

Victims' Experience: Annual Survey

September 2021

The sample

- The Victims' Commissioner received 587 responses to an online survey (June 2021). 569 respondents had reported or been a victim of crime in the last three years. Almost half of these cases had been reported or dealt with by the criminal justice system during COVID.
- The survey was posted on the Victims' Commissioner website and social media. The sample was self-selecting, having chosen to fill in the questionnaire, and may not be representative of the population (see Appendix).
- Just over one in four respondents said that someone was charged with the reported offence.
- 4% had attended the trial, and 16% said someone was convicted of the offence at court.
- Less than one third (29%) of respondents were aware of the Code of Practice for Victims that sets out the minimum standards of service that agencies in the criminal justice system must meet when dealing with victims of crime.¹
- We carried out a very similar survey last year² and this bulletin contains some comparisons with those results.

Procedural justice is based on four central principles: treating people with dignity and respect, giving citizens a voice during encounters, being neutral in decision making, and conveying trustworthy motives.³ Procedural justice theory says that if people perceive they are being treated fairly by authority figures they are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome.

- In agreement with the results from last year's survey, procedural justice was of prime importance to victims of crime: they wanted to be treated with fairness and respect by the police, for the crime to be fully investigated and to be kept informed about the progress of their case.
- Respondents placed greater importance on having the crime fully investigated and being treated with fairness and respect by the police than on the perpetrator being arrested, being kept informed about the police investigation or being referred to victims' services.
- Some respondents said the police 'did not take their complaints seriously'. People reporting domestic violence often felt the police were unresponsive to their reports.
- Respondents commented on the length of time of the investigation or time taken for their case coming to court, with almost half of respondents feeling the police investigation took too long.
- Only a quarter of respondents agreed that they were kept regularly informed or received all the information they needed about the police investigation.

¹ This compares to 20% of all victims of crime (in the last year) who had heard of the Code in 2017/18. The higher figure in our survey may underscore that our sample were a particularly interested group of victims who may be more likely to be aware of the Code. According to the Crime Survey of England and Wales, awareness of the Code has also been increasing in recent years. See: https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/victcomm2-prod-storage-119w3o4kq2z48/uploads/2020/03/OVC_Victims-stats-2020.pdf

² See: <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/victims-experiences-of-criminal-justice-system-revealed-in-new-research/>

³ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/the-evidence-base-probation/models-and-principles/procedural-justice/#>

Victims survey

We received 569 responses from people who said they had been a victim of crime or had reported a crime of which they had been a victim, in the last three years. Respondents told us about their experience with the police, victims services, court and sentencing:

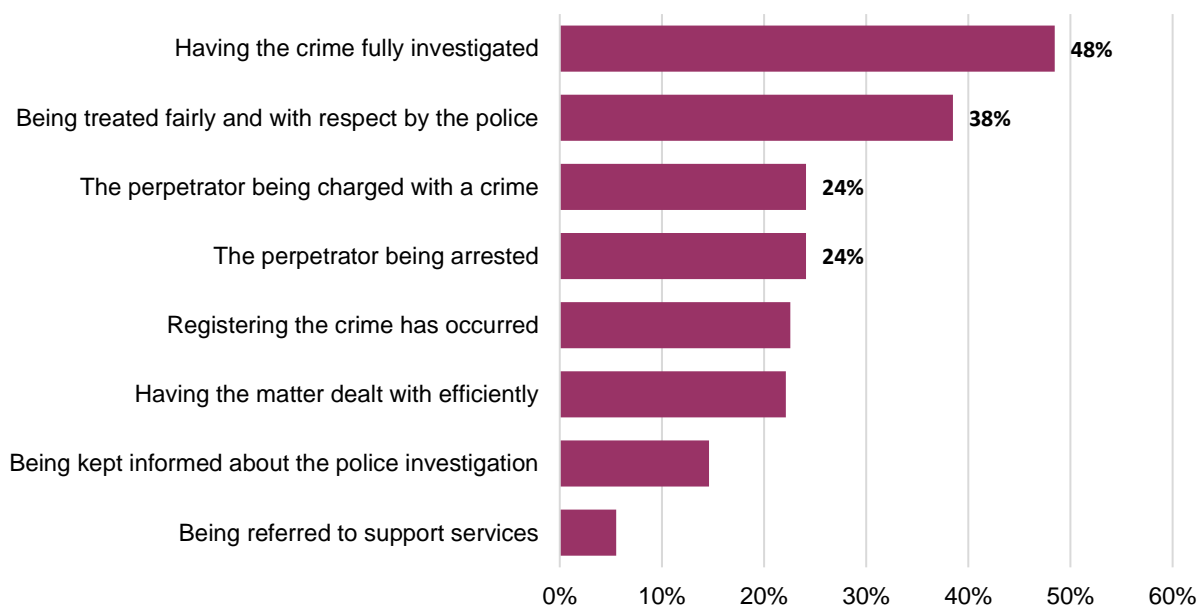
- **Charging:** 26% said that someone was charged with an offence, 10% were unsure/did not know, and 64% said no one was charged with the offence.
- **Court:** 5% said they have given evidence at the trial, 3% attended the sentencing hearing, and 4% attended any other hearing.
- **Sentencing:** 16% said that someone was convicted of the offence at court.

