Avon and Somerset Constabulary 2005–2022



Several forces disbanded their units as had Avon and Somerset. A Guardian Newspaper FOI (Siddique, 2021)<sup>4</sup> found at least two fifths of police forces do not have specialist rape and serious sexual offence (RASSO) units. Closures dated from 2014.

Some indicative costings can be inferred from the Westmarland et al. (2014) cost–benefit study of specialist rape units, albeit it clearly depended on staffing levels and remit of the particular unit. One force calculated £719,633 set-up costs and another two forces calculated £2.1 million and £1.2 million annual running costs respectively with the latter figure not including victim services, first responding, forensics or scenes of crime. The pound sterling has lost 21% of its value since these figures were calculated and inflation is likely to run at around ten percent. If the Soteria Bluestone model is to go national, then, approximately, 17 forces have no specialist units so the cost of setting up new ones and re-engineering the existing units are likely to be considerable and on-going against a current cost of living crisis.

The Government' promise of restoring police numbers by an uplift of 20,000 officers is unlikely to feed into the (re)-establishment of specialized units nationwide as the new officers are young in service and inexperienced and are more likely to reconfigure neighbourhood policing which was hollowed out through previous austerity cuts (Higgins, 2017). The present set of papers does not touch on the economic realities of the current global and UK fiscal environments. Will Government, UK forces and their police and crime

commissioners (PCCs) give priority to and sustained funding for the (re)-establishing of specialist provision within the current economic climate? The demise of such units in previous periods of financial restrictions might seriously challenge their good intentions.

## The Social Environment

Public attitudes remain somewhat punitive towards women who are raped. A survey by YouGov conducted on behalf of End Violence Against Women Coalition in December 2018<sup>5</sup> found a third of people in Britain think it is not usually rape if a woman is pressured into having sex but there is no physical violence, and that a third of men think if a woman has flirted on a date it generally would not be rape, even if she has not consented to sex (21% of women believe this). Almost a quarter do not think that, in most cases, sex without consent in long-term relationships is rape (despite laws against rape in marriage being in place since 1991) and around one in 10 are unsure or think it is usually not rape to have sex with a woman who is asleep or too drunk to consent.

The #MeToo movement has had some impact on attitudes. A survey by the Fawcett Society in October 2018<sup>6</sup> reported that people had changed their thinking about sexual harassment with 38% agreeing they had thought differently about what behaviour is and is not acceptable over the last

<sup>4</sup> Two-fifths of police forces in England and Wales lack rape units | Violence against women and girls | The Guardian.

<sup>5</sup> Major new YouGov survey for EVAW: Many people still unclear what rape is (endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk).

<sup>6</sup> #MeToo one year on – what's changed? | The Fawcett Society.



year. Over half of women aged 18–34 and 58% of young men say they have been more willing to challenge behaviour or comments they think are unacceptable. For most people, #MeToo has shifted social norms—the acceptable limits of behaviour in the social environment in which we live. However, significantly older men are less likely to say they have changed their own behaviour as a result of #MeToo.

Sentiment towards rape amongst the public are significant because those eligible may make up members of a jury. Similarly, local people respond to consultations by Police and Crime Commissioners in setting policing priorities. Police officers are also drawn from the public. Sweeting and Cole (2022) report findings to suggest police recruits exhibit sexually inappropriate behaviours ranging from sexualised language to sexual assault. Such attitudes are fed by and feed into the occupational cultural environment which is looked at in more detail in the next section.

### Occupational Cultural Environment

The End-to-End Rape Review and the national police VAWG framework are committed to culture change to promote such optimal environments in which to land the proposed reforms. The occupational culture of the police has been problematic and resistant to change (Loftus, 2009). Recent research suggests that sexual harassment within the police towards women officers still occurs (Brown et al., 2019). Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and published by the Guardian (18th May 2019<sup>7</sup>) show that 1491 complainants were filed against police officers, special constables, and police community support officers (PCSOs) across 33 forces in England and Wales for sexual misconduct over a period of 6 years.

Following grossly inappropriate behaviour by police officers from Charing Cross, the Independent Office for Police Conduct published this statement<sup>8</sup>:

“We are today (Tuesday 1 February 2022) publishing wide ranging recommendations made to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to change policing practice after nine linked investigations found evidence of bullying and discrimination within the ranks. Other inappropriate behaviour by officers, including, racism, misogyny, harassment and the exchange of offensive social media messages, is also highlighted in a learning report. The recommendations we have made seek to tackle underlying cultural issues by preventing

environments from developing in which unprofessional and inappropriate behaviour can thrive and go unchallenged”.

A recent ‘super complaint’, by the Centre for Women’s Justice into police perpetrated domestic violence (PPDV), resulted in a joint investigation by HMICFRS, the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct.<sup>9</sup> The report accepted that the police service still exhibits a culture of ‘institutionalised sexism’ that condones and trivialises violence against women including sexual harassment reported by police employees, abuse of power by police officers for sexual gain and a high numbers of reports of sexual assault by police officers where officers have faced no sanction, and the scandal of undercover police officers having deceitful sexual relationships (p. 5).

There is also evidence to demonstrate that police and prosecutors’ adherence to rape myths negatively impacts victims (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2018) which increases the likelihood of attrition (Shaw et al., 2017). There is no evidence available from the present set of papers to evaluate whether the proposed investigative model can confront or change these attitudes and behaviours. It is rather an aspiration that exposure to the specialism knowledge base, time for CPD, employment of PJ principles, and effective reflective practice will contribute to individual as well as institutional changes in the culture.

There has too been a mutual skepticism exhibited between police and academia, so much so that Canter (2004) labelled this as a world of two cultures. He drew attention to differences in approaches to the nature of knowledge. Police officers, he argues, know the details of the procedures they must follow to achieve certain ends, whether for an arrest, preparation of evidence for court, or the management of a public demonstration. But they have little command of the principles behind the procedures they are following or an understanding of the empirical trends on which such procedures can be based. Canter contrasts this with academics who see decisions as part of an evolving body of knowledge. The actions of any professional, he says, are a contribution to the development of that knowledge base, which is why research is so highly prized. The importing of evidence-based policing is challenging police conceptions (Knutsson et al., 2017; Mitchell & Huey, 2018; Fielding et al., 2021) with them showing greater awareness and valuing the contribution of research as the earlier quote from Chief Constable Crew testifies.

Moreover, very much as MacQueen and Bradford (2017) advised, co-production in the research endeavour is much

<sup>7</sup> Scale of police sexual abuse claims revealed | Police | The Guardian.

<sup>8</sup> IOPC recommendations to tackle Met culture after investigation uncovers bullying and harassment in the ranks | Independent Office for Police Conduct.

<sup>9</sup> Police\_perpetrated\_domestic\_abuse.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk).

more likely to engender success. Here, we do have some evidence. A participating chief inspector<sup>10</sup> from Avon and Somerset comments:

“I did not know what to expect, having not been involved in a project like this before. I met Dr. Emma Williams who was the academic lead for this work stream at an early stage. We discussed the project and what was needed. Despite the timescales involved (which were extremely short), we developed a very good working relationship. Emma and I communicated most days either in meetings, during virtual calls or by email to make sure that the plan we had formulated was on target. I also reviewed reports and potential products and provided feedback. I was really pleased to be consulted about these products incorporating some of my recent learning about trauma informed practice. The Pause Point Policy (reflective practice) and Supervisors Guide to Reflective Practice During the Case Review are really great practical tools that the police can use straight away as a result of the work we did. It felt that I had been more than a facilitator but a real partner in the work”.

Canter (2004) also notes that police tend to be in the here and now reacting quickly to problems, whereas academic life has a more leisurely pace with research taking many months, often years, to complete and publish. Getting them synchronized is possible but difficult. Stanko acknowledges in her conversation piece that the research proposal was written within a week, submitted in October 2020, funded in January 2021 to be completed by end of March 2021, a startlingly short time span for a research project. In addition, the process of gaining access to police forces for the research usually ‘a belaboured, bureaucratic process’ as well as the necessity to gain appropriate ethical approvals all proceeded at pace. This demonstrated that academics can work within tight and demanding schedules although there is an irony here. Williams et al. argue for time allowances for police officers to absorb specialist knowledge and Norman et al. advocate reflective practice which requires creating space to think and consolidate new knowledge. The timescales for the present work were punishing and offered limited reflective thinking capacity.

The Bluestone approach relies on academic-police collaboration. Avon and Somerset Constabulary was an especially receptive research site having a highly committed Chief Constable, previous exposure to a Bluestone model and staff open to co-production working. Workable practices

transferred from one jurisdiction to another without due regard to organizational context are not always successful as the Queensland to Scotland experiment describe above testifies. It would have been useful to have some recognition of and contingency planning for the transferability attributes of the model to less optimal force environments.

## Co-ordination

The present papers do not address concerns about co-ordination of the external environment as advocated by Walby and colleagues’ systems approach. There are a complex of projects under the Soteria Bluestone banner. Avon and Somerset’s Bluestone has five pillars and associated research projects. In addition, there are four other Soteria forces as well as six work streams<sup>11</sup> being undertaken by the CPS and a collaboration of 24 forces taking part in a transforming forensics programme in a Rape Review Response Project.<sup>12</sup> The College of Policing and National Police Chief’s Council (NPCC) have published their new national VAWG framework.<sup>13</sup> At present, it is difficult to see the connectivity within the present set of studies and between its five pillars, the roll out to the other 4 Soteria forces, the six CPS work streams, the forensic projects, and the three pillars of the VAWG framework. Walby et al. (2015, p. 3) point out that that the multiplicity of responses from “a myriad of specialist and mainstream services requires co-ordination at national and local level in order to be effective. There is a need for national-level coordination and funding of policies, and also local-level cooperation of the services needed to serve victims”.

It would be desirable to have greater synergies within the pathfinder projects and also between them and other evolving developments from the CPS, the forensic programme, and the VAWG framework, so that they can synch and flex mutually beneficial information about work in progress. The latest Government’s The End- to- End rape review progress report<sup>14</sup> indicates the work is “not on track” and there is little reported interaction between projects.

<sup>10</sup> Police and academics working together to improve rape and serious sexual assault investigations | Centre for Policing Research and Learning (open.ac.uk).

<sup>11</sup> CPS Rape Strategy Update, February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Twenty-four forces join new Transforming Forensics Rape Response Project | Forensic Capability Network (fcn.police.uk).

<sup>13</sup> Policing violence against women and girls—National framework for delivery: Year 1 (npcc.police.uk).

<sup>14</sup> Rape Review progress update (publishing.service.gov.uk).

## Conclusion

Soteria Bluestone is a very ambitious, multi stranded programme. As Emma Williams says in her blog<sup>15</sup> “Bluestone offers the first holistic examination into the complex areas impacting on the investigation of rape”. Whilst co-joining the need for victim/survivor support, support for investigating officers, switching focus from victim credibility to suspect centric case building, improving police recording practices, harvesting knowledge from police data are not in themselves novel, bringing these elements together, creating a reflective learning environment all underpinned by theory does represent a step change in approach. Proof of concept is inferred from the previous evaluations of Bluestone 1. But there are risks to Project Bluestone’s successful implementation. Past austerity has shown the precariousness of funding and in the present economic climate political priorities to sustain financial support is not assured. Rape myths remain a social and attitudinal influence.

Whilst the present papers were able to demonstrate

- The soundness of PJ principles to provide a theoretical basis for the model;
- How to improve the timeline of investigations by identifying pinch points;
- How to improve record keeping by specification of data entry protocols;
- The evidence basis for specialist investigation.
- The use of reflective practice to transform investigations

coverage of all five pillars of the model was incomplete. What the present papers did not demonstrate was the value of mining the suspect and offender data, so a literature review on what we know would be a useful starting point. They were short on process. We do not at this stage know what the integrated Bluestone model looks like operationally because of the omission of the offender-centric component. There were no fidelity criteria to ensure successful translation of the prototype investigative model into a national roll out allowing for any local tweaking. It is still early days so a future evaluation of the success of the new approach is essential not only to review performance improvements but also to monitor any impacts that reflective practice and adoption of PJ principles may have had on the wider police occupational culture.

The written evidence by Kari Davies and colleagues<sup>16</sup> to the House of Commons Select Committee reiterates the importance of a systems approach:

“In short, any recommendation to improve policing through the common recommendation – training of officers – will fail without a **whole systems** approach” [original bold text].

Connectivity within the present suite of papers and between these and the external Soteria projects and allied organisations is opaque presenting risks of overlap, duplication, and gaps in the model’s development. This is very locally based project grounded in a force with an open-minded chief constable and highly motivated police practitioners. Some cognisance of the contextual factors for successful national implementation is in order. Stern (2010) was particularly critical of the broader implementation failures in inculcating and extending good practice as a national effort. All of this calls for clearer and forceful implementation that acknowledges local variations as well as the critical factors that promote the interconnectedness necessary to articulate with other developing reforms in forensic services and the prosecuting authority. At present, there is little indication from within the present papers of mechanisms to achieve this.

Given the cross-jurisdiction commonalities in criticisms of police investigations, there is also scope for learning from and exchanging lessons learnt from elsewhere exemplified by the attempt to import practice from Queensland to Scotland demonstrates. Rape is an international problem and criticisms of police practices common across jurisdictions (Westmarland & Gangoli, 2011). There is huge potential for international transfer.

On balance, the evidence in these articles and previous research supports the concept but it may be the external factors that jeopardise its sustainability and national rollout. As Professor Stanko declared in her evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee<sup>17</sup>: “We absolutely must be over-ambitious in this area because we have been under-ambitious since now”. There is too much at stake not to be.

**Funding** Project Bluestone was funded by the Home Office and delivered between January and March 2021. This pathfinder project has subsequently informed the design and delivery of Operation Soteria Bluestone, a Home Office funded programme, led by the National Police Chiefs’ Council and hosted by the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime in London, which commenced delivery on 6.9.21. Operation Soteria Bluestone included Deep Dive research in four additional police forces, and the transfer of knowledge to all 43 Home Office Police Forces. Operation Soteria Bluestone is part of Operation Soteria which also includes a CPS programme of work.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

<sup>15</sup> Bluestone: A collaborative approach to addressing the ‘problem’ of rape investigation – Perspectives on Policing (wordpress.com).

<sup>16</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/35602/html/>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2521/pdf/>.

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