Time for change: Modernising the police response to stalking and VAWG

A practical guide for constabularies to meet new national stalking investigation standards

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Foreword

Stalking and harassment have a devastating impact on countless lives and on society. Despite the prevalence of these offences, too often, victims do not receive justice.

This report represents a critical step forward in addressing these challenges. It provides a comprehensive overview of the issues, highlights the urgent need for reform, and offers practical solutions. It showcases the success of Operation Atlas, a Metropolitan Police Service initiative, which demonstrates how digital-first, victim-centred investigations can dramatically improve charge rates, cut investigation times, and reduce the burden on victims.

The time for change is now. By modernising investigative practices and implementing the recommendations outlined in this report police services can significantly improve the response to stalking and harassment, rebuild trust and afford victims the protection and respect they deserve.

Steve Rick, CEO, Forensic Analytics Ltd

Produced by the Forensic Analytics Public Affairs team: **Samantha Burton,** Strategic Development Manager, Forensic Analytics Samantha is an experienced security and intelligence professional with expertise in security, risk, and digital analysis across the commercial and public sectors, including the Metropolitan Police Service and the National Crime Agency.

At Forensic Analytics, Samantha supports high-impact crime areas, focusing particularly on violence against women and girls (VAWG) offences. Samantha collaborates with key stakeholders to contribute toward the government's goal of reducing VAWG by 50% by 2034, leveraging Forensic Analytics' cutting-edge technologies to drive meaningful progress.

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Andrew works with senior members of law enforcement agencies, crime and justice specialists, and government officials within the UK and abroad.

Executive summary

Stalking and harassment crimes have affected over 5 million women in the UK over the last three years. These crimes frequently leave victims traumatised and are often a precursor to violence and other more serious offences.

Despite these realities, systemic failings have eroded victim trust in law enforcement. In 2022 the government-appointed Victim's Commissioner, Baroness Newlove undertook a survey that found 79% of women did not have confidence in the police's ability to thoroughly investigate crimes against them.

In response to a super-complaint submitted by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust in 2022 on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium, an investigation was conducted and a joint response published in September 2024 by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), along with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS), and the College of Policing.

The investigation highlighted how urgent reforms were needed throughout policing, which in summary were: better officer training, clearer guidance on applying preventative measures, and the use of "digital witnesses" to provide objective, irrefutable evidence. Additionally, the HMICFRS report laid out a list of time-bound actions Chief Constables are required to address by 22nd November 2024, and 27th March 2025.

This report is a guide to assist Chief Constables in their efforts to meet the new standards, and explains how Operation Atlas, a Metropolitan Police initiative supported by Forensic Analytics' CSAS software has used digital first, victim centred methods to dramatically improve results.

1. Introduction

Stalking. **The numbers are unacceptable.**

In the UK, 1 in 5 women over the age of 16 experience stalking.[1] And 1 in 7 women have been subjected to an episode of harassment or criminal incident in the last 3 years.[2]

That's over 5 million women. They are friends, loved ones, mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Reform is needed. **Urgently.**

The impacts of stalking

Stalking often inflicts lasting trauma on victims. Persistent societal and systemic misconceptions about the impact of stalkers on their victims have led to gaps in protection and support responses from policing.

With stalking often being a precursor to violence and more serious crimes, this is eroding women's trust in the police to keep them safe.

Severe and long-lasting trauma

The impact of stalking on victims can be profound. Though every instance is different, stalking and harassment often leaves victims with feelings of a loss of control, fear & anxiety, and total mental exhaustion.

A particularly heartbreaking consequence sees victims struggling to trust other people, which can lead to breakdowns of relationships with those they care about.

> "I have lost my life, my livelihood, friends, and family. I have lost all trust in everyone and view everyone with suspicion…I cannot sleep as the nightmares follow.**" Victim of stalking, Paladin Service** [3]

The first stalking law came into statute in 2012, and in 2017, the maximum sentence for a stalking offence was increased to 10 years. Whilst recognition and support for victims of stalking and harassment is slowly improving, it's being driven mainly by victim's charities and non-profit organisations.