Experience of reporting a crime to the police

We asked whether, based on their experience of reporting a crime to the police, respondents would report a crime again. Less than half (43%) of respondents said they would report again; this was in line with the previous year's figure of 42%. Thirty-four per cent said they would not report again, and 23% said they did not know (n=451).

Based on their experience of reporting a crime to the police, we also asked respondents to rank the most important factor for victims. The most popular response was having the crime fully investigated by the police. Forty-eight per cent of respondents ranked this as the most or second most important factor for them.

Based on your experience of reporting a crime to the police, what is most important for victims? Combined percentage of respondents who said it was the most important or second most important factor Sample size: 452



Again, based on their experience, respondents were also asked about their attitudes to the police, the police investigation, receiving information about the investigation and the overall experience. Forty-two per cent of respondents felt they had been treated fairly and with respect by the police.

The female officer responsible for the rape case was exceptional. She was timely, called regularly, and ensured I received adequate support. (Female, 25-34, London)

The police were fantastic and thank god for them. (Male, 25-34, London)

My first investigating officer was amazing and made me feel heard and believed (Female, 25-34, West Midlands)

By contrast, some people felt that their reports of crimes were not taken seriously and there was a lack of action taken by the police. This was notable amongst both female and male victims of domestic abuse who felt the police did not act on the crimes they reported.

I felt blamed and that they tried to lower my expectations because they didn't want to charge him from the outset. I felt the evidence I provided them with was disregarded. (Female, 35-44, East Midlands)

All they want to do is no further action domestic abuse cases where the victim is male. (Male, 55-64, Wales)

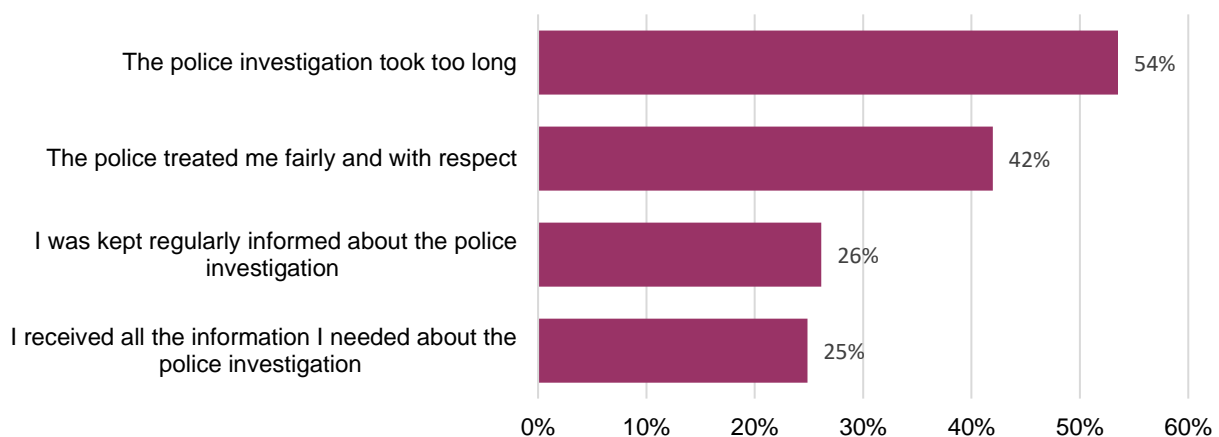
A number of respondents mentioned that they were police or prison officers. These respondents felt that the crimes against them were not treated seriously by both the police and the courts, as these assaults were seen as an occupational hazard rather than an assault.

I am a police officer and have been assaulted a number of times over my service. I find in my experience, as victims, we are dealt with differently and the Victims' Charter is not complied with. It's disappointing to not be treated as a victim but merely, what feels like, being looked upon that it's part of the job and if you want to know what's happening you'll have to find out yourself type attitude from the investigating officers. (Male, 45-54, London)

I believe that the CPS are mainly poor when it comes to dealing with prison staff. There appears to be an element of "expectation" in the job as a prison officer. (Male, 45-54, North West)

Many respondents felt the process took too long and it was difficult to get information about the investigation. Only a quarter of respondents agreed that they were regularly informed or had all the information they needed: 54% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'the police investigation took too long' (n=454). The impact of COVID on investigation times was noticeable with 60% (n=219) of respondents whose cases were reported or investigated during the COVID pandemic agreeing with this statement, as opposed to only 47% (n=235) of respondents whose cases were dealt with prior to COVID.

Proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about the police and criminal investigation Sample size: 454-510



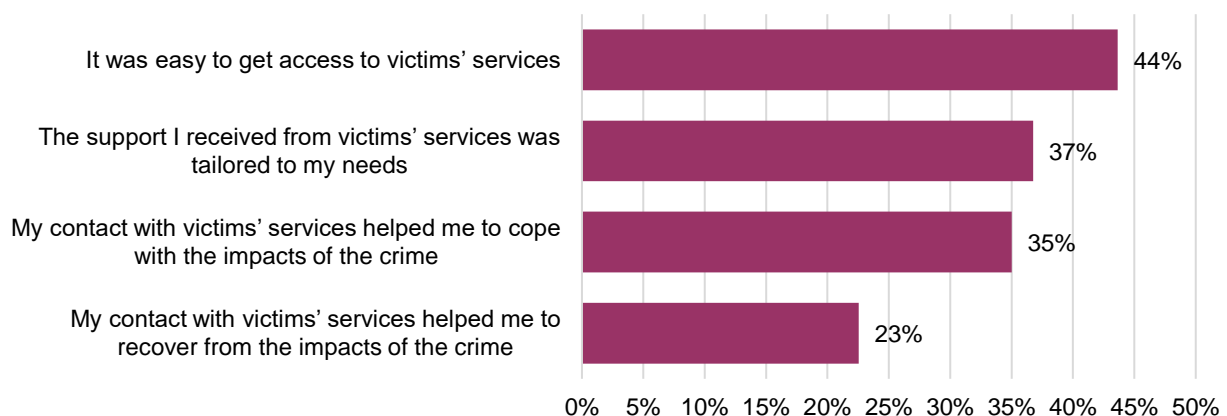
There was a noticeable difference towards victims' experiences with the police based on ethnicity. Only 33% (n=80) of ethnic minority respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'the police treated me fairly and with respect', as opposed to 44% (n=404) of white respondents. Similarly, only 16% (n=98) of ethnic minority respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'victims are fully supported by the police', compared to 26% of white respondents (n=450).⁴

