



Science
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in Policing

POLICE STAR FUND 25/26 FINAL REPORT

**GENDERING POLICE CUSTODY: EXAMINING
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF POLICE
CUSTODY IN WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE**

WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE

**UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK
AND CARDIFF UNIVERSITY**

**LAYLA SKINNS, LEXINE SMYTH, KATIE WEIR, ROXANNA
DEHAGHANI, JACQUELINE HODGSON, VANESSA MUNRO
AND ANGELA SORSBY**

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Layla Skinns, Lexine Smyth, Katie Weir and Angela Sorsby are at the Centre for Criminological Research, School of Law, University of Sheffield.

Jacqueline Hodgson and Vanessa Munro are at Warwick Law School, University of Warwick

Roxanna Dehaghani is at the School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University

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FOREWORD BY DAME VERA BAIRD



This is the first academic study to examine police custody as a gendered space and to assess the particular impact of detention on women. I am pleased to write this foreword, not least because the project drew on some of the insights from the review I conducted in 2023–24 following a Sky News exposé of apparently unlawful treatment of three women in custody at a police station in Greater Manchester.

Within days of Andy Burnham announcing that review, more than twenty other women came forward with complaints of similar treatment across Greater Manchester Police. Thirteen were prepared to be identified, and the accounts of those courageous women became the most powerful feature of my report. Their criticisms — all accepted by the Mayor and the police — led me to make 26 recommendations – and to a concern that the same behaviour could be happening in other forces.

The Police Star Fund project took up that challenge by examining women’s experiences of police custody in West Yorkshire. Partnering with three universities, West Yorkshire Police opened up its procedures to research scrutiny in order to understand more about its practices in the detention of women suspects and to improve these where possible. The researchers analysed more than 52,000 custody records, conducted almost 180 hours of observation in custody suites, and interviewed 44 women with experience of custody and 43 custody staff. This is a very different study from mine, distinguished by its academic breadth, depth and rigour. Yet the authors are clear that their findings provide empirical support for some of my own. Concerns first raised in Greater Manchester are therefore likely to be present in varying degrees elsewhere. They pose a major challenge for policing.

The data show instances where women in West Yorkshire were arrested for less serious offences in circumstances where arrest was unnecessary and a voluntary interview should have been considered, instead. Some allegations against women arose from calls they themselves had made to report domestic abuse, where police officers failed both to identify the primary perpetrator and to understand the effects of trauma on the victim. No Further Action is a far more frequent outcome for women, yet they were still sometimes detained for lengthy periods.

Although the introduction of a designated woman officer as a single point of contact (SPOC) offered some benefits to women detainees, the researchers found custody areas to be profoundly masculine environments in which women were in crisis and acute distress. This included women who had experienced male violence, who were required to remove religious head coverings and those who were pregnant and/or separated from their children. These findings support the case for entirely separate, female-only cell areas attended by female officers.

This new study brings more extensive data, sustained observation and rigorous academic analysis to many of the same concerns as mine. There is now the evidence for all police forces to examine their own practice, to limit arrest to where there is no alternative, to recognise women’s distinct experiences of custody, and to make the changes required to ensure gender-responsive, trauma-informed safe and equal treatment.

Contents

Table of Contents

Foreword by Dame Vera Baird	3
Acknowledgements	5
Executive summary	6
Introduction	8
1.1 Background	8
1.2 Terminology and the focus on women and girls	9
1.3 The existing research	10
1.4 Project management and team.....	12
Innovative Research	14
2.1 Outline of the concept.....	14
2.2 Innovation.....	14
2.3 Assumptions made	14
Implementation	16
3.1 Data collection and analysis	16
3.2 Reflections on the research process.....	20
Project Findings	23
4.1 The context of police custody for women	23
4.2 Women's experiences of police custody	32
4.3 Women's needs in police custody.....	39
4.4 Views on the future of police custody for women	47
Next Steps	50
5.1 Dissemination plan and knowledge exchange activities	50
5.2 Impacts on policy and practice	51
Conclusion	52
6.1 Conclusions.....	52
6.2 Key recommendations.....	54
References	61



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We also thank the women who participated in the research and who generously shared their stories with us. Without these views, the project would not have existed.

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- Vera Baird DBE KC, External Expert Member, Women's Justice Board
- DCI Simon Barnes, Staff Officer to NPCC Lead for Police Custody, Northamptonshire Police
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women account for 16% of suspects held in police custody in England and Wales (Home Office, 2025a). Yet, there has been limited research into their experiences of police custody. The recent Baird Report afforded some insight, identifying significant problems within Greater Manchester Police, which was the specific focus of the inquiry. This included poor care of women, many of whom were also victims of domestic abuse (Baird, 2024). However, the applicability of those findings and recommendations to other police force areas is currently unknown. This limits the possibility of evidence-informed policy and practice reforms, presenting a major barrier to improving police treatment of women in custody.

The Police STAR-funded ‘Gendering police custody’ project therefore aimed to investigate women’s lived experiences of and needs in police custody in West Yorkshire, identifying challenges and best practice solutions.

The research involved a comprehensive literature review and the collection of a range of mixed-methods data, including: West Yorkshire Police (WYP) custody record data from 1 January 2025–31st December 2025; interviews with 44 women with lived experience of police custody; interviews with 43 police custody staff in WYP and other West Yorkshire criminal justice practitioners; 9 interviews with national-level police custody stakeholders; 179 hours of observation in police custody and of relevant Out of Court Resolution (OOCR) interventions and scrutiny panels.

In our literature review, we found that women’s treatment in police custody has rarely been considered directly in empirical police custody research or in policies on custody or women in the criminal justice system (Skinns et al., 2026).

The empirical research showed a complex picture and potential risks of inappropriately criminalising women in domestic abuse and assault on emergency worker cases, as well as challenges with viewing all women as vulnerable. Police custody was often experienced by women as painful owing, for example, to uncertainties about the wellbeing of their children and insecurities related to being in a male-dominated environment.

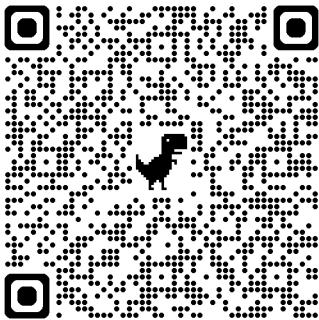
Measures in place to respond to these challenges included diversionary measures, such as non-authorisation of detention, voluntary interviews and OOCRs, and additional support provided by women welfare officers. Whether these measures were routinely offered and provided, however, was impacted by staff busyness, perceived deservingness of women suspects and wider pressures on custody and on others that work there.

We make 40 research-informed recommendations around six key themes: (1) Preventing unnecessary criminalisation and reducing women’s entry into and time spent in custody; (2) Embedding trauma-informed and gender-responsive practice; (3) Improving dignity, privacy and women’s welfare; (4) Strengthening police communication with women to ensure their views are heard; (5) Building workforce capability and organisational capacity to better meet women’s needs; (6) Strengthening accountability for and continuous improvement of custody on matters impacting women’s needs and experiences.

This report can be read alongside an animation, which was produced to make its key findings more accessible to a wider audience. Following on from this report, we will also be working with the police and other stakeholders to implement the recommendations for policy and practice set out here.

The animation and further updates on the project can be found on the study's project page:

<https://sheffield.ac.uk/ccr/our-research/gendering-police-custody-examining-womens-experiences-police-custody-west-yorkshire-police>



INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Women account for 16% of suspects held in police custody in England and Wales (Home Office, 2025a). Police custody refers to the place where someone is taken when arrested whilst a decision is made about what to do next with the alleged criminal case against them and is a key entrance point into the wider criminal justice process (Skinns, 2011: 2-3). Women's needs therein are distinct in terms of health, mental health, caring responsibilities and offending (Disely et al., 2021: 35; Angiolini, 2017: para 69), and they often experience a 'revolving door' into prison due to these needs going unaddressed (HIMPR and HMIP, 2024: 28). Yet, there has been no focused research into their experiences of police custody. The recent Baird Report afforded some insight, identifying significant problems within Greater Manchester Police (GMP), including poor care of women who were also often victims of domestic abuse (Baird, 2024). This set in train a process of further local scrutiny and reform. However, the applicability of those findings and recommendations to other police force areas is unknown. Together with the paucity of sustained academic research, this limits the possibility of evidence-informed policy and practice reforms, presenting a major barrier to improving police treatment of women detainees, including through diversionary measures. This also limits opportunities for improving public confidence in the police amongst women, which is especially important at a time when women's trust in the police has been diminished by high profile police misconduct scandals and sexual violence against women by serving officers (Pickering, et al., 2024).

The limited academic research and the scrutiny set in motion by the Baird report prompted a successful application by the authors with West Yorkshire Police to the Police STAR Fund for the 'Gendering police custody' project, which explores police custody as a gendered space. Though the Baird Report has recently highlighted urgent concerns about gendered police custody, little is known about the applicability of those findings beyond GMP. A previous scoping study similarly highlighted areas for concern in the treatment of women suspects, such as failures to acknowledge the distinctive needs of women (Hodgson and Skinns, 2019). In this study, brief surveys were administered by Independent Custody Visitors to 26 women detainees in 5 police force areas and interviews were conducted with 5 Independent Custody Visitor Scheme Managers. A key finding was that police practitioners were reluctant to recognise gender as a significant feature of the detainee experience, preferring instead to recognise the "individual needs" of all detainees. In addition, this scoping research showed that male-dominated custody blocks created challenges for staff, for example, when dealing with women detainees who may also be victims of male violence or exploitation, albeit that the women detainees in the research offered mixed views about whether it was important to them that they were dealt with by women staff.

Through a more systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research investigates women's lived experiences of police custody in West Yorkshire, identifying challenges and best practice solutions. The following research questions were addressed in the project:

1. How do detainee populations vary by gender and how does this impact, if at all, on case outcomes? Are there other intersections, e.g., with ethnicity, offence type and arrest/volunteer status?
2. How do women detainees describe their lived experiences of police custody? How is gender relevant?
3. How do staff describe women detainees' experiences of, and needs in, police custody? How is gender relevant?
4. To what extent do existing laws, policies and guidance address the needs of a diverse range of women detainees, many of whom are domestic abuse and sexual trauma survivors? What changes – if any – are required for a more gender-responsive approach to women in police custody?

By better understanding women detainees' experiences and needs, and making recommendations for improving policy, training and practice to respond to those needs, the overarching aim of the research was to improve treatment and reduce the likelihood of women being repeatedly arrested and detained.

1.2 Terminology and the focus on women and girls

Before setting out the existing research we wish to explain the terminology used in what follows and the focus of the research on women and girls.

The language used in official reports can be inconsistent and does not always demonstrate fidelity to commonly used distinctions around sex and gender. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) Code C tends to refer to female detainees, not women, whilst Baird (2024) refers to women and girls, and College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) refers to women and female detainees interchangeably. Similarly, and unsurprisingly, the custody staff we observed and interviewed also used these terms interchangeably. Therefore, when quoting from these key sources or when drawing on data collection obtained in accordance with these frameworks or data collected from staff, we necessarily rely on the language they adopt. However, the 'Gendering police custody' project set out to examine women's experiences of police custody, where we define women as those who are designated female from birth or come subsequently to identify as women. This means that the experiences of trans people who identify as women were not excluded from the remit of the research, albeit that, as far as we know, none were ultimately encountered or therefore participated in the research. In what follows, we primarily use the term 'woman' or 'women', understood in this way, but use the term 'female' or 'male' selectively to reflect the language of police policies, such as PACE Code C, within which the police must work and record data and the language of those who participated in the research.