> "Stalking is a crime of psychological terror. It robs the victim, and often their family, of their day-to-day freedoms and their sense of safety in their own home and community. Stalking has significant and long-term impacts on the health and wellbeing of victims, and children are often hidden victims of this crime.**" Claire Waxman, London's Victims' Commissioner** [4]

The effects of stalking are seen beyond the suffering of individuals and impact public perception of the criminal justice system. Processes, investigation standards, and legislation do not fully account for or deal with the experiences of victims.

> "He has been stalking me and my children since 2012, and I've only managed to get support in 2023. I knew I was being stalked, but all my worries and concerns were belittled by the police because he was my partner. Now my ex-husband. They mostly took his side more than mine.**" Stalking Victim-Survivor** [5]

Research conducted by Women in Data® in October 2023 shows how this lack of confidence is manifesting in confusion, apathy, and even acceptance among women.[6]

68%
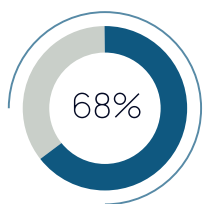
Of respondents didn't realise the incident was a notifiable offence[6]

68%
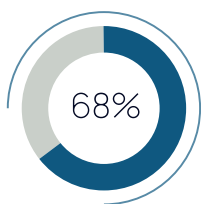
Didn't believe their report would be seen as a priority[6]

48%

Did not know how to report the incident[6]

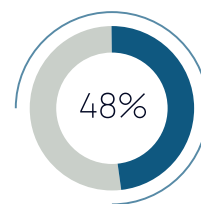In 2022 the government-appointed Victim's Commissioner, Baroness Newlove undertook a survey that found 79% of women did not have confidence in the police's ability to thoroughly investigate crimes against them. Additionally, after their experience with the police, 59% were unsure about or unwilling to report to the police again. Stalking is, often, a precursor to other serious crimes and violence against women and girls (VAWG).

While men and boys also suffer from many forms of abuse, stalking, harassment, and associated violence disproportionately affect women. 100 women die at the hands of men every year, in the UK and almost all of them are stalked beforehand.
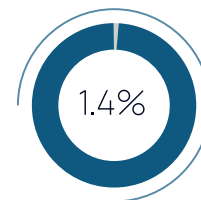
1 woman is killed by a man every 3 days in England & Wales[7]
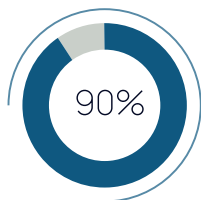
90%

90% of women killed by men experience stalking behaviour from their attackers prior to their deaths[7]

7.1%
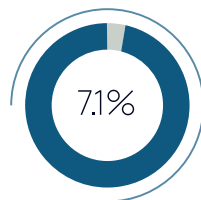
7.1% of stalking reports result in CPS charges[8]

1.4%

And only **1.4%** of cases result in a conviction[9]

Perhaps the most egregious detail that has emerged over the last few years is the fact that, on average, men who have killed women in the home serve 10 years less prison time than those who have killed women outside of it.[10]

Time for change

In November 2022, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust submitted a super-complaint on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium.

The complaint criticised the police response to stalking, and highlighted system-wide issues in the way forces across England & Wales respond to stalking, calling for urgent reform.

Between 4th August 2023 and 4th September 2023, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) led a joint investigation into the complaint, along with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS), and the College of Policing.

The investigation revealed victims of stalking were often let down by a lack of police understanding, inconsistent investigation quality, and insufficient safeguarding. Recommendations emphasised the need for better officer training, clearer guidance on applying Stalking Protection Orders (SPOs) and other preventative measures, and the value of integrating digital tools to gather and review evidence.