Victim Personal Statement Overall 39% of respondents said they were offered the opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement (n=412). This figure fell to 29% for cases reported and investigated prior to the COVID pandemic and increased to 51% for cases in the system since the pandemic. These results are encouraging as they show not only an increase over time but also a high proportion of victims offered the opportunity to make a personal statement compared to the latest available data from the CSEW which showed only 14% of victims recalling being offered the opportunity to make a personal statement.⁵

Experience of victims' services

We asked respondents whether they agreed with statements about victim support services. We also received several comments about victims' services. Forty-four per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that it was easy to access victims' services.

Proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about victims' services *Sample size 234 - 252*



Some respondents said they had not received any contact from victims' services, despite saying they would like to be contacted. Some respondents expressed concerns that victims' services were under-funded leading to long waiting lists and difficulties accessing the services. They also felt that the lack of funding meant that it could be difficult to access specialised services.

I was offered victim support which I said I would like however never received any. (Female (Transgender), 45-54, Yorkshire and the Humber)

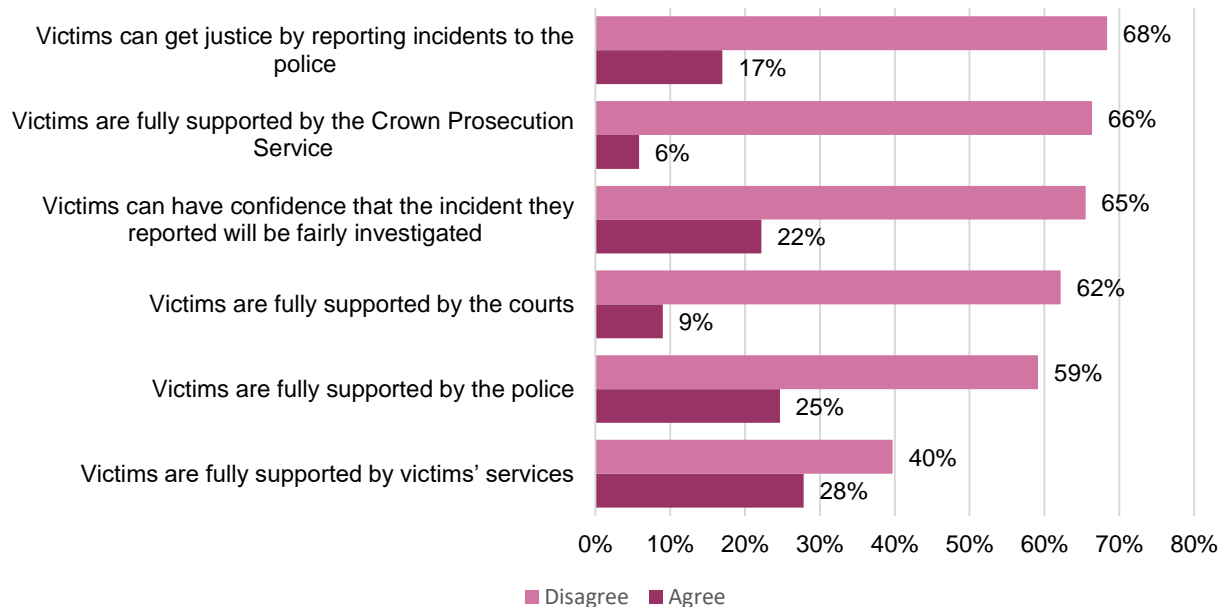
Victims services are overwhelmed, there is not enough staff to deal with the amount of victims referred which means waiting lists are long or in some cases even closed. Accessing support is incredibly difficult. (Female, 16-24, London)

⁴ Sample sizes were too small to provide any meaningful data at a more detailed level

⁵ <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/victcomm2-prod-storage-119w3o4kq2z48/uploads/2019/08/VC-Victim-Personal-Statements-Review-2018-19.pdf>

Despite these concerns, respondents rated victims' services as the most supportive aspect of the criminal justice system.