Though the original intention was to focus on adult women in the research, i.e., those aged 18 years and over, we decided at the outset of the project to adjust this to include girls too, in particular those aged 16 and 17 years. This was because we felt it important to include the views of this younger age group in the research, but it also enabled us to do this without adding too much complexity to

the ethical dimensions of the research, not least because 16 and 17 year old girls are able to consent to participate in research themselves, without the consent also of their parent or guardian. In what follows, where we say ‘women’, for linguistic convenience, we mean women and girls aged 16-17 years, though at points we will also draw attention, where relevant, to findings pertaining to the teenage girls in the research in particular.

1.3 The existing research

As part of this project, the research team conducted a review of the literature on women in police custody (see Skinns et al., 2026). Although a preliminary review of the literature revealed a paucity of information, it was nonetheless important to more precisely establish the main gaps in policy and research and to demonstrate how the ‘Gendering police custody’ project would fill these gaps. The key points of this literature review are summarised here.

Women are a small but significant minority in the criminal justice system, whose needs and experiences have been historically displaced by those of men. Research shows that women have distinct needs and experiences within the criminal justice system regarding:

- The type of offences for which they are arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. Women typically commit less serious offences than men.
- The context of women’s offending behaviour, which is often marked by trauma, abuse and poverty and by the complex effects of men and their offending on women’s lives.
- The patterns of sentencing, one of the most important of which is short and more often multiple sentences contributing to the revolving door nature of women’s experiences with the criminal justice system.
- The effects of imprisonment which are qualitatively different to men, linked in large part to women’s caring responsibilities, with separation from children amplifying mental ill-health and deepening trauma.

Framing women’s needs and experiences through an intersectional lens is important in order to recognise the distinctive experiences of subgroups of women, based on race/ethnicity, age and neurodivergent conditions and to understand processes of criminalisation and injustice. For example, Black women are more likely to be remanded into custody and to receive longer sentences if convicted. Black girls are also subject to adultification biases, which can lead to their culpability being overestimated and their need for support being underestimated. For neurodivergent women, meanwhile, tendencies towards social assimilation can result in their conditions being under-identified within the criminal justice system and necessary support being under-delivered.

Whilst there have been numerous policies and recommendations written about women in the criminal justice system, often focusing on prisons, these have sometimes had limited effect on practice. Moreover, their focus on the prison environment can be contrasted starkly with how few policies and recommendations there are about women in police custody. Existing police custody policies pay little attention to women. For example, neither the College of Policing’s Authorised

Professional Practice nor the National Police Custody Strategies gives substantial consideration to women's experiences and needs in police custody. Conversely, policies focused on women and the criminal justice system, such as the Female Offender Strategy, pay little attention to police custody. This mutual lack of attention limits the development of appropriate police custody practices for women and highlights the need for reform.

As for vulnerability in police custody, Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code C guidance emphasises consideration of innate, not structural (e.g. gender), situational or universal vulnerabilities for vulnerable adults. Women are, therefore, not automatically considered vulnerable in police custody. In any case, feminist scholarship points to the need for careful and critical engagement with the concept of vulnerability, including questions about why women are considered vulnerable, to what they are vulnerable, and how their vulnerability is produced or exacerbated by institutional practices. This scholarship also cautions against approaches that locate vulnerability primarily in women themselves, rather than in the social and institutional conditions in which it arises. At the same time, interventions designed to identify and respond to vulnerability may have unintended consequences, including extending surveillance, control and other forms of state intervention in women's lives. These concerns highlight the need to consider critically both the value and the potential consequences of vulnerability-informed approaches in police custody.

Much like the policy sphere, whilst there is plenty of research about women in the criminal justice system, often focused on prisons, research on women in police custody is notable by its absence and, where it does exist, women have largely been in the background. Of the limited research that does exist and, as cited in Skinns et al. (2026), it shows that:

- Custody suites are culturally and materially male dominated. They are predominantly staffed by men and have been shown to have a culture of machismo, misogyny and sexism, much like other parts of the police organisation. They are furthermore likely a site for the 'doing of gender' i.e. the performance, reproduction and negotiation of both masculinity and femininity through the everyday interactions of suspects and custody staff.
- Police powers are differentially applied to women, in ways which can be problematic (e.g., when arresting or strip-searching women with histories of abuse and trauma), but may also enable more equitable outcomes (e.g., when voluntary interviews are scheduled to accommodate women's greater caring responsibilities or when Out of Court Resolutions (OOCR) enable women to access the help they need to address the root causes of their offending). However, they can also be employed in gender-inattentive ways, which fail to take account of women's distinctive criminogenic and physical needs (e.g., when using force).
- In terms of women's due process rights and entitlements, access to a female welfare officer is not routinely and proactively offered or provided. Women's access to custodial legal advice is proportionate to their representation among suspects, though how many request or receive it is unknown. Given their typically more complex needs, more women are likely to need an Appropriate Adult (AA), but it is unclear the extent to which they are requested or received and thus the amount of unmet need for women.

- There has been significant focus on and some improvements to women's access to menstrual and menopause products, as 'lower-hanging' fruit, which are easier for the police to address. Also, a greater proportion of women than men are referred to Liaison and Diversion support, albeit that drug/alcohol-using women are the least likely to engage with this. Too little is known about the qualitative differences of experiences in relation to police powers and women's compliance with this, the gendered pains of police detention and of dignity beyond what Baird (2024) found, for example, about the indignities of strip searching and menstruation.
- As with other parts of the criminal justice system, an intersectional lens draws attention to differences in the experiences of women in police custody, including those whose experiences may be overlooked when women are treated as a homogeneous group. It enables consideration of the minorities within the minority of women in the criminal justice system and the distinctive challenges they may face. For example, neurodivergent women may experience particular difficulties with disclosure and identification, owing to the greater likelihood of masking. They may also experience sensory overwhelm and associated distress, which can be misconstrued as non-compliance requiring control rather than as an indication of a need for care and support.

We concluded that it is time for gender to move from the background to the foreground in police custody research, theorisation, policy, training and practice. As demonstrated by this literature review, neither policy nor research shows any sustained attention to or consideration of women's needs and experiences in police custody, unlike for other parts of the criminal justice system. This amounts to significant gaps, including around understanding women's experiences of police powers, accessing their due process rights, the pains of police detention and of dignified treatment. These must be filled with comprehensive, mixed methods and sustained research, including through the 'Gendering police custody project', which opens up possibilities of evidence-informed reform of policy, training and practice, such as through a national strategy for women in police custody.

The literature review also has wider implications for the theorisation of police custody, which has hitherto overlooked women. Such theorisation needs to consider the conceptualisation of vulnerability as it applies to women, how police powers operate in police custody, taking account of gender stereotypes and the institutionalisation of racism, machismo, sexism and misogyny, and the 'doing of gender' in police custody by staff and detainees, all of which requires recognition that police custody operates in a patriarchal context where women continue to face structural disadvantage as a result of their gender.

1.4 Project management and team

This project was a collaboration between West Yorkshire Police and academics from the University of Sheffield, University of Warwick and Cardiff University. The academic team brought decades of complementary experience of impactful on-the-ground research on police custody, gender and criminal justice. Academic Lead, Professor Layla Skinns, University of Sheffield (police custody/power/dignity); Academic Co-Leads, Professor Jackie Hodgson, University of Warwick

(police custody/detainee treatment/rights) and Professor Vanessa Munro, University of Warwick (gender/criminal justice), and Dr Roxanna Dehaghani, Cardiff University (vulnerability/criminal justice); Dr Angela Sorsby (statistician/race/criminal justice); Lexine Smyth, University of Sheffield (Research Associate, police custody/women/criminal justice) and Katie Weir, University of Sheffield (Research Assistant, social policy/women).

From WYP, the police lead was Chief Inspector Phil Sanderson supported also by Jonathan Tendall and Warren Walker. They provided crucial support facilitating access to custody facilities and staff; to women; to custody record data; as well as ensuring operational support enabling researcher presence whilst minimising disruption. Together this enabled us to work sensitively and effectively with staff and women to conduct the research, responding to any challenges that the research presented.

INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

2.1 Outline of the concept

The project addressed a significant evidence gap concerning women's experiences of police custody. Whilst previous research and policy on women in the criminal justice system has largely focused on prisons and community sentences and provision, comparatively little was known about women's experiences at the earlier and important point of police custody. Existing evidence suggested that women have distinctive needs associated with, for example, trauma and abuse, health and mental health, caring responsibilities and patterns of offending, but there was insufficient empirical evidence about how these shape their experiences of arrest and detention or how effectively police custody policy and practice respond to them.

The research sought to address this problem through a comprehensive mixed-methods study, combining quantitative analysis of police custody records with interviews and focus groups with women with lived experience, custody staff and other practitioners, interviews with national stakeholders, and direct observation of police custody and related practices. Bringing these different sources of evidence together enabled the research to identify gendered patterns in the use and outcomes of police custody, understand women's lived experiences and needs, examine how staff respond to them and identify opportunities for evidence-informed improvements to policy, training and practice.

2.2 Innovation

The project is innovative in placing gender at the centre, rather than the margins, of research on police custody. Previous police custody research has rarely focused specifically on women, whilst policy concerning women in the criminal justice system has concentrated predominantly on later stages, particularly imprisonment and community sanctions. The project therefore examined an important but comparatively neglected point of entry into the criminal justice system.

The research was also innovative in its breadth and mixed-methods design. It brought together large-scale quantitative analysis of custody records with detailed qualitative evidence from women with lived experience, custody staff, other criminal justice practitioners and national stakeholders, as well as direct observations of custody practice. This enabled the research to examine not only gendered patterns in custody populations and outcomes, but also how custody is experienced by women and staff and how formal policy operates in everyday practice.

Conceptually, the project moves beyond treating women simply as a category of potentially 'vulnerable' detainees by examining police custody itself as a gendered environment and considering how gender intersects with trauma, caring responsibilities, ethnicity, age and other aspects of women's lives. In doing so, it provides a new evidence base for developing more gender-responsive police custody policy, training and practice.

2.3 Assumptions made

The project was informed by existing research suggesting that women in the criminal justice system have distinctive experiences and needs associated with factors including trauma and abuse, health and mental health, caring responsibilities and patterns of offending. Previous research, such as the Baird Inquiry, also suggested that police custody is a predominantly male environment, and that existing custody policy and practice may not always recognise or respond adequately to women's needs.

The project therefore proceeded from the premise that gender was potentially significant to understanding women's experiences of police custody and that this warranted empirical investigation. It also recognised that women would not necessarily constitute a homogeneous group and that an intersectional approach could help to identify variation in their experiences. The mixed-methods design enabled these issues to be explored through comparison of quantitative patterns with the accounts of women, staff and other stakeholders, alongside observations of custody practice.

IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Data collection and analysis

To address the research questions we drew on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, including:

- 52,078 custody records from men and women aged 16 years and over and held in police custody in West Yorkshire in 2025;
- Interviews and focus groups with 44 women who had experienced police custody; 43 police custody staff and other criminal justice practitioners; and nine national police custody stakeholders;
- and 180 hours of observation in police custody and other relevant settings external to the police (see Table 1 for a summary of the qualitative data).

The project formally commenced on the 1st of April 2025, with data sharing agreements between WYP and the three academic institutions being put in place by the 31st of October 2025. Because of delays with the signing of these agreements, the team collected qualitative data in settings external to the police in September and October 2025. Once these agreements were signed, the remaining qualitative data collection in police custody took place from November 2025 to January 2026. The custody record data were shared by WYP with the research team in February 2026. Though the project formally ended on the 31st of March 2026, follow on Higher Education Innovation Funding from the University of Sheffield enabled data analysis and outputs to continue until the 31st of July 2026.

The project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield and Cardiff University in May 2025 (which also sufficed to address University of Warwick ethics approval requirements), meaning the data were carefully collected in accordance with ethical principles, such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and importantly safeguarding both of participants and the research team. This meant, for example, ensuring that participant information sheets were provided, including information about the circumstances in which anonymity may need to be waived, along with consent forms when conducting interviews or focus groups. Women interviewees were also provided with additional information about sources of support, should they need this, and were provided with a £20 gift voucher in recognition of the time taken to participate in the research. For the observation, staff were informed in advance about the research taking place. In accordance with these ethical

requirements, all data was pseudonymised to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.¹ Interview participants were invited to select a pseudonym of their choice, though not all wished to do this, meaning the research team selected one on their behalf, opting for names appropriate to their ethnicity, age, gender etc.