- HMICFRS report
- IOPC report
- College of Policing

The findings make it clear. Immediate action is required from Chief Constables and their forces to prevent further failures and keep women safe.

Note: Whilst each report provides a general set of recommendations for Chief Constables, HMICFRS lays out a list of time-bound actions Chief Constables must address by 22nd November 2024, and 27th March 2025.

Review the time-bound actions here

A commitment for better, with more digitally enabled investigators

The UK government has pledged to cut VAWG-related crimes by 50% over the next 10 years. The government hasn't yet said what statistics they will be measuring, but the commitment reflects the widespread recognition for stronger protective measures.

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust reports that 100% of cases they handle involve a digital element. The domestic abuse charity Refuge has seen a 300% rise in tech-facilitated abuse since 2019.

300% Rise
In tech-facilitated abuse since 2019

2019   2021   2022   2023   2024
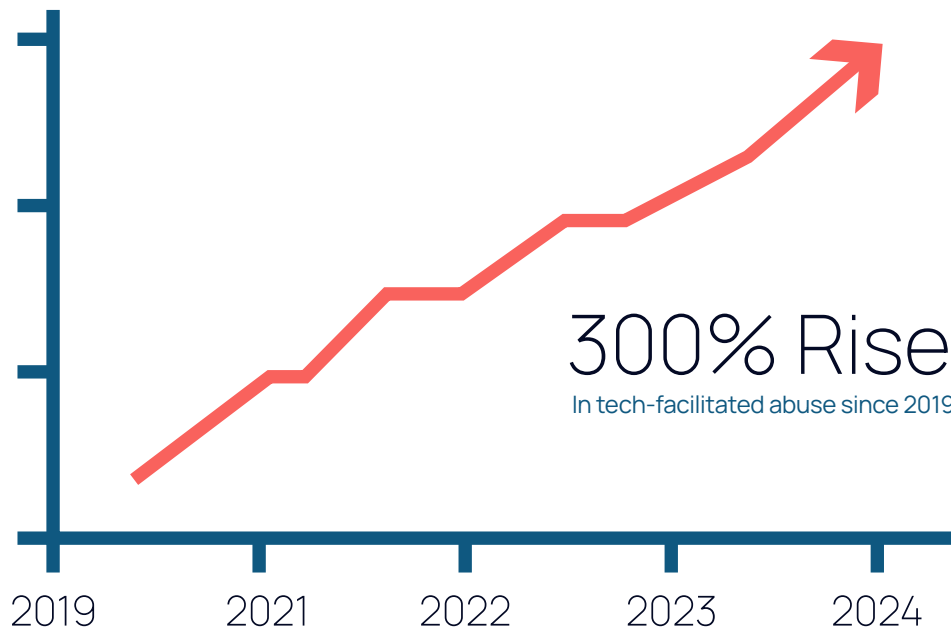
A focus on the digital witness is therefore seen as a critical step in reshaping how policing deals with violence against women.

Focusing on identifying new leads through digital and data driven investigations not only helps to safeguard victims but also increases convictions—with digital technology providing court-worthy evidence. They also reduce the burden on the victim to remember and report each incident.

This whitepaper serves as a practical guide for police services to modernise their approach to stalking. It will lay out what's needed for police services to navigate the time-bound recommendations set out by the HMICFRS, and it will show how to leverage technology to adopt digital-first investigations.

2. Implications & Immediate Actions

The National Strategy

In December 2021, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and College of Policing published a new police VAWG framework (updated and refreshed in March 2024).

The framework was developed under the leadership of the National Police Lead for VAWG Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, and informed by experts in policing, government, and the VAWG sector.

VAWG is now officially classed as a national threat, and Blyth has brought the police response to VAWG in line with counter-terrorism. This includes adoption of the '4Ps', which underpins every force's plan to tackle VAWG.[11]

Prepare: police services must have the right culture, skills, and resources

Protect: action is being taken to protect individuals, families, and communities

Pursue: perpetrators of violence are being relentlessly pursued

Prevent: policing must work with partners as part of a whole-system approach

VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment

The VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) supports forces to better understand the contributors to VAWG.

The offences identified in the STRA as being the biggest threat to women are:

- Domestic abuse
- Rape and serious sexual offences
- Child sexual abuse and exploitation
- Tech enabled VAWG, such as online stalking and harassment

The STRA helps forces direct their finite resources, and decide how many officers will be needed to tackle VAWG within their jurisdiction. It is also used to identify where they should focus specialist investigators, victim support, and digital crime-fighting technology.

Implications for policing

The recommendations from the HMICFRS, IOPC, and College of Policing report have significant implications for those investigating stalking and harassment, who play a critical role in safeguarding victims.

Public Protection Units (PPUs) where they exist are often at the forefront of protecting the most vulnerable individuals, although the responsibility for investigating stalking and harassment varies across police services, depending on internal processes and the volume of demand. The recommendations emphasise a series of key changes aimed at ensuring more effective investigations, for better victim outcomes.

1 - Use of protective & preventative measures

The report calls for best practices in managing stalking cases, including the early, and consistent use of Stalking Protection Orders (SPOs) and Domestic Violence Prevention Notices (DVPNs). Historically, these orders have been underutilised and forces are now being urged to increase their application as a preventative measure. 90% of women killed by men experience stalking behaviour from their attackers prior to their deaths (killedwomen.org). Issuing protective and preventative orders early in an investigation provides immediate protection to victims, while gathering further evidence to build a case. This proactive approach prioritises victim safety from the outset

2 - Collaboration with victim support services
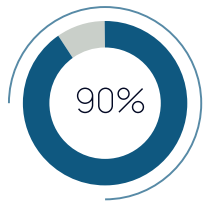
90% **Of women killed by men** experience stalking behaviour from their attackers prior to their deaths

The next recommendation is the need for improved collaboration between those investigating stalking and harassment cases, and external victim support services. Many victims of stalking and domestic abuse rely on these services for counselling, legal advice, and safety planning.

The report advises forces must work more closely with these agencies, for a more holistic approach to victim care.

The collaboration extends to sharing data, conducting joint risk assessments, and developing tailored support plans for victims. The aim is to create a more cohesive support network that addresses both the legal and emotional needs of victims.

3 - Adoption of digital tools

Finally, police services need to integrate digital tools into their investigations, particularly in cases of stalking and harassment where digital footprints are a vital source of evidence.

The introduction of technologies such as Forensic Analytics' Cell Site Analysis Suite (CSAS) allows the processing of large data sets, such as communication data, handset downloads, trackers, and vehicle telematics in seconds. All are displayed in a unified view to identify and evidence stalking seamlessly.
CSAS is a prime example of how digital tools holistically improve investigations, for investigators and victims:

- Accelerate the analysis of phone, location, and communications data to identify stalking behaviour
- Identify new leads
- Removes onus on victims to prove each harassment incident
- Uncover stalking behaviour victims may have been unaware of

Immediate actions for Chief Constables

The HMICFRS report laid out **27 recommendations** for the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, and Chief Constables. There are five time-bound, immediate actions for Chief Constables to consider.

By 22 November 2024:

• Publish an action plan on your force website which explains what will be done in response to each of the recommendations made, and send the NPCC a link to where this action plan can be found.

By 27 March 2025:

• Improve the quality of stalking investigations, ensuring they are victim-centred, suspect-focussed, and context-led.

Specific steps include:

- • Improve officer's capacity and capability to pursue digital lines of enquiry
- • Pursue all lines of enquiry, with good supervision
- • Use arrest and search powers to gather evidence
- • Ensure the impact on victims is evidenced in statements

• Review and update policy and practice in relation to:

- • Provision of dedicated stalking officers and staff
- • Early case screening, improvements in crime recording, and case allocation
- • Improved access for victims to support
- • Enhanced multi-agency response
- • Commitments to consider a Stalking Protection Order in every case
- • Improvements to risk management
- • Improvements in the recognition of and response to online stalking

• Make sure appropriate mechanisms are in place to fully understand the scale and types of stalking behaviour within your force and the effectiveness of the response. This should align with the VAWG national delivery framework.

Provide an update to the NPCC describing the progress made against the action plan.

Our expert team is on standby to support you in navigating the HMICFRS recommendations.

Even if all you need is a conversation on best practice, get in touch, here:

🌐 www.forensicanalytics.io   📞 +44 (0)800 158 3830   ✉ support@forensicanalytics.io

3. Operation Atlas: A Model for Success

Stalking and harassment are often precursors to more serious violence against women. Despite this, in the UK only 7.1% of stalking cases result in charges. This is largely due to limited investigative capacity, knowledge, and access to tools. Addressing this problem requires more effective digital-first investigative methods.

"By enhancing the way we use data and intelligence, we will improve our ability to identify, intercept and arrest those causing the most harm in communities." **Chief Constable Maggie Blyth**

Operation Atlas is an initiative designed to embed specialist policing capabilities into the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) response to public protection, with a specific focus on stalking and stalking-related incidents.

The pilot was launched in November 2022. Cases and outcomes were recorded through to March 2023. The MPS saw Operation Atlas delivering improved victim care, a reduction in days taken to investigate, reduction in risk through quicker case disposal, an increase in suspects charged with offending, and the improvement of investigating officer's 'digital IQ'.

Operation Atlas: Impact & outcomes

With its dual focus on victim centred and digital-first investigations, Operation Atlas transformed how MPS officers handled stalking and harassment cases, driving significant improvements in charge rates and investigation efficiency, and reducing the burden on victims.

Improved charge rates & investigation efficiency
Reduction of investigation time

Operation Atlas reduced investigation times by **45 days**, from **137 days** to **92 days.**[12]


137 Days   92 Days

Operation Atlas reduced investigation times by 45 days, from 137 days to 92 days.

Average length of investigations before Operation Atlas, and during Operation Atlas Increased charge rates & decreased NFA rates

Cases adopted by Operation Atlas saw increased charge rates from **12%** to **66%,**[12] and decreased No Further Action (NFA) results from **88%** to **34.**[12]

Charge & NFA rates before Operation Atlas, and during Operation Atlas

● Charged   ● NFA
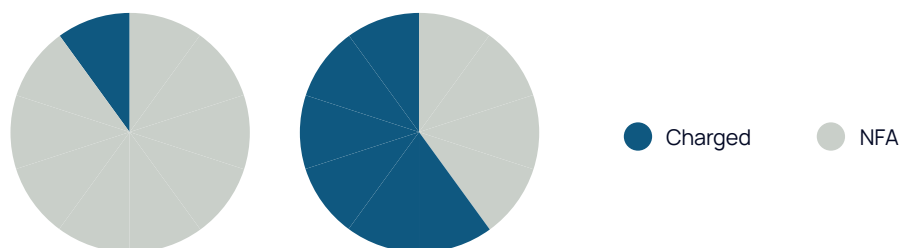
High conviction rates and guilty pleas

Operation Atlas saw 96% of charged cases resulting in convictions, with 92% of those charged pleading guilty.[13]

96% Of charged cases resulted in convictions[13]

92% Of those charged pled guilty[13]

Conviction & guilty plea rates during Operation Atlas Reduced burden on victims

Using this model to analyse digital evidence of a suspects location to support a victim's account meant there was a reduced burden on victims to prove an offence took place. Victims whose cases went through Operation Atlas were highly unlikely to need to give evidence at court, and experienced shorter investigation lengths.

Operation Atlas: Methodology

Operation Atlas adopted a data informed approach to investigating stalking and harassment cases, alongside supporting victims through the investigation process. Significantly, by looking at the digital footprints of suspects, officers were able to evidence their physical movements.

Through training, and by leveraging Forensic Analytics' Cell Site Analysis Suite (CSAS) software, the Operation Atlas team were able to quickly access and analyse digital evidence from phones and other devices and services—creating in effect "digital witnesses." This data helped corroborate victim accounts, and/or refute suspect alibis.

The Digital Witness

"Digital witness" describes the data traces left by suspects through their use of technology—like phone records, GPS data, text messages, and social media activity—which can act as silent witnesses to criminal behaviour.

The digital witness concept is central to stalking investigations because, often, these crimes involve repeated and obsessive contact via digital channels.

Tools like CSAS allow investigators to quickly analyse call records, cell tower data, and other digital footprints to establish patterns of behaviour.

The data can independently verify a victim's claims, showing whether a suspect was in the same location as the victim, or whether the volume of communication matches the victim's testimony.

The digital witnesses provides objective, irrefutable evidence to support a victim's account of events, even in cases where the victim may not be aware of, or be able to recall all the harassment interactions or stalking incidents.

The Operation Atlas methodology has four stages; Triage, Retrieve, Evaluate and Evidence.

Triage: Officers assess incoming cases, both current crimes and ongoing investigations, for digital lines of enquiry involving the victim, suspect, or third parties. Digital triage is a continual process, recognising new digital leads can emerge during an investigation. In-custody cases are prioritised to ensure case resolution within custody time limits, while out-of-custody cases are given a 28-day deadline.

Retrieve: Once a digital investigation strategy is agreed upon, Operation Atlas officers request relevant data through processes, becoming increasingly proficient, and reducing investigation times. Additional digital evidence is collected as needed.

Evaluate: Officers analyse digital data using the CSAS software, identifying and communicating new lines of enquiry to investigators. Their evaluation informs the progression of cases, particularly those in-custody, assessing whether the digital evidence supports or disproves the allegations.

Evidence: After processing, the "digital witness" data is compiled into reports, which are converted into witness statements from officers. These statements clarify what the data proves and what it cannot confirm. The statements are provided to investigators for use in suspect interviews or case submissions to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

The success of Operation Atlas is partly due to the robust methodology and process, but also as a result of training. The training element has ensured officers are more aware of the potential digital lines of enquiry than they were before. Training allowed officers to identify new leads using digital data, putting them to productive use immediately.

Most people leave digital footprints that can generate lines of enquiry. It was crucial the officers in an Operation Atlas team were trained and conversant in all available types of digital evidence.

Operation Atlas: The role of CSAS

Cell Site Analysis Suite (CSAS) is the software system used by the Operation Atlas team. CSAS is already widely used throughout policing, often to tackle complex serious and organised crimes to quickly identify key lines of enquiry and identify actions from complex digital data. The same methodology has been successfully used to democratise access to data for front line investigators tackling volume crimes like stalking and harassment.

CSAS empowers investigation and intelligence teams to process and analyse large amounts of digital data quickly, producing information to a robust evidential standard. It does so through enhanced processing of call data and handset records, downloads, ANPR, social media takeout, vehicle telemetry, and more. Evidence packages included maps overlaid with phone data, including timestamped location information, and tables of information showing message content, times, and frequency. Comprehensive training is provided to all CSAS users which, during Operation Atlas, saw officers become proficient quickly. Indeed, the Metropolitan Police noted in their review that the 'digital IQ' of investigating officers and supervisors increased through their use of CSAS.

> "Normalising this approach is thought to be critical to future-proofing investigation, given the prevalence of digital devices and footprint in the lives of victims and suspects." **College of Policing, February 2024**

Operation Atlas case study

In 2021, as their relationship broke down, a man began a sustained campaign of abuse and harassment against his ex-girlfriend. In addition to **calling and texting her up to 700 times a day,** he threatened to burn down her home, and distributed revenge porn. Detectives from the Metropolitan Police East Area Basic Command Unit used CSAS for the first time in this type of case. **CSAS allowed them to evidence 157 occasions** when the suspect co-located within proximity of the victim during his stalking.

The software cleansed and presented the elements of harassment through calls and other digital devices utilised in this sustained predatory behaviour.

Officers then used CSAS to create an illustrative story board of tables and maps which was clear to read and present in an evidential product for the Crown Prosecution Service—but also for any future jury. The overwhelming evidence the software presented allowed the investigating team to charge.

In February 2023 **the offender was sentenced to three years and nine months imprisonment.**

Analytical capabilities accessible to frontline investigators

With tools like CSAS, frontline investigators can directly access advanced analytical capabilities, allowing them to handle high-volume, lower-priority cases—like stalking.

Analytical enquiries are expedited, which lessens the workload for analytical teams, freeing them up to focus on more complex, high-priority cases.

"This software allows my officers to cleanse, manage big data from electronic devices and self-analyse it within seconds of inputting the information…the use of this software in Public Protection cases such as stalking & harassment has significantly reduced the time to investigate and present cases to the CPS for charging decisions.**" Detective Superintendent Lewis Basford, Metropolitan Police**

Operation Atlas: Follow up & future

Operation Atlas is showcased by the College of Policing as best practice for investigating stalking & harassment cases.[14]

The IOPC and HMICFRS highlight Operation Atlas as an example of best practice in their response to the super-complaint.[15]

The Police Digital Service has published a thorough analysis of the use of CSAS with the Operation Atlas method, and recommend its wider use.[16]

4. Conclusion

The super-complaint on the police response to stalking highlighted several fundamental gaps in how stalking and harassment cases are handled.

However by adopting a digital informed approach to stalking investigations, alongside supporting the victim, the Metropolitan Police have transformed how MPS officers handle stalking and harassment cases, driving significant improvements in charge rates and investigation efficiency, and reducing the burden on victims.

Modernising investigative practices is not optional, and forces adopting a digital informed approach now, will see results sooner.

Identify stalking early: Tools like CSAS allow officers to recognise (or rule out) stalking behaviours. By leveraging digital evidence, such as communication patterns and proximity data, officers can see whether a suspect is repeatedly engaging with a victim inappropriately.

Use of protective & preventative measures: By obtaining digital evidence promptly, officers are able to submit robust applications for protective & preventative measures, such as Stalking Protection Orders, enhancing victim safety early in investigations.

Embrace "digital informed" investigations: By adopting a "digital informed" mentality to investigations, officers analyse phone records, social media activity, and other digital sources within hours rather than weeks. This approach ensures digital lines of enquiry are not missed, leading to higher charge rates and lower NFA rates.

Ultimately, a digital informed approach means victims are safer, more supported, case resolution times are quicker, and victims are more likely to report crimes again in the future.

"They should never give up on reporting it, because I've come a long way and that is because of the police. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here today." **Stalking victim, "Leena"**

5. Forensic Analytics

Forensic Analytics modernises law enforcement investigative practices with advanced digital forensic tools.

We're an approved supplier to 95% of UK police forces, and our services include accredited training, RF surveying, consulting, and expert witness capabilities.

Our flagship product, the Cell Site Analysis Suite (CSAS), is widely used to quickly retrieve, evaluate, and transform digital evidence into actionable intelligence that meets evidential standards.

CSAS The powerful investigative platform trusted by police forces UK-wide.

CDAN Nexus Provide real-time intelligence straight to your frontline.

CellView Add instant real-world detail to cell site visualisations.

Lima Cell Monitor RF Survey hardware, optimised for law enforcement.

Contact Us

The Forensic Analytics' team is here to help Chief Constables and their forces navigate the recommendations outlined by the HMICFRS, IOPC, and the College of Policing.

With our expertise in law enforcement and digital forensics, we can support your teams in modernising their investigative processes, reducing delays, and improving outcomes in stalking and harassment cases.

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