Proportion of respondents who disagree and strongly disagreed or agreed and strongly agreed with the following statements Sample size: 564-568



Respondents who had been supported by victims' services expressed their appreciation and gratitude for the support they received and mentioned how helpful they had found these interventions.

These services are essential to help victims. If I didn't have these by my side I honestly don't know if I would be here today. (Female, 25-34, West Midlands)

They were invaluable and really understood my needs and helped me understand processes that were alien to me and a world I have had little dealings with. (Male, 35-44, North East)

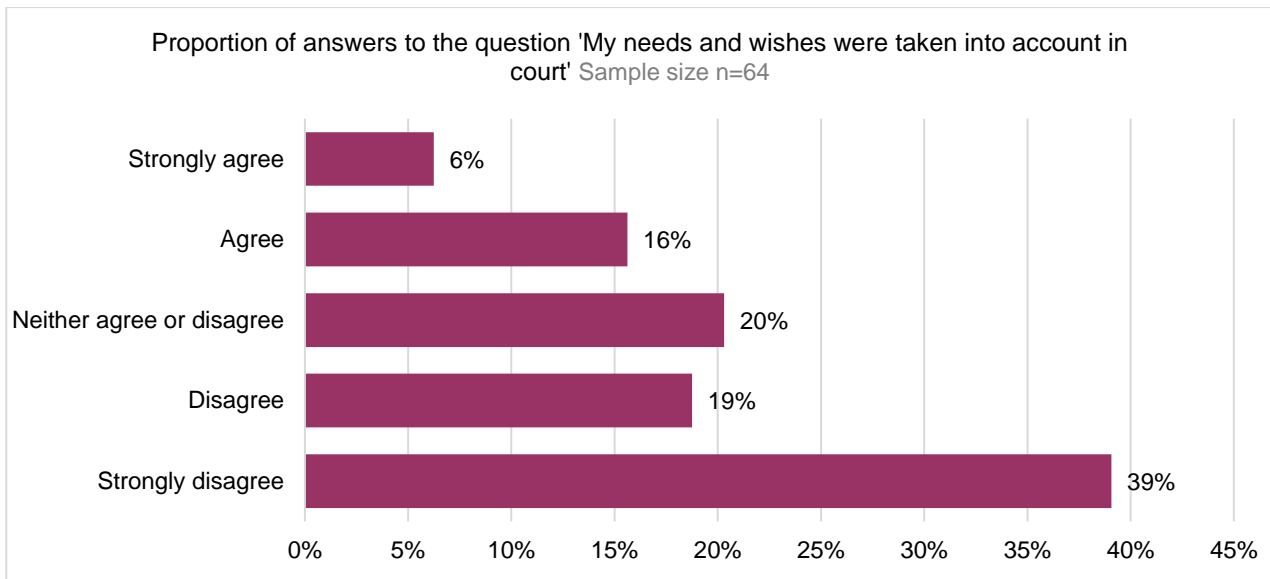
Without my ISVA, I would not have got through the process. Her support was amazing and unwavering. (Female, 45-54, North West)

While there was sometimes some difficulty in gaining the support they required, it appeared that victims' services did have a positive impact on those victims who were able to access these services.

Experience of attending court

We asked whether, based on their experience of attending court, respondents would attend court again. Just half (50%) of those who had attended court said they would attend again, 26% said they would not, and 22% said they did not know (n=46). This figure is appreciably lower than the 67% of respondents in last year's survey who said they would attend court again.

Victims found the court process challenging. Less than 10% of respondents felt that they were supported by the courts or by the CPS and only 22% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'My needs and wishes were taken into account in court', with 58% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (n = 64).



When asked to elaborate on their experience in the court, respondents often commented that special measures that had been requested were not put in place, and that the CPS were inconsiderate of the needs of the victims.

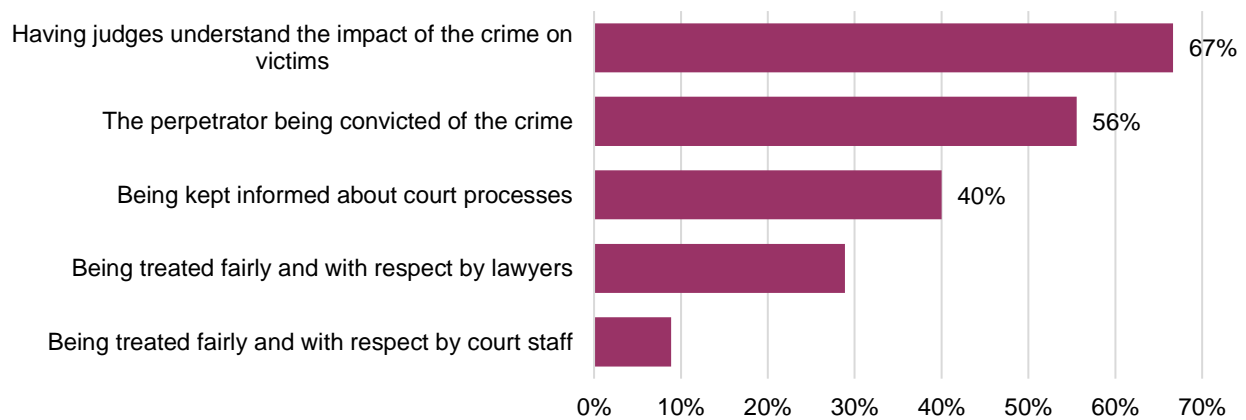
I requested a screen as perpetrator was my ex-husband, Witness Care were fantastic and arranged this, Citizen's Advice we're also brilliant at the court in acknowledging this, however the CPS lawyer very briskly advised the court allocated wasn't suitable for screens, but I could always stand sideways so I didn't have to look at him! The reason for requesting screens was so I didn't feel intimidated by him watching me, so felt totally let down [...] felt pushed into accepting to get the case over with! (Female, 45-55, West Midlands)⁶

It was terrible. I had requested a privacy screen and separate entrance. The security staff were not well informed, and I had to argue with them to be allowed in the back entrance after walking the streets several times at their demand. I was then escorted to the court room by witness protection but they were not there to collect me so I was locked in the corridor for 45 minutes and the only person I came into contact with during that time was the perpetrator I should have been protected from. (Female, 35-44, West Midlands)

Based on their experience of attending court, we asked respondents to rank the most important factor for victims. Two thirds of respondents said that having judges understand the impact of the crime on victims was the most or second most important factor. This was also rated the most important factor in our survey last year (63% saying it was the most or second most important factor).

⁶ This case occurred during the pandemic where issues around the provision of screens had been identified.

Based on your experience of attending court, what is most important for victims? Combined percentage of respondents who said it was the most important or second most important factor for victims Sample size: 45



All respondents – regardless of whether they went to court – were also asked about their attitudes to the courts. Once again respondents felt that the process was taking too long and that they were not properly informed about the court proceedings. Two thirds (66%) agreed with the statement ‘I had to wait for too long before the case came to court’ (n=118) and only 25% agreed with the statement ‘I was kept well informed about the progress of the case’ (n=118)

Communication was inadequate, often inaccurate and slow. (Female, 45-55, Wales)

You have no voice and are expected to put up with delays, misinformation and miscommunication. (Female, 25-34, East of England)

Attitudes towards the criminal justice system

The survey asked respondents, ‘Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience as a victim in the criminal justice system?’ This was an open question, in which respondents could raise any points they wished to, and we received 220 responses. These reflected respondents’ varied experiences of the criminal justice system. A diverse group of themes emerged and although this summary is not a comprehensive thematic analysis of all responses, it does highlight a number of recurring themes.

A number of respondents noted how their experience had been positive, however they were aware that their experience was not replicated throughout the system.

Our experience was excellent, but I don't know of anyone else who has had such a positive time. (Male, no other demographic details given)

Equally, many respondents expressed their disappointment with the criminal justice system and especially the court process and the CPS. They remarked on the need for improvements to the system and that victims should be given more support and protection.

I was failed by every service I reached out to for help. The whole process has traumatised me. I do not trust anyone connected to the police, courts or justice system. It is disgusting. Women are treated so poorly, and the lack of legal aid supports abusers and criminals. The whole system protects and supports perpetrators and not victims. Anyone connected with those systems should be ashamed of themselves. (Female, 45-54, Wales)

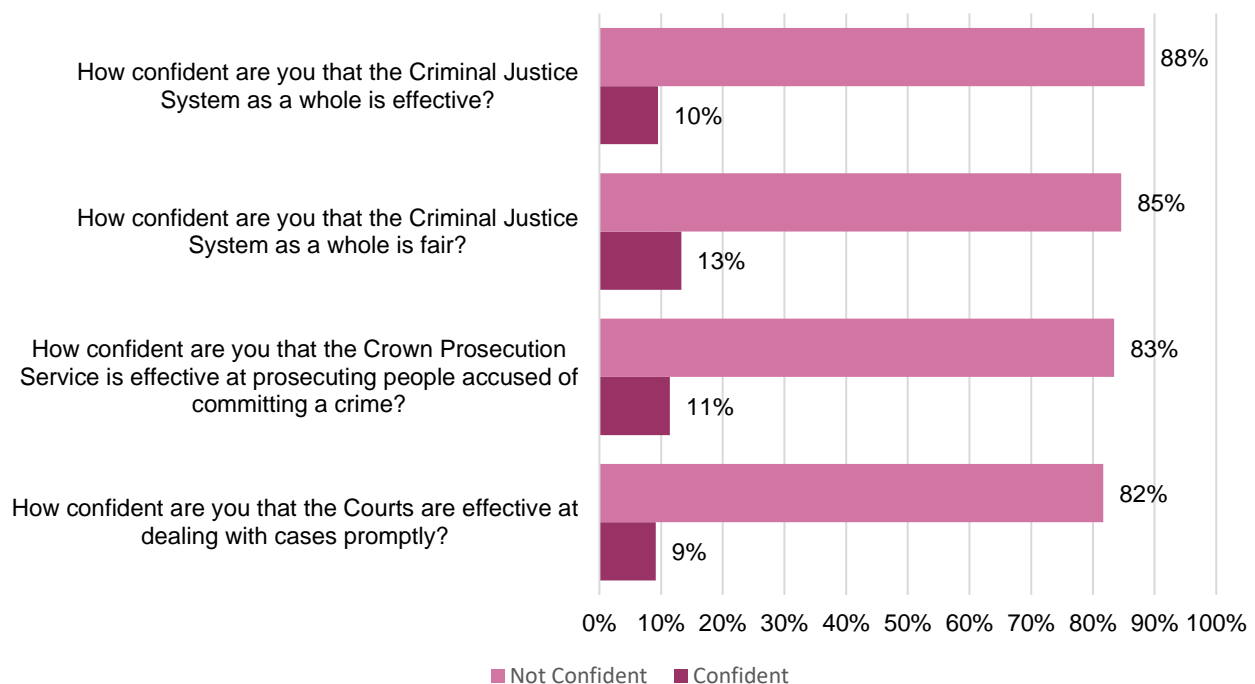
This whole process has been more traumatic than the actual rape. I have zero belief in the justice legal system. (Female, 25-34, London)

Being kept informed. Reflecting the responses in the questionnaire, many respondents remarked on the lack of procedural justice. They commented on the importance of information about their cases and noted how different agencies varied in their ability to keep respondents informed about the criminal investigation, the court hearings and the sentence. Many comments focused on how difficult it was to obtain information at various points throughout their criminal justice journey.

The poor communication from the initial reporting to the final sentencing was unacceptable and so easy to fix. I felt unsupported, isolated and as though I was fighting a battle with the very people (police & CPS) who were supposed to be fighting for me. (Female, 34-44, South East)

Confidence in the system. The survey asked respondents about their confidence in the criminal justice system. Confidence in the system was low overall. Generally men expressed greater confidence in the system than women with 16% of men (n=172) saying the CPS was effective at prosecuting people, versus 9% of women (n=378) and 20% of men stating that they were confident that the system was fair, against only 10% of women.

Proportion of respondents who were not very confident and not at all confident or very confident and fairly confident with the following statements about the criminal justice system. Sample size: 565 – 568



From first reporting, through to giving evidence in court - The whole unbalanced system and process is based on and supports the perpetrator's rights. The system and process dismiss and breaks the victim and their rights. (Female, 45-55 South East)

Around half of the respondents had reported their crimes, or had their crimes investigated during the COVID pandemic. The pandemic placed great strains on many aspects of the country including the criminal justice system so perhaps it is not too surprising that our survey reflected marked dissatisfaction with some aspects of the criminal justice process. Nevertheless, the

findings around the court process, in particular, suggest a worrying picture, with low confidence that the courts are dealing with cases promptly, and little sense that victims' needs and wishes were taken into account from those who had been to court.

However, there were some encouraging findings: in particular, higher recollection of being offered a VPS than we've seen elsewhere. Although many of the respondents to this survey had experienced difficulties with the system, when victims do feel heard and that their concerns are being responded to, they also feel supported. Even if the case does not end in a conviction, this survey, in line with our findings from elsewhere, underscores that victims' primary concern is for procedural justice.

My court case resulted in a non-conviction restraining order, so I did not have to testify. The staff were very supportive, and the magistrates asked me to come upstairs to thank me for attending court and willing to testify which was reassuring. (Female, 25-34, London)

Appendix

Methodology – The Victims’ Commissioner launched an online survey on 28th May 2021. It was closed on 5th July 2021. The survey was designed to take between 5 to 10 minutes to complete. We asked one screening question at the start of the survey to identify respondents who had been a victim of crime or had reported a crime of which they were a victim in the last three years. Most reported that they had been a victim (97%, n=569), the rest said they had not (3%, n=18). Those who answered ‘No’ were routed to the end of the survey and did not answer any other questions. Other screening questions were used to route respondents through the survey, i.e. if a victim had attended court, they were asked about their experiences of attending court. We used Smart Survey to collect responses and provided information on the Victims’ Commissioner’s privacy policy at the start of the survey. The survey used a mixture of closed (tick box) and open questions (comment box for text responses). The survey was promoted through the Victims’ Commissioner social media and website, and through partner organisations, victims’ services, and other agencies.

The survey findings have some limitations: the sample is a self-selected group and cannot be viewed as representative of all victims. For example, we would expect underrepresentation of respondents with limited internet access, who do not use social media or visit the Victims’ Commissioner website. The survey methodology literature on self-selection bias also indicates that respondents with strong feelings may be more likely to respond to surveys.⁷

Demographic breakdown – **Gender:** female (66%), male (30%). **Age (years):** under 24 (8%), 25 to 34 (20%), 35 to 44 (26%), 45 to 54 (28%), 55 to 64 (12%), 65 and over (3%). **Ethnicity:** White (77%), Asian/Asian British (5%), Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (3%), Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups (6%), Other (2%). **Regions:** Wales (7%), East of England (7%), North East (5%), South West (8%), East Midlands (6%), West Midlands (9%), North West (10%), Yorkshire and the Humber (9%), London (17%), South East (16%).

⁷See: ‘Self-selection bias’ in: Lavrakas, P.J., (2008). Encyclopaedia of Survey Research Methods. 2nd Edition. Sage Publications. Also see: Bethlehem, J. (2010). Selection bias in web surveys. International Statistical Review, 78(2), pp.161-188.