The quantitative custody record data consisted of everyone 16 years and over detained in all six custody suites across West Yorkshire between 1 January 2025 and 31 December 2025. There were 52,078 records in total, including 8,810 women (17%), 43,226 men (83%), 36 'unclassified', 5 'indeterminate' and 1 missing. This data also included 46 variables, including arrest classification, nationality, risk assessment question responses, strip search logs, first disposal, last disposal and top-ranked disposal. These were decided on in discussion with WYP, based on the data they had available. One variable they could not provide was requests for custodial legal advice. These data were shared with us in a de-personalised format, meaning they did not include names of suspects, though they did include data on other protected characteristics, such as age, date of birth and ethnicity. These data were stored confidentially on non-cloud-based University servers.

The sample of 44 women who participated in interviews and focus groups was achieved by inviting as many 'suitable' women to participate in the research as possible. In custody, decisions about who to approach were taken in conjunction with WYP, taking into account the need to safeguard participants and the research team. This meant, for example, that women who were mentally distressed, intoxicated or who were otherwise unlikely to be able to be fully informed about the research were not approached to participate. Though this happened rarely, it did mean that some of the most vulnerable women may not have been able to participate in the research. Those interviewed for the research had a wide range of current and historical experiences with WYP as suspects and, in a few instances, of other police forces. Some had single experiences, whilst others had multiple experiences. They also had a range of post-custody experiences from Out-of-Court-Resolutions (OOCRs) through to community penalties and imprisonment. They also represented a range of age groups and ethnicities. As shown in Table 2, six were from British Pakistani or Pakistani backgrounds, and five were aged 16 or 17 years of age, with an age range in the sample of 16 years up to 55 years. Based on women who disclosed their ethnicity, 64% (25 women of 39) described themselves as White, White British or White British Other and 8% (3 of 39) described themselves as Polish, Ukrainian or White European). The proportion of women interviewed who were White British or from other White backgrounds (72%) was similar therefore to that in the custody record data (71%). It was also possible for us to triangulate the accounts of women interviewees with the custody record data, based on the date of arrest and alleged offence.

¹ Interviewee and observation note pseudonymised name labels, refer to, as follows: W = woman with lived experience; DO = detention officer; CO = custody officer; CJP = criminal justice practitioner; Manager = a manager within custody; PC = police constable; and E = elite interviewee.

As for the interviews with 31 police custody staff, this included 6 Managers in custody, 15 Detention Officers, 6 Custody Officers, 4 Police Constables (who were either passing through custody or had been temporarily assigned to work there) and 12 other criminal justice practitioners, including Liaison and Diversion, Independent Custody Visitors, Appropriate Adults and third-sector practitioners. The 9 national-level police custody stakeholder interviewees were purposively selected to include those with experience of policing, women offenders and the wider criminal justice system.

Observations were conducted in two large and busy custody facilities in West Yorkshire, chosen to enable access to as many women, custody staff and other criminal justice practitioners as possible for interviews.² The team observed in each suite for 2-3 days per week for four weeks. Observation of custody scrutiny panels included an OOCR scrutiny panel and a child custody scrutiny panel. We also observed relevant OOCR interventions for women.³ Observation in these settings was opportunistic, based on their relevance and the availability of research staff to attend.

These mixed-methods data were wider in scope than we initially anticipated. The quantitative data we were able to obtain contained more custody records than had been originally planned, which thus provided a more robust basis for the analysis. For the qualitative data, due to constraints accessing custody at the beginning of the project, extra avenues of data collection were found which provided rich sources of data. Whilst waiting for data sharing arrangements to be agreed, we interviewed and held focus groups with women in settings external to the police, including Women's Centres, Youth Justice Service premises, as well as residential hostels and online (when women contacted the team directly about the research), as well as observing OOCR interventions for women and relevant scrutiny panels. Otherwise, the interviews with women, custody staff and other criminal justice practitioners and the observation work, took place in custody. Whilst waiting for data sharing arrangements to be agreed we also decided to conduct interviews with national-level police custody stakeholders, albeit that these interviews were then conducted once these arrangements had been finalised.

The qualitative data were thematically analysed using NVivo. Four researchers first individually read two transcripts (one for a woman with lived experience and one for a member of the custody staff) and two observations (on each from Site A and B) whilst writing reflective memos and searching for initial codes and patterns. The team then met to discuss the initial patterns and codes to develop a draft coding framework. Three researchers were then assigned two different transcripts or observations each, to test the coding framework in NVivo and make a note of further potential codes. The team then met to discuss the additional patterns and codes found during the testing phase and

² For the custody observation notes, these are referred to by site and day, for example 'Site A, Day 1'.

³ Observations of custody scrutiny panels are labelled type and date, and OOCR interventions are labelled by Programme (P1 or P2) and session, for example 'OOCR, P1, Day 1'.

re-drafted and expanded the framework. All transcripts and observations were then uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software for coding using the finalised coding framework.

The analysis of the quantitative data focused only on those classified in the custody record data as 'Men' or 'Women' due to low numbers in other categories. The quantitative custody record data were first cleaned and then analysed using SPSS, including descriptive statistics and some inferential statistics, though further analysis is still to be conducted.

Table 1 - The qualitative data collected in the research

	No. of hours of observation	Interviews with women	Interviews with staff/ professionals	Elite interviews
Site A	75	16	18	-
Site B	67	5	14	-
Outside of custody	38	23	11	9
Total	180	44	43	9

Table 2 – Socio-demographic data on the women who participated in interviews or focus groups

Age		Ethnicity		Religion	
16-17 years	5	White, White British, White British other	25	Muslim	4
18-25 years	8	British	3	Catholic	2
26-35 years	12	British Pakistani/Pakistani	6	Christian	2
36-45 years	7	Polish, Ukrainian or other White European	3	Atheist	1
46-55 years	8	Black African	1	None	7
Not disclosed	4	Other	1	Pagan	1
		Not disclosed	5	Not disclosed	27

3.2 Reflections on the research process

Police custody is a hidden space to which it is typically difficult to gain access (Skinns et al., 2023; Skinns, 2022). As such, there were benefits to working in partnership with WYP. Firstly, they facilitated access to all data, without any issue, once the collaboration agreement was signed, including facilitating access on the ground in custody facilities. Whilst gaining access was drawn out due to necessary police and university data sharing processes, we collected more wide-ranging data than originally planned because of this delay. Our partners suggested and arranged alternative forms of data to collect whilst we were waiting for these agreements to be reached, such as observing custody scrutiny panels and OOCR scrutiny panels, and they facilitated access to observe OOCR programmes for women. Additionally, once the data collection in police settings had begun, they provided a staff member – funded through the project – to facilitate access to and within the custody suite. Though they were not always present during all observation periods, the individual supporting the research provided considerable assistance with arranging interviews with women in police custody and custody staff, as well as answering any queries the team had about women in custody or custody practices, such as by looking things up on police databases, custody records and CCTV footage.

The research team were all women which was advantageous for interviewing women and observing OOCR interventions, as for some of our data collection we entered women only spaces such as women's centres, and it is possible that some women would not have agreed to or felt comfortable being interviewed on a 1:1 basis by a man. Given the distinctive nature of women's experiences in

custody (as set out in the findings presented in Section 4), for the most part, this enabled the team to relate more effectively to these experiences, particularly in regard to their feelings of gender-based dignity or indignity in custody, feelings of intimidation in a male-dominated environment and fears of separation from family.

Within custody, differences in status and relative power within the research team shaped the researchers' experiences of fieldwork and their ability to observe custody practices. More senior members of the team were sometimes referred to as 'the professor', making it more difficult for them to blend into the custody environment and observe unobtrusively from the background. By contrast, the early career researchers felt that staff sometimes became less conscious of their presence as researchers, enabling them to observe custody practices in a more naturalistic way. However, this greater degree of immersion also presented challenges. At times, custody staff used language to describe women detainees in their presence that the early career researchers found uncomfortable, placing them in the difficult position of witnessing comments that they regarded as inappropriate whilst seeking to maintain their role as impartial observers.

Conducting observational research creates an inherent dilemma around whether to adopt an active or passive role, and our position sometimes shifted throughout the fieldwork. As researchers with an emotional investment in the wellbeing of the women participating in the research, towards whom we also felt a duty of care, remaining entirely passive was sometimes difficult. For example, we would ask custody staff for food or drink on women's behalf or seek information about the progress of their case. On occasion, we also advocated for women, for example by asking staff to consider whether they should be reassessed as requiring an Appropriate Adult. However, this more active role could create further difficulties, with custody staff sometimes asking us about the women we had interviewed, placing us in an uncomfortable position in relation to confidentiality and our responsibilities to participants. Whilst we never shared details of what had been discussed in the interviews, there were other questions, such as about women's level of spoken English, which we were prepared to discuss as part of a more general conversation about how the interview had gone.

There were also occasions when custody staff expressed views with which we disagreed. As we were there to understand staff perspectives and wanted staff to feel able to speak openly in our presence, we did not always challenge or disagree with what was said. The shifting nature of our role therefore required us continually to negotiate the boundaries between observation, participation and advocacy, whilst balancing our relationships with, and responsibilities towards, different groups involved in the research. Navigating these competing demands could itself be emotionally challenging.

In terms of ethical issues beyond those discussed in Section 3.1, drawing on previous experience of conducting research in police custody (Skinns and Smyth, 2025), we added an additional safeguard to the participant consent form. Alongside the standard exception to confidentiality where women indicated an intention to harm themselves or others, we explained that we might also raise concerns about serious police mistreatment. Had such concerns arisen, we would first have discussed with the woman whether she wanted us to raise them on her behalf. Although this offer was not taken up, it provided an important additional layer of protection for participants.

Overall, having police partners significantly eased access to what is often an invisible research setting and enabled us to collect a richer and more varied body of data. At times, our position as researchers sat uneasily alongside the care and sense of responsibility we felt towards the women we encountered in custody. Nevertheless, documenting women's accounts remains crucial: their stories provide insight into experiences that would otherwise remain largely hidden from view.

PROJECT FINDINGS

4.1 The context of police custody for women

4.1.1 *Setting the scene in West Yorkshire: Trends and patterns from the custody record data analysis*

The analysis of the custody record data for the entirety of 2025 showed that women (mean age = 36.5) were slightly older than men (mean age = 35.8) with slightly fewer women under 26 (18% of women compared to 22% of men). A greater proportion of women were white British (71% of women compared to 61% of men).

Violence against the person, summary non-motoring and theft offences were the three main reasons for arrest for both men and women, although violence against the person makes up a slightly greater proportion of cases for women (34%) than for men (30%). Sexual offences were the fourth most frequent reason for arrest for men (7.3%) but were one of the least likely reasons for arrests for women (1.2%) (See Table 3 below).

Within the violence against the person category, cruelty to or neglect of children was the specific offence for a considerably greater proportion of women (14.0% of violence against the person for women compared to 1.9% for men), whilst stalking (16.2% for men compared to 7.4% for women), engaging in controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate / family relationship (9.3% for men compared to 5.2% for women) and intentional strangulation or suffocation (8.2% for men compared to 4.2% for women) was the specific offence for a considerably greater proportion of men.

In spite of the greater proportion of women involved in violence against the person offences, women nonetheless tend to be arrested for less serious offences overall. For men, 10% of arrests were for indictable only offences compared to 6% for women, showing a pattern of men typically being arrested for more serious matters than women.

The time between arrival and release was shorter for women (mean time-period in hours = 14.37, standard deviation = 9.55) than for men (mean time-period in hours = 16.34, standard deviation = 11.62). In addition, the time between arrival and first disposal was shorter for women (mean time-period in hours = 11.05, standard deviation 6.96) than for men (mean time-period in hours = 11.57, standard deviation = 7.20). T-tests indicate that these differences are statistically significant, showing that women were typically in custody for shorter periods of time.

Men (68.4%) were somewhat more likely to be detained overnight than women (65.4%). Handcuffs were used for a greater proportion of men (67%) compared to women (50%) whilst no force was used for a greater proportion of women (45%) compared to men (28%). Strip searches were indicated for somewhat more women (4%) than for men (3%). This may be due to the greater number of needs identified during the risk assessment (see the discussion of Figure 1 below).

Responses to the eleven risk assessment questions asked of detainees on booking-in indicated that women had more complex needs in custody than men. As shown in Figure 1, a considerably greater proportion of women indicated that they: were suffering from mental health problems, depression or

were considered mentally vulnerable (67% for women compared to 49% for men); were taking or were supposed to be taking medication (63% for women compared to 47% for men); had tried to self-harm (51% for women compared to 35% for men); and were more likely to have an illness or injury (61% for women compared to 53% for men). Women also indicated a need for a significantly greater number of the risk assessment questions. We calculated a score based on whether people indicated a need in relation to the first nine risk assessment questions (i.e. excluding whether an interpreter was needed and whether the detainee wished to indicate anything else regarding their welfare). Women had a mean score of 4.2. Men had a mean score of 3.5. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that this was a statistically significant difference. Only 6% of women and 11% of men indicated no needs for the risk assessment questions.

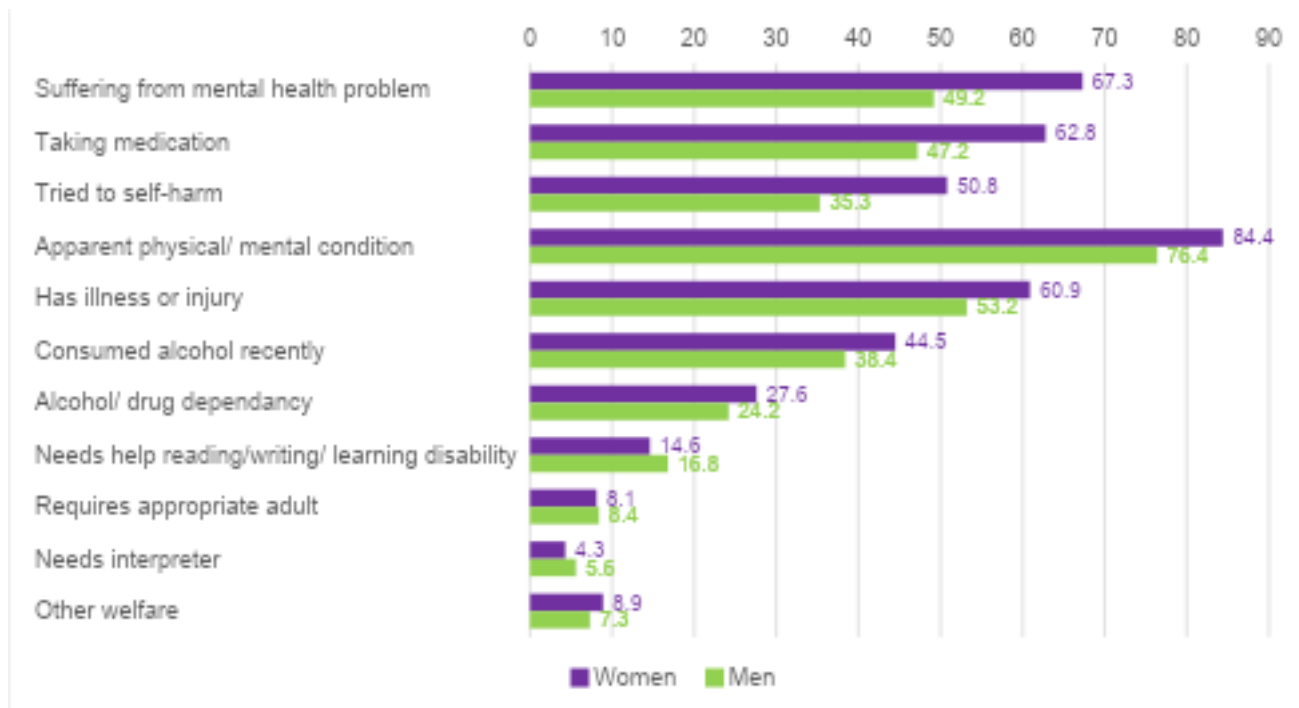
Focusing on first disposal, a greater proportion of disposals for women were no further action (32.2% for women, 25.7% for men), whilst bail made up a greater proportion of disposals for men (39.5% for men, 29.8% for women). Focusing on those who were charged with a criminal offence as their first disposal: slightly more men (34%) than women (30%) were refused bail; slightly more men (44%) than women (40%) received unconditional bail; whilst more women (30%) received conditional bail compared to men (22%). Focusing on the top ranked disposal, meaning the disposal seen as the highest priority by the police when recording it on their systems, this was a charge with a criminal offence for a greater proportion of men (30.7%) than for women (25.5%).

In summary, this shows, therefore, that women tended to be arrested in West Yorkshire in 2025 for somewhat less serious offences than men and had more vulnerability-relevant needs in custody than men. Compared to men, women were in custody for shorter periods of time and were more likely than men to receive a disposal of no further action as the first disposal. For those charged as the first disposal, compared to men, women were more likely to receive conditional bail and somewhat less likely to be refused bail or receive unconditional bail.

Table 3 – Primary reason for arrest (based on Home Office classifications)

	Women		Men		Total	
Offence category	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Violence against the person	2611	33.9	11297	29.6	13912	30.3
Summary non-motoring	2237	29	9017	23.7	11263	24.6
Theft offences	1188	15.4	4948	13	6138	13.4
Sexual offences	89	1.2	2793	7.3	2884	6.3
Summary motoring	385	5	2301	6	2689	5.9
Drug offences	320	4.2	2291	6	2625	5.7
Public order offences	313	4.1	1869	4.9	2183	4.8
Miscellaneous crimes against society	195	2.5	1590	4.2	1789	3.9
Possession of weapons	109	1.4	816	2.1	926	2
Robbery	101	1.3	715	1.9	816	1.8
Fraud offences	93	1.2	243	0.6	337	0.7
Criminal damage and arson	66	0.9	235	0.6	301	0.7
Offence type						
Indictable only	554	6.3	4366	10.1	4921	9.4
Triable either way	4531	51.4	22441	51.9	26990	51.8
Summary non-motoring	2225	25.3	8939	20.7	11173	21.5
Summary motoring	397	4.5	2369	5.5	2779	5.3

Figure 2 – Percentage of men and women indicating a need during the risk assessment process on booking-in



4.1.2 The culture of custody and its workforce

It is recognised by many officers that, as a predominantly male environment, custody can be especially oppressive for women, many of whom have experienced abusive treatment by men (Skinns et al., 2026). The introduction of what was called the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) role in West Yorkshire Police to fulfil PACE Code C and College of Policing requirements to have a “female member of custody staff responsible for checking on their welfare needs” (College of Policing, 2025), aims to ensure that women have access to a woman officer if that is their preference.⁴ Despite this, in practice, women are dealt with in custody for the most part by men. Women make up around 16% of detainees, but there are insufficient women working in custody roles to ensure that women suspects are always seen by women officers during their time in custody, and that their needs are met. Most shifts are staffed by a mix of men and women, but this gender balance is somewhat precarious. Illness or periods of leave can result in an all-male shift and difficulty in having to find a woman officer at very short notice to conduct a search of a female detainee. Officers reported having to radio out to patrol or simply find a woman officer in the building

⁴ Throughout this report we have adopted the SPOC terminology used by West Yorkshire Police, though this role may be referred to as something else in other police forces. As recommended later in the report, there is a need to ensure more consistency in terms of how this role is referred to across England and Wales to enable more consistent delivery.

who could help out. Those required to step into custody simply because of their gender were likely to be untrained and inexperienced in custody protocols, potentially creating additional risk.

Simply having a woman officer available, whether or not trained for custody, does not represent the women-focussed measures and procedures to which WYP aspire. Those fulfilling the SPOC role did so with differing levels of experience and enthusiasm and in many instances, this was not a choice – it was a necessity by virtue of the fact there was only one person, i.e. one woman, on shift able to fulfil this function. Most women detainees were given the opportunity to speak to the SPOC or another woman officer, but this did not necessarily continue beyond the custody desk. Most women were dealt with for the rest of their time in custody by men officers and staff. This included cell checks, which made disclosure of welfare issues less likely, as these often happened during unplanned moments and interactions. This also impacted women's privacy and dignity as women were inadvertently exposed using the toilet or being without their hijab (see also section 4.3.2 below). Furthermore, whilst officers reported to us that women were ensured expedited booking in, a separate room where women detainees could discuss health, welfare and sensitive issues with a woman officer, and separate holding cell area, this was not common practice. We observed lengthy waits, seemingly in order of arrival not need, and inconsistent access to a private area for booking in, or a separate cell area.

Women's needs during detention are not the same as those for men. Women enter custody disclosing poorer physical and mental health than men, and a greater risk of self-harm (see also section 4.1.1). Women may also be breastfeeding, menstruating, menopausal or pregnant. And women are more likely to have caring responsibilities, which are a major source of anxiety when in custody. These varied and sometimes complex needs require an informed and nuanced approach. In practice, officers tended to bundle all of these things together under the category of 'women as vulnerable' and support for this 'vulnerability' often focused on the provision of hygiene packs, along with completion of the initial risk assessment completed on booking-in to examine women's likely risks and vulnerabilities in custody (see also section 4.3.1). Delivery of this risk assessment had the potential to uncover women's needs but was sometimes read out in a quick and robotic style, with little opportunity for comprehension or anything beyond the briefest of responses.

In addition to their pre-existing needs and vulnerabilities, women's experience of custody could itself provoke a crisis point. Jasmine (W1) told us:

They'd come in randomly after six hours and say, 'Right, we're strip-searching you for this, this and this', knowing damn well that you didn't have any of it on you, or they'd just like, at one time six men sitting on me. (Jasmine, W1).

Several officers and managers explained how women who had been victims of domestic abuse were sometimes labelled as the perpetrator. One officer explained that "it's a bit of a kick in the teeth" to get arrested after having called the police for help, and noted that it wasn't surprising, therefore, that a woman whom the team encountered during observation in such circumstances had "lashed-out" at officers when they had "broken her door down and she was very distressed" (Site A, Day 6).

Existing research shows that detainees may be seen by officers as undeserving and presumed guilty, their treatment often contingent on compliant behaviour and demonstrating respect for the police role (Skinns et al., 2026; Savigar-Shaw et al., 2022; Skinns et al., 2017). In this respect, women detainees in the present research were no different. However, an additional factor that was often determinative of women's access to the SPOC or to private space, was the busyness of police custody. The small number of women officers working in custody meant that workload had a particularly acute impact on the amount of time they could spend with women detainees. Women were also seen in highly gendered ways by some officers – described as vulnerable but also manipulative; as needy and as problematic; and as more likely than men to 'kick off'. This was not borne out in our observations and may have been the result of gendered expectations about how women 'should' behave, such that they were judged more negatively.

Finally, whilst policy rhetoric often speaks of trauma-informed approaches and vulnerability, the language of the police practitioners in the research centred more on showing care, whilst also managing risk. Staff therefore engaged in small acts of kindness intended to make the women in their custody less anxious and also more appreciative of being seen as people with human needs. This could be bringing them hot drinks; sending them home with food and clothing on release; charging their phone; updating them on the investigation; and most importantly for many women, finding out and informing women about the care of their children.

In sum, meeting women's needs in custody was made harder by the scarcity of women officers and by struggles in identifying what was distinct about these needs and therefore how to respond to them appropriately. Despite the SPOC role, women detainees were mostly dealt with by men. Women were not consistently expedited or held in separate areas and responses to their needs often centred on provision of hygiene packs, alongside standard risk assessment. Women were also often seen as problematic, perhaps reflecting gendered expectations of staff. Women entered custody with greater health needs and caring responsibilities, but rather than trauma-informed or gender-sensitive approaches to meet these needs, custody itself could provoke detention as time of crisis. Vulnerability, trauma-informed practice and gender-sensitivity were not comfortable concepts for custody staff to enact in their daily practice. Instead, care was more often spoken of and displayed. This included attending to detainees' physical needs, reassuring women that their children were being cared for and exercising their discretion to provide small acts of kindness.

4.1.3 The criminalisation of women entering police custody

Women's offending is often linked to victimisation and abusive relationships as well as structural inequalities such as poverty and precarity (Skinns et al., 2026; Harding, 2021; Barr and Christian, 2019). Women are more likely to be prosecuted for dishonesty crimes and summary non-motoring offences, related to socioeconomic status, such as shop theft, fraud, television license evasion and truancy by their children (Ministry of Justice, 2025). Analysis of the custody record data showed that the percentage of offences committed by women categorised as 'violence against the person' was higher at 34%, than men at 30%, though the absolute numbers were lower. These violence against the person offences appeared repeatedly within the qualitative data. Looking at these data more closely, a more complex picture emerges, particularly in relation to cruelty to/neglect of a child, assault on emergency workers and alleged low-level offences adjacent to domestic abuse.

Notably, women were more likely to be arrested for **cruelty to or neglect of a child**, which includes wilfully neglecting to provide a child with adequate food, clothing, medical aid or lodging. This offence makes up 14% (366) of women's offending categorised under 'violence against the person' compared to only 2% (211) of men's, which is higher both proportionally and in absolute terms. On further analysis, 60% of the cases involving child neglect resulted in no further action (NFA), compared to 40% no further action rates in the overall dataset. Whilst qualitative findings on this offence were limited because of the nature of the interview and offence, which made it difficult for the circumstances of the alleged offence to be discussed in interview, observations included a woman who was initially arrested for drink driving but upon release was additionally charged with child neglect, for which she accepted a conditional caution without legal advice. Accepting the caution caused her significant distress not only because of the serious implications of the offence type but also because her profession required Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. In addition, two women interviewed had been arrested for child neglect and both had no further action taken against them, which reflects the custody record data. The high rates of NFAs for an offence which women are disproportionately criminalised for is concerning, especially considering the distress and potential ongoing harm that being arrested and detained for this type of offence can cause both to women and their children.

From further breaking down the violence against the person offence category, it was found that women are also disproportionately represented under the **assault of an emergency worker offence**, making up 6% (143) of suspected violence against the person offences committed by women, compared to only 3% (348) committed by men. Overall, 10 out of the 44 women interviewed had at some point been arrested or charged for assaulting an emergency worker, which usually meant a police officer. What is concerning was the context in which some of these arrests were made, such as victims being arrested after calling the police for help, and girls arrested after running away from home. For example, Jade recounted an arrest that happened to her when she was 15 years old. She had run away from home and when approached by officers 'lashed out' in fear; she was subsequently restrained to the ground by four officers much larger than her:

There's no need for four officers on top of one girl... I were missing. I lashed out an officer.
(Jade, W14)

In addition, there were multiple examples of women arrested for assault of an emergency worker as a direct result of their domestic abuse victimisation, where they had initially called the police for help.

They come to arrest my partner who they knew... was domestically violent, and they ended up arresting me... But I'd never had a criminal record at this point. (Lola, W41)

Helen, a criminal justice practitioner, stated "assault against an emergency worker is a reaction through trauma, again exacerbated by the heavy-handedness of police and their lack of understanding of women's trauma". This suggests that officers may not be trauma informed when approaching women and girls, particularly those with histories of domestic and sexual abuse. Whilst front-line officers complete e-learning on trauma responses, it is generic and e-learning has been found to be an ineffective method of learning, especially in regard to changing and breaking internalised biases (Honest, 2020; Hadlington et al. 2021) Practitioners and some custody staff

themselves recognised the need for greater trauma-informed training for both frontline officers and custody staff.

A further pattern appeared in the data of women being arrested for **low level offending and counter allegations** connected to or arising from them being victims of domestic abuse, with many of these cases ending in no further action. Staff recognised that, in such circumstances, the police may be “further victimising women” as officers may be ill-equipped to correctly identify the primary perpetrator in domestic abuse incidents (Amy, CO). This was illustrated by Jameela’s (W28) case. She had been the victim of serious domestic abuse, including assault and strangulation, for which her ex-partner had been convicted and imprisoned. Since then, she had been arrested three times for harassment charges brought against her by her ex-partner and his family, all of which resulted in no further action taken against her.

We observed an OOCR programme which women were required to attend as a condition of this disposal and which was designed for perpetrators of abuse. Here, it was found that the women attending were almost always the primary victim of abuse in the relationship and had been arrested for minor offences such as criminal damage, which was adjacent to the abuse they had experienced. This reflects similar trends in the existing literature in which the supposed gender neutrality of positive arrest policies become a form of gendered injustice as women who are not typically perpetrators of domestic abuse become arrested under laws designed for men who are (Hester, 2013; Miller, 2001). In the present research, for example, Claire (W2), who had suffered 30 years of abuse, damaged her ex-husband’s property when he was harassing her, though she had paid for it. She admitted to this on police body-worn camera and was then arrested two months later for criminal damage and given an OOCR and a condition to attend the programme we observed, as a ‘perpetrator’ of domestic abuse. Some women, including Claire, expressed a sense of injustice at their condition to attend a ‘behavioural’ programme when they had been the subject of continued abuse from their partners or ex-partners who they felt had not had the same police action taken against them. One woman expressed that “his ongoing behaviour was relentless, exhausting and very emotionally draining for her... stressing that she kept the abuse to herself until the incident, which she described as a moment of power” (OOCR P1, Day 2).

Custody staff suggested that officers are not using their discretion effectively when it comes to domestic abuse incidents. When responding to women’s offending behaviour, officers can use their discretion to choose from a range of options, including arrest, voluntary interview, street disposal, or informal advice. Officers also have the discretion to assess the veracity and validity of the allegations made, by considering the wider context, so as not to unnecessarily arrest, detain and criminalise victims of abuse. However, there was a suggestion that young, inexperienced officers in particular may struggle to accurately determine the primary perpetrator when attending domestic abuse incidents and are less confident in using their discretion to make informed decisions and not take allegations at face value. Additionally, officers said that police discretion is increasingly restrained by managerial pressures and policing policies, such as ‘positive action’ which mandates officers to make an arrest at domestic abuse incidents.

In sum, these patterns of criminalising women arose from the under-recognition of women’s distinctive histories, particularly in the context of domestic abuse, as well as from too little meaningful

use of various forms of diversion and a lack of trauma-informed approaches to women. As noted in Section 4.1.2, custody staff preferred to think of themselves as caring for and managing the risks associated with women in their custody, but this was not the same as “recognising the impact that trauma ... has on an individual, seeking to avoid re-traumatisation with shame, blame or unnecessary physical intervention and providing appropriate support” (Goodall, 2023: 9). Women shared that because of their experiences, such as of being criminalised even though they were the victims of domestic abuse, they would “never, ever phone the police” if they needed help for fear of criminal repercussions (Claire, W2).

4.2 Women's experiences of police custody

4.2.1 *The exercise of police powers*

The use of police powers such as arrest, detention, searches, interviews, and force can have a significant impact on individuals' experiences of police custody. This section examines women's and staff members' perceptions of the use of these powers and considers the extent to which policy frameworks and safeguards are reflected in women's lived experiences.

Women's experiences of **arrest** varied considerably. Some described being treated respectfully and did not find the process particularly distressing. Others experienced arrest as traumatic, humiliating, and lacking dignity. Several women reported the use of force during arrest, including being handcuffed, dragged, physically restrained, subjected to PAVA incapacitant spray or other coercive practices, despite perceiving themselves to be compliant. For some, these experiences were described as infantilising or degrading. Women with previous experiences of gender-based violence reported that arrest by men could be particularly distressing and, in some cases, retraumatising. Common impacts included fear, panic, humiliation, and physical symptoms associated with acute stress. Kath (W20), for example, described being pepper sprayed during arrest:

I got pepper sprayed... my whole face was burning, so I literally felt like acid was in my face... the next time they sprayed it, I went straight down, and I ended up going unconscious as well.

Similarly, Evelyn (W39) recalled being arrested at home whilst attempting to gather essential belongings: "They wouldn't let me get my shoes... he ended up pepper spraying me... and then handcuffed me".

Staff members also expressed concerns about arrest practices. Two suggested that organisational pressures and performance expectations may contribute to the use of arrest in circumstances where alternative approaches could be considered.

Detention was commonly authorised following arrest for both men and women, both in the qualitative research and in the custody record data. In the custody record data, for example, only 230 women (2.6%) and 604 men (1.4%) did not have their detention authorised in 2025. This chimes with wider evidence that refusals to authorise detention remain rare (Kemp et al., 2024). Some staff raised concerns that organisational pressures and misunderstandings regarding the legal thresholds for arrest and detention may contribute to routine detention practices. Staff suggested that factors such as caring responsibilities, first-time offending, age, and the availability of voluntary interviews could influence decisions regarding detention. One manager (Matt) explained: "A lot of times they'll say, 'I've got no childcare'... for the option of arresting or doing a voluntary interview that would definitely come into it." However, given the tiny proportion of suspects for whom detention was not authorised, it would seem these factors did not come into play especially frequently for women.

In the qualitative data, women's experiences of detention varied significantly. Whilst some spent only short periods in custody, others described lengthy periods of uncertainty whilst awaiting interviews or procedural decisions, reflecting also the variability in the custody record data (see also Section 4.1.1). Delays were attributed to factors such as interview readiness, interpreter availability, and case processing. For women with caring responsibilities, prolonged detention could have

particularly significant consequences. Katy (W23) described the anxiety associated with uncertainty about when she would be released: “I’m still waiting for an interview time; I have no idea... I’ve got to think, well, it’s going to be kids’ bedtime.” This contributes to some of the pains of police detention discussed in Section 4.2.3. Some women also reported feeling unable to challenge authorisation of detention decisions because they feared doing so might result in further delays or adverse consequences.

Staff generally emphasised communication, patience, and de-escalation as the preferred means of managing interactions with detainees. Common approaches included explaining procedures, setting expectations, and attempting to reduce conflict through dialogue. Staff reported that force was used less frequently against women than against men, as also found in the existing research (Skinns et al., 2026), and was most commonly associated with mental ill health, intoxication, or concerns about self-harm. As one manager (Max) explained: “If females are intoxicated, force potentially will be used... Other than that, it tends to be either through intoxication or mental health.”

However, many women questioned the necessity and proportionality of force used against them. Their accounts often contrasted with staff explanations that force was required to manage risk or ensure safety. Some participants felt that coercive powers remained ever-present, shaping interactions even when force was not ultimately used.

Experiences of **police interviews** were mixed. Some women felt they were treated fairly and given opportunities to explain their actions. Others reported delays in being interviewed, poor communication, and a lack of clarity regarding the process. Particular concerns were raised about coercive interview practices. Some women reported feeling pressured to confess, admit to more serious offences, or proceed without legal representation. Although many accessed legal advice, a number questioned whether their solicitors had adequately supported them during interviews. Others described interviewing officers as punitive, dismissive or judgmental.

Strip searching was one of the most contested aspects of the use of police powers in custody. Staff generally justified searches based on intelligence, warning markers, suspected concealment of prohibited items, and/or concerns regarding safety and risk management. Some staff reported actively challenging requests for searches where supporting evidence appeared weak or outdated. Daniel, a custody officer, explained: “There could be markers on for that person that they’ve similarly concealed items previously whilst in custody... then it kind of gives you that more of a, ‘It’s for your own safety’.”

Women’s experiences often differed sharply from these official rationales. Many questioned whether strip searches were necessary or proportionate and described them as degrading, intrusive, and violating. Whilst staff emphasised safeguards such as removing clothing in stages and maintaining dignity where possible, some women reported being required to fully undress and described feeling exposed and unsafe. Evelyn (W39) recalled: “They wanted to strip search me... they pulled my trousers off and my top off and just chucked me in the cell.”

Concerns were also raised regarding the number of officers present during **searches** and whether the presence of women officers sufficiently mitigated feelings of intrusion. Operational challenges,

including the availability of women staff and uncertainty regarding searches involving transgender and non-binary detainees, were also identified.

The removal of personal property – including phones, jewellery, piercings, clothing, and religious items – was a significant source of distress for many women. Experiences of biometric collection, such as of fingerprints and photographs, similarly varied, with some reporting respectful treatment and others raising concerns about communication, delays, and the involvement of men officers.

In sum, women's accounts reveal a significant gap between formal safeguards and lived experiences of police powers. Whilst staff generally emphasised legality, professionalism, accountability, and risk management, many women experienced arrest, detention, force, interviews, and searches as distressing, intrusive, or disproportionate. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring that procedural safeguards are not only present in policy but are also experienced as meaningful and protective in practice.

4.2.2 Women's key rights and entitlements

Because of the extensive power of the police to arrest, detain and question, in return suspects have key rights and entitlements to counterbalance the power of the State. We focus here on the rights and entitlements that emerged from the data as important to the women in the research, though this is far from comprehensive and crucial rights, such as to have someone informed of your arrest and to custodial legal advice, were not something that were consistently discussed. The research findings showed that women's access to their rights and entitlements was inconsistent which reflects the literature on the wider detainee population. Basic entitlements such as a shower, reading materials, time outside, and to speak to a healthcare professional were rarely offered or provided even upon request. Additionally, a few women shared that they experienced being denied food and drink when they requested it. The denial of requests for entitlements such as toilet paper and food was also observed in custody; however, these denials were not specifically directed towards women.

How and if women were offered to read PACE Code C or the brief version of information on their rights was observed to be inconsistent. Concerningly, staff rarely explained what PACE Code C was and sometimes actively discouraged women from reading it, describing it as boring or “bullshit”, according to women in the research (Mollie, W3). Ultimately most women who were offered, did not choose to read it, although they also expressed that they were unsure of what ‘the codes’ were. This suggests women were not always fully informed of their rights whilst within police custody. On the other hand, women were consistently offered legal advice, although once more, how this was offered varied. Some officers took the time to ensure women understood that it was free, independent, and would not delay their release, whilst others simply asked once if they wanted to speak to a solicitor and quickly moved on. No evidence was found to indicate that how, or if, custody officers asked detainees if they would like to access information about rights or seek legal advice was gendered. However, women were more hesitant to accept legal advice due to a fear of delays and relatedly because of their concerns around caring responsibilities and being separated from their children.

When asked how women's needs specifically were being met, staff referred to the ‘menopausal’ products available within a menopause ‘kit’, such as fans and cool packs. However, there was an overwhelming consensus among staff that they “never hand them out” to women (James, DO). Staff

claimed that the reason these products were never provided to women was because few women make menopause-related disclosures or request these products, potentially because of the “taboo” (Carly, DO). The kits were requested so rarely that some staff were unaware of where they were kept or what products they contained. This low level of use may partly reflect how the kits were offered to women, including whether they were routinely offered or were only provided when women requested them. Women were not observed being asked during the booking-in about the menopause or any menopause-related needs, nor did the women interviewed state they had been asked, or offered to speak to the healthcare provider in this regard. Whilst DO Faye stated that they routinely asked, “women over 40 if they need anything [menopause-related]”, other staff stated that they did not ask women or offer the menopause kit during the booking-in procedure. This inconsistency in staff understanding may be due to unclear policy on menopause, as some staff said they had been given little information when the menopause kits were introduced. It may also be because of staff practices, as officers shared that they felt a sense of awkwardness in asking women about the menopause, which they felt risked appearing presumptive or offensive. Overall, there seemed to be an expectation for women to request menopausal care, rather than being provided without request or explicitly being offered. This was also sometimes the case for menstrual products.

Women’s experiences of being offered and provided menstrual products varied significantly. At least thirteen women interviewed stated they were offered at the stage of booking-in or when taken to their cell, whilst other women were not aware of the availability of menstrual products. Some women, like Louise (W16), had only been provided with “one the whole time [she was] there”, which she was given after being strip-searched at the beginning of her detention. Some staff did express an understanding that requests for menstrual products needed to be fulfilled quickly, and sympathy for the impact that the lack of privacy in custody has on menstruating women’s sense of dignity. Concerningly though, some women were ignored or made to wait long periods when requesting such items over the buzzer, with some stating they were denied menstrual products altogether.

Women menstruating also expressed a desire to wash, yet this was rarely provided. And for others, the possibility of starting their period whilst in custody was a cause of stress and worry, as Aaliyah (W23) stated that coming on her period in a police cell “would be the worst experience for me”. To prevent potential feelings of awkwardness or humiliation in having to ask for menstrual products, especially from men, and to not have to wait long periods for requests to be fulfilled, women felt that “they should put sanitary towels, and they should put tissue in the cells for a woman” (Kath, W20).

The SPOC is a fairly new provision introduced following changes to PACE in 2019, which allows women to speak privately with an allocated woman officer. The effective implementation of the role and the availability of women officers were found to be important, as several women shared that they preferred being able to speak with women officers rather than men. This was particularly important for women from some minoritised ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as Muslim women and women from South Asian heritage, because they were not as comfortable speaking alone with men or speaking to men about personal matters such as menstruation. However, many women did not recall being informed of the provision. This may be a result of how the provision is described to women during the booking-in process, as officers were observed reading the

entitlement verbatim as it is described on their computer system, rather than offering a clearer explanation of the provision. As the booking-in process is often disorientating and stressful, it is unsurprising that women may not have taken in all the information provided at that stage, demonstrating the importance of repeated offering of the provision.

We were told by many staff that the SPOC was supposed to introduce themselves to every woman detained in custody, so that women knew who their single point of contact was. However, many women did not recall the women SPOC introducing themselves. Detention Officer Tallulah supported this experience stating, “I always introduce myself, ask them if they need anything, but you will find that a lot don’t, because they don’t know they’re expected to”. Overall staff understanding and fulfilment of the role varied, possibly because of a lack of training for the role or clear guidance on its requirements, as staff stated that they had not received any formal training for the role.

Ultimately there was an expectation that women request support from the SPOC rather than a proactive offering by staff. However, for this to be effective, women need to be aware of the provision in the first place. This practice also presumes that women in custody feel comfortable or able to ask for such support. When women did ask to speak to the SPOC, delivery was dependent on staffing capacity and staff’s confidence in fulfilling the role (as discussed above). Some women detention officers felt out of their depth supporting women’s needs, particularly around breastfeeding and pregnancy. They also felt they did not have the sufficient time and capacity to successfully fulfil the role and provide support to women because it was allocated in addition to their usual duties and responsibilities. In some cases, women detainees were told a woman officer was available but was then subsequently too busy to attend, resulting in only being spoken to by men officers.

In sum, women’s access to key rights and entitlements in police custody was found to be inconsistent. Findings on access to women specific provisions echo those of the Baird (2024) report, as some women reported being delayed access to menstrual products or denied them altogether. Women were seemingly expected to request provisions and help. However, this was found to be difficult and intimidating for some in a male-dominated environment, especially for those from some minoritised ethnic and religious backgrounds; and when women did ask they were sometimes still denied access. Staff lacked the time, understanding of the SPOC role, and emotional availability to effectively enact the role, resulting in a policy which may reflect well on paper but is inadequate in practice.

4.2.3 The gendered pains of police detention: Women’s distinctive experiences and their drivers

Much like the pains of police detention for other suspects (Skinns and Wooff, 2021), for women these pains revolved around being cut off, losing control, having nothing, insecurity and uncertainty. However, these also all had gendered dimensions to them, which have hitherto not been explored in the existing research, and which are the focus of this section. Women feared being *cut off* from all family and friends, but especially their children. DO Brittany said that the main challenge when working with women detainees is:

concerns over their children, and it can make it really, really challenging ... Because we don’t have the answers ... The officers don’t tell us the answers. And often, it’s not that they [the

women] want the answers in respect of where their children are, it's that they want them with them, and we can't give them it. (Brittany, DO)

Women also worried about *losing control* in terms of the men they might encounter in custody settings, whether staff or other men detained there, with this having a particular significance to women who had been victims of domestic abuse and/or who came from Muslim backgrounds, as explained by this participant of British Pakistani heritage:

I don't feel really comfortable when men keep coming to the door and stuff ... unless they're like your husband or whatever, your partner or your parents or your brother, you should really technically try and stay away from them. Unless it's like a workplace, and you sort of have to ... it makes me uncomfortable, but ... it's very strict when it comes to men. You don't want to be around them and stuff.

However, she felt she had little choice about this in custody: "Don't really have a choice, do I?" (Jameela, W28).

Having nothing, including not having personal effects, such as jewellery, hair bobbles, headscarves or sufficient toilet paper, shampoo for long hair or showers were also gendered in nature and particular to women's experiences and needs. Men working in custody not understanding just how much toilet paper women might need was one such example of this. Lola said:

Oh, yeah. Because they only give you so much toilet roll, you know, and the men haven't got a clue either. They'll rip you a little bit off and go... and you press again, 'I need some more toilet...' 'Have you gone through that toilet roll I left you?' 'Fuck off, mate.' (Lola, W40)

Like men, women had short and long-term concerns about the police investigation and their employment situation. However, their greatest feelings of *uncertainty* concerned their children, including who was looking after them, especially if they had been taken into care as part of their arrest. Women also worried about the intricate aspects of their lives e.g. if they had their school uniform:

I worried because I think their dad ended up having them [her children] ... But he doesn't know where, like, their uniform is and stuff, so I just wanted to ring my mum so she could sort of phone him and say the kids' uniform is here ... my little boy especially is like 100% attendance, like I know he'd want to be at school, and ... so like is he at school? Did they find their uniform? (Susan, W33).

This made experiences of uncertainty a particularly gendered pain of police detention.

Women's *insecurities* were less about staff and more about aspects of the material conditions, including the noise made by men, the relative height of the booking-in desk given the smaller stature of women, the lack of separation of women from men at all stages of the custody journey, and the more general problems arising from the male-dominated nature of the custody environment, which risked re-traumatising women previously abused by men. This was encapsulated by Zahrah, who said:

It's the noise as well ... The steps in the hallways and the keys and... yeah ... and when the door's closing, the slam ... got people banging on the doors and men screaming ... I just don't think it's the right environment to put women in. I really don't ... You know, women that have gone through trauma ... through domestic violence ... and then they're putting them in a situation where they're at their most vulnerable, and they're just making them more vulnerable. (Zahrah, W38)

These pains of police detention were more than mere thoughts or worries and were also writ large on women's bodies and bodily processes. They manifested in sobbing, crying, shaking, sleeplessness, not using the toilet for fear of being seen by men working in custody and self-harming behaviours. Women's reproductive functions also drove a unique set of embodied experiences, including of miscarriage, pregnancy, breastfeeding, leaking milk or blood. Without meaning to, women therefore added to the risk of police custody being rendered 'dirty work' for custody staff, women being seen as too difficult or complex to deal with and custody being an unpopular posting which most staff would prefer not to do or not for long. Given women's distinctive criminogenic needs (Skinns et al., 2026), the way they embodied mental ill health, trauma and physical ill-health was also distinct in police custody. As is the case for women in healthcare settings, these pains and illnesses tended to be overlooked or ignored.

The research furthermore showed that these pains of police detention stretched far beyond the moment of detention itself. They extended outside of custody into other criminal justice processes and all other parts of women detainees' lives. They included ongoing feelings of uncertainty for them and their children, particularly as criminal proceedings wound their course, leaving some suicidal or wishing to abscond. Women's (frightened) actions in custody also left indelible imprints on their employment prospects for the future; for example, accepting an OOCR because they had not fully understood the consequences or thought that they had no choice could mean a loss of employment opportunities later. They also lost some of their belongings forever, such as mobile phones seized for evidentiary purposes, on which all their lives and their children's lives were lived. These "aftershocks" meant custody continued to have consequences (Wooff and Skinns, 2017). Though women only *fully* recognised these consequences with the benefit of hindsight, they were to some extent realistic in their ruminations about them in the moment of their detention, particularly about the likely outcomes of their situation, in terms of case disposals and the disruptions this would cause their lives.

In sum, women's pains of police detention were distinctive in character. Some, such as insecurity and uncertainty, were especially gendered. They were influenced not just by gender, but also religion and race. However, they were also driven by other factors outside of custody. These included greater caring responsibilities, histories marked by trauma and abuse, and by the effects on them of men and their offending. Altogether, these provided an important framework through which women understood the pain they experienced in police custody.

4.3 Women's needs in police custody

4.3.1 Vulnerability

Under PACE code C, women are not categorically vulnerable. However, under College of Policing national Authorised Professional Practice guidance and force training, women are positioned as a vulnerable group warranting special protective measures from the point of entry into custody. Custody staff are trained on this positioning. However, across several staff accounts, the notion of women as vulnerable was routinely contested. Men officers tended to universalise the concept of vulnerability: "I think anyone can be vulnerable, not just females, personally I don't think we should be saying every female, you know, is vulnerable." (Frank DO). Whereas women officers tended to use themselves as the reference to reject the category: "As a female I don't see myself as vulnerable. To class females as vulnerable is a little bit offensive." (Janice, DO). Despite the two different framings, vulnerability is situated as a potential property of everyone moving through custody. A woman being treated as vulnerable can therefore depend on which officer is sitting at the booking-in desk.

Across the data, vulnerability was identified through three main registers operating concurrently; formal mechanisms (IT system, risk assessments), staff subjectivity (the intuitive "sensing" or "getting a feeling" for who is vulnerable) and a woman's own disclosure. These modes of identification did not operate independently. Formal mechanisms produced records that were interpreted and given meaning by staff. The custody staff reading was shaped by their cumulative experiences in the force more broadly and their experiences of women. And women's own disclosures are mediated through staff judgements of credibility. The result is that women are objects of scrutiny being read and interpreted by staff. Identification was not a neutral process, it was a relational one between women and staff based upon staff training, their experience and the formal tools of recognition in custody. Staff wanted to see women first before designating them as credibly vulnerable: "So, we can't make that assessment, if they're vulnerable or not, until we've actually spoken to them" (Lottie, CS). This had material consequences for women.

This produces what we have called 'a burden of proof' for women. Women had to be seen to be vulnerable, on top of being women, before the protections that should have been afforded them at the point of entry were triggered. The burden of proof ran along two axes; performative and attributional. Performative refers to what staff need to see, or hear or smell, and is sensory based. Performance here is something staff were looking for, not something women were knowingly doing. Attributional is what staff and systems read onto women, often before the woman herself had spoken. A clear example of the attributional axis is how the custody record was read. A detainee's record (if she had one) arrived at the booking-in desk before a woman did and what was contained in it shaped how staff interacted with her. First-time entrants were broadly credited as vulnerable; regulars to custody were not. Staff read familiarity as a sign of reduced need and unfamiliarity as a marker for heightened need.

Across the data, and supported by wider literature, was a culture of disbelief. Women's disclosures in custody were often met with scepticism and treated as *claims* requiring verification rather than as information to be listened to and acted upon in the provision of care. Language across staff accounts

was consistent with a disclosure-as-information-to-be-verified framework; women were described as claiming to be pregnant, women claimed to have poor mental health, women claimed to be in pain. As Chloe, a Custody Officer outlines: “They are quick to say depression or anxiety, but is any of that diagnosed? Have you been to see a doctor? How is it different from just a bad day? They are quick to say it without confirmation” (Chloe, CO). Staff demands for verification placed a particular weight on women as they are systemically under-diagnosed across a range of conditions within the community (Wicks, 2025; Maciver et al., 2025; Laughey et al., 2025). Therefore, custody staff’s needs for verification can work against women in particular because the records and diagnosis required to verify their disclosures are records and diagnoses, they are less likely to have (than men). An example of this is mental health and Appropriate Adult provision. Mental health is a PACE recognised trigger for AA provision: this means that a disclosed or suspected mental health condition should result in an AA being arranged to support a woman through the custody process. Staff in the study consistently stated that an overwhelming majority of women (“nearly all of them”) both have a mental health condition that staff can identify and a large proportion of women disclose a mental health condition. Of the women in the custody record data, only eight percent received an AA, however. There is a disconnect between disclosure, identification and provision. This reflects a wider culture of disbelief in that women are making mental health disclosures, staff are hearing them, and distress is witnessed by staff but AA’s are not being arranged.

Where vulnerabilities were recognised and responded to, the response was often gendered, with that gendered response running bi-directionally. Where work was feminine coded (menstruation, pregnancy, menopause), women officers were deployed as proxies for gender knowledge. Men officers distanced themselves from this particular type of work through displays of performative ignorance. On discussing women’s menstruation, Brian (DO) states: “Let’s be honest. I’m a bloke. I don’t know any of this.” Carolyn, a young female DO, was handed a breast pump for a new mother in custody and did not know how to use it; “She looked at me with these pumps and was like, well, what do I do? And I were like... I’ve no idea.” There were also levels of acknowledgement amongst staff that women officers could be deployed in high force situations to soften force optics where cases may attract heightened oversight or scrutiny:

Let’s be honest. The last thing I want to be doing is rolling around with some female in a cell, in here, dragging her to the cell, because it just looks horrendous on the camera...you always have that in the back of your head. So, you tend not to push the female DO’s, but you tend to go, come on, you go first. I’ll be behind you if you need me, more so, because it just looks so awful. (Brian, CO)

In both cases, women officers are being deployed because of what their gender signifies to the institution more broadly, not necessarily because of their competence in a particular situation. This has the potential to harm both staff and detainees. Women officers may be placed in high force situations unnecessarily and women detainees receive a response based on gendered stereotypes and logics, rather than actual need.

When responses failed, they did so in structurally distinct modes. Response failures are structurally distinct, as each represents a different institutional response type, not simply a milder or harsher

version of the same thing. Each response has its own mechanism, provoking its own response in turn from women, and all could unfold within a single encounter. Hostile responses worked through the active intensification of a situation. This included staff mocking, humiliating and/or dismissing women in ways that made their distress worse through the staff interaction itself. Partial response worked through minimal delivery. Women would be given something in response to their need (one tampon for an entire custody stay) but not enough to meet the underlying need, often leading women to have to ask for more provisions. Further help-seeking could then lead to a hostile response from staff, leading women to stop seeking help altogether. Non-response worked through the active withdrawal of institutional help, such as ignoring buzzers or turning them off completely.

Although an individual member of staff delivers each response, the same modes of response were evident across different staff, shifts, circumstances, and women. Where custody does not address these failed responses and enforce existing systemic accountability mechanisms, they become institutionally embedded patterns rather than the failings of particular individuals. Communication, or the lack of it, was experienced by women as a form of discipline whereby they felt they were being punished for being 'difficult', when really, they just wanted their basic needs to be met.

Taken together, these findings point to structural inconsistencies in the ways custody conceptualises, identifies, and responds to women's vulnerability, and these inconsistencies can produce vulnerabilities instead of ameliorating them. The category of women as vulnerable is contested by the staff meant to apply it. The identification of vulnerability is mediated through staff judgement, where women are read against a structural burden of proof they do not know exists. Even when the threshold for that burden is met, further disclosures may be met by a culture of disbelief that treats women's accounts as claims to be verified. Responses to vulnerability, when they do come, are often highly gendered and inconsistent. The category of women as vulnerable persists in training and guidance, but it is hollowed out: empty, with little material meaning for women. Care is contingent. It is not guaranteed. Our findings suggest that custody environments and staff must do better in operationalising the term in a way that reaches women in a meaningful and substantive way.

4.3.2 Dignity and indignity for women in police custody

Dignity on arrest and in custody can be effectively framed by concepts of equal worth, autonomy, privacy, decency, thus chiming with some of the existing research (Baird, 2024; Skinns et al., 2022). These forms of dignity during arrest and detention mattered to women in the research, albeit that this was not always bestowed on or accessed by them. As found in previous research (Savigar-Shaw et al., 2022; Skinns et al., 2017), there was a tacit expectation amongst staff that dignified treatment was possible when women first showed respect towards staff, after which they would reciprocate. In the context of the all-encompassing power of staff in custody – particularly over women, given their likely more disadvantaged status, based on gender, poverty and experience of abuse and trauma (Skinns et al., 2026) – this provided significant pressure on women to comply and to show or perform respect to staff in the first instance.

On arrest, policemen talking down to women or not seeing them as human beings conveyed a sense of their lack of equal worth, a feeling that carried on into custody settings. Privacy of

interactions between women and the police was also sometimes absent during arrests, with this mattering especially when children were present and, leaving some children also traumatised by seeing their mothers arrested. Women's (loss of) autonomy tended to encompass the use of handcuffs and use of force against women. These tools and techniques often eroded their bodily autonomy, particularly where it was not clear to them why these forms of coercion were being used, owing, for example, to their perceived innocence or their arrest for typically lower-level matters than men; or where intimate parts of their body became exposed during scuffles with the police. Not having opportunities to gather the things they needed or having to do so with limited privacy in front of male officers (e.g. changing from pyjamas to appropriate day clothing), furthermore undermined women's sense of (bodily) autonomy. In other words, the material conditions of their arrest overlapped with their ability to make autonomous decisions right for them.

Though not strictly about dignity, there were further inequities and injustices that women noted about their arrest. These revolved around the differential impacts and risks of traumatisation and criminalisation for women arrested by policemen, given their greater likelihood of being victims of violence. Where this went unacknowledged, it could have particularly catastrophic effects on women, resulting in them lashing out and being accused of assaulting an emergency worker (see also section 4.1.3). There was also a sense of injustice that women felt by 'surprise' arrests, particularly when they happened in the middle of the night or following what they thought was to be a voluntary interview. This was rooted in the view, for example, that they were more likely than men to have been arrested for a low-level matter, which might have been therefore dealt with by other means, such as attending the police station voluntarily for an interview.

In custody, *equal worth* continued to be of importance to the women, in which they were seen and recognised as human beings, as Emma noted here:

It's like once you're arrested, they just automatically assume that you're a criminal. You're a bad person. And that's not the case, because... I've been to jail, yes, I did a bad crime, yes, I've changed my ways, like I've come out a changed person. But people in jail, they're not... they're not bad people. Like, most of them are good people that have just made bad choices ... I feel like because, obviously, they're the police, they think that they're above everyone else, but at the end of the day, we're all human. They're still humans just like us. Whether you've been convicted of a crime or you've been accused of a crime, you're still a human ... At the end of the day, like, we come into the world the same way, we leave the same way. (Emma, W10)

This recognition of being human also centred on the need for women's victim status to be acknowledged and responded to. As for decency, this was not just about being treated in the same way as a family member or friend might be, but about showing responsivity to women's (gender-based) needs. Women wanted this responsive approach to be human being-focussed, attentive and thoughtful, albeit that the delivery of such decency could be undermined by routinisation, busyness, problematic staff attitudes and use of humour in ways which laughed at, not with, detainees.

In custody, (*bodily*) autonomy also continued to be of great importance to women, given their dependence on staff to access this form of dignity. This was evident in forcible strip searches, which

women found especially undignified when the rationale for them was not explained and opportunities for consensual strip searches were not offered, when men were involved and when alternatives such as constant watch or CCTV observation in the cells were not explored or could not be provided due to limited resources. Autonomy, or a lack of it, also arose in relation to women's efforts to manage their menstruation and to a lesser extent menopause. There were examples of staff playing a critical role, especially women custody staff, in being available and willing to help women to manage their menstruation for themselves. For example, Roseanne said:

Well, I had to buzz all the time, asked them for sanitary towels ... And he says, "Yeah." But he wouldn't give me three. And then I... they were just like on my bed, and when they looked through the flap, they took two off me, said I didn't need them all. So then, I had to buzz again later on, and it was always the men that were coming along to answer ... The buzzer, yeah. Just uncomfortable ... But the CID woman gives me three when I asked her. Why take them off me, know what I mean? I'm not going to do owt with them to myself, know what I mean. (Roseanne, W35)

This suggested that a cultural shift was still needed to enable more (bodily) autonomy, so that women's menstrual needs were responded to in a timely fashion.

As for *privacy*, women, especially Muslim women, disliked being watched, particularly by men in the cells via CCTV cameras and whilst potentially using the toilet. This included Jameela, a woman of British Pakistani heritage who said:

I'm being recorded, so, I don't... I sort of don't ... Because I don't know who's watching ... And then I'm taking my tampon out and I'm a woman, like, it's just very uncomfortable, and I'm having to like lean over, just... and it's just like... because you don't know, there could be a male watching ... Because it makes you think, oh, I'm peeing and there's someone watching me, I'm taking my top... is someone watching me? (Jameela, W28)

Though there were uncertainties about whether women were informed of the pixelation of toilet areas, irrespective of this, some women simply did not trust the police enough not to look or record them. Yet, toilets in the corridor did not afford women much more privacy either, nor did the showers, because of the small doors which opened directly onto the corridor and because of staff observing them whilst they showered. Again, this lack of privacy in the showers was a particular concern for Muslim women. There was also a lack of privacy when it came to women's personal information. Though there was scope for women to be booked-in in discreet areas of the custody suite, this was not routinely the case, meaning women's personal information – such as about their health, mental health, caring responsibilities, charges against them etc. – was often shared in earshot of others. This is a gendered matter, given the more complex needs that women will often exhibit, as shown in the custody record analysis (see section 4.1.1), and greater likelihood of them having very personal information which it may be necessary for them to share in a risk assessment.

In sum, there was a clear pattern of distinctive experiences of dignity and indignity for women. Some of these dignities and indignities were more gendered than others, e.g., (bodily) autonomy and privacy. They were rooted in the male dominated environment, women's distinctive bodily processes

and worries about them, as well as by gender, race and religion and the intersections between them. It is important that these gender-based dignities and indignities are acknowledged and addressed more fully, and that staff have the resources to do this.

4.3.3 *Diversion*

Police custody is a key entrance point into the wider criminal justice process, though it can also prove to be a critical point for diversion. The research considered the appropriateness and gender-responsiveness of police diversionary measures including liaison and diversion, voluntary interviews, refusal of detention and OOCRs. Due to some diversionary measures, such as voluntary interviews and OOCRs, being part of the arrest, investigation and charging side of policing, which is separate from custody, some custody staff did not have extensive, if any, knowledge of the use of them, which to some extent limited what we are able to say in this regard.

One form of diversion explored in the research was liaison and diversion (L&D), whose stated role is to identify, support and refer onwards vulnerable suspects, including women, when they first come into contact with the criminal justice system. There had been a recent change in L&D provider in West Yorkshire, who were still establishing themselves at the time of the research, and this appeared to impact engagement. At the time, L&D were not based within the custody suite, did not have access to police custody record systems and only visited the custody suite twice a day. Resultingly, engagement was highly dependent on custody staff's capacity to assist in taking them to the cells and helping identify particularly vulnerable detainees or those with higher needs. As a result, when custody was busy, L&D engagement suffered.

Some criminal justice practitioners criticised that there was no longer a dedicated female pathway. At the time of the research, this pathway had been scrapped as a result limited resources and changes to the provider of L&D services in West Yorkshire. In the past, it has enabled women to be referred directly to women's centres from police custody and to gender-responsive support in a more appropriate setting, including, for example, safety plans to protect women from domestic abuse. Nearly all the women interviewed did not recollect speaking to a practitioner from L&D or engaging with them. Due to the lack of engagement with the women interviewed, no evidence on women's experiences of L&D was found. Some custody staff shared a lack of confidence in L&D's service, suggesting "L&D don't do much - if you're homeless they divert you to a place in town but otherwise not much else... They just give you a leaflet" (Site A, Day 1). An L&D practitioner also informed us that because of resource constraints they only worked with women not already in contact with other statutory providers, e.g., probation. Overall, the findings present concerns over the effectiveness of L&D in engaging and supporting women within West Yorkshire custody suites.

It was unclear how often voluntary interviews (VIs) were used within West Yorkshire. Most of the women interviewed in the research did not have knowledge or experience of attending a VI. Some officers shared the view that the police should aim to use VIs more, if appropriate, because they use up less of suspects' and police time. They were also seen as an appropriate response to women with caring responsibilities to prevent lengthy periods in detention. Though they also shared that women who failed to attend a voluntary interview multiple times may end up being arrested instead. However, one officer had allowed the rescheduling of a VI twice by a woman suspect, taking into

account her caring responsibilities. Concerningly, one woman interviewed was arrested, after attending a pre-arranged voluntary interview appointment at a police station, before her interview had even begun. This demonstrates how non-diversionary VIs can be, if they are simply used to arrest women as soon as they arrive. The findings suggest that the use of VIs are not simply determined by the necessity of arrest but also by the decision making and practices of individual officers and their level of understanding about VI procedures, in theory and practice.

A CO also stated that VIs should be consistently used when the necessity to arrest is not met and reported that when suspects who he believed were appropriate for a VI had been brought into custody, he would refuse detention. However, such refusals were seen by some as likely to cause “arguments” and “ripples”, suggesting there was a culture of authorisation within custody:

It's easier to authorise detention, always has been, because it's not criticised, and if you refuse detention, it's always been criticised... and there's always this big push on like arresting people without actually thinking, “Does it necessitate the need for arrest? Do they need to be in a custody setting?” (Daniel, CO)

Other COs stated that, whilst detention was rarely refused, this was because arrest and detention was consistently appropriate. Overall, COs presented conflicting views on authorisation and refusal and its relationship to VIs.

OOCRs were another form of diversion explored within the research. These offer a formal response to an alleged often first-time and/or low-level offence without taking the case to court. Determined by the police, examples include cautions and community resolutions. In the research, officers stated the use of OOCRs was decided by offence type and suspect history, with gender not being a specific consideration. Staff suggested that there had been a push for greater use of OOCRs. However, this was not specifically for women suspects but the wider population. An OOCR was viewed by some officers as a ‘positive outcome’, less work for the police and easier to deliver, especially when there was minimal evidence, because it did not require any court processes. However, there was also a recognition of the risk of using OOCRs liberally for the sake of reaching targets and managing public perceptions.

When observing OOCR programmes specifically targeted at and attended by women, it was found that the women engaged well and responded positively to these programmes, especially, as the programme facilitators tailored the workshops to be gender-responsive and demonstrated their empathy and understanding of the women’s histories and needs connected to trauma and abuse. The online format allowed the women to engage flexibly around childcare, work and ill-health. In contrast, in-person formats proved more difficult for some of the women because of their additional caring responsibilities, which impacted engagement. The lack of continued support or follow-up with participating women was also raised as a limitation.

Of most concern was that some women didn’t feel fully informed when agreeing to an OOCR, as they did not understand the wider implications, such as around enhanced DBS checks and the impact on employment. This caused significant, ongoing pains and anxiety for some women, particularly around the potential response by their current or future employers. This was made much

worse for one woman who had to wait 18 months to complete the intervention required as a condition of her OOCR. There was also evidence that women were not consistently offered or provided the opportunity to seek legal advice before accepting an OOCR.

In sum, with clear robust guidance and when implemented effectively, diversionary measures may successfully divert women from the CJS. However, diversion through VIs or OOCRs without appropriate safeguarding and support such as legal advice, especially for victims of domestic abuse, risks re-victimisation and fails to address the coercion, dependency and trauma underlying many women's offending behaviours. Ultimately, inconsistent implementation, lack of justifications for use, and women not being properly informed of their potential consequences, risks resulting in adverse outcomes: criminalisation and a distrust of the police, rather than diversion.

4.4 Views on the future of police custody for women

When we specifically asked interviewees for their views around whether changes were required to improve women's experiences in police custody and, if so, what those changes should involve, we received a range of responses. Importantly, many responses mirrored our findings regarding the contexts and conditions of detention and the need for further development of policy and practice to better protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of women detainees.

There were some interviewees who felt that current processes were largely adequate, or who resisted the suggestion that it was necessary or appropriate to develop a more gender-specific approach to police custody. However, the majority identified a need for change.

A prominent focus was on improving the material conditions of custody, including warmer and less austere cells, with more ready access to basic self-care items. Kristina (W18) for example reflected: "how can you feel safe, you know, anywhere in a room that I would say is two metres square, you know, with no window, no nothing, no anyone to talk to." Provision of hygiene facilities such as sinks were felt to be particularly crucial for menstruating women – as Ivy (W13) put it, "I know it's not meant to be luxury, that's the whole point, but like having somewhere to have a bit of hygiene would be great...you've got like your time of the month, haven't you, and I just think it's important...just to freshen your body up."

Beyond this, interviewees often emphasised the need for more meaningful welfare checks, with staff engaging in a conversation and showing greater professional curiosity. This was often coupled with suggestions for improved mental health awareness for custody staff or greater involvement of specialists to ensure appropriate emotional and psychological support during detention. Kristina (W18), for example, said that she felt her experience of detention was characterised by "people not being supportive, people not offering help, people don't even offer you a psychological chat here, which I believe should be offered to everyone, you know, like, people just to help you...deal with all the emotion." Meanwhile, Ruth (W19) reflected that "the way I see it, you shouldn't be putting me in a cell when you've not even listened to my story."

The importance of more, and more standardised, training for custody staff was often highlighted, with many interviewees suggesting that this should specifically include training on gender-specific needs, trauma-informed care, and communication skills. At the same time, there was some ambivalence amongst custody staff around whether it was necessary for this training to be a universal offering, rather than targeted only to specialist points of contact, such as the SPOCs. There were also concerns that any training in relation to women's needs would need to be complemented with training around men's needs since treatment of all people should be equal.

The need to better empower (women) detainees through clearer information and signage about their rights and entitlements, and support services available, was also identified. In addition, greater partnership working with specialist services, including women's organisations, was often highlighted as key. Suggestions were made for co-location of women's services within custody suites or for an automatic referral by police to such services for all women detainees. It was felt that this would significantly increase the prospects for holistic support that would, in turn, best ensure that women

“leave custody in a better position than when they first came in” (Jackson, E4), and so would be substantially better able to avoid future offending.

Some interviewees went further, proposing structural changes to the custody environment: recommendations here included giving greater priority to the investigation of women’s cases so as to expedite their detention and increasing provision of women custody staff to allow for more reliable gender-matching. Though there is mixed evidence around whether women necessarily are inclined to be less judgmental of, or more sympathetic, caring and open towards, other women, it was often felt that interacting with women staff would be more conducive to women detainees’ disclosure of welfare needs and to improving their overall custody experience. Meanwhile, some interviewees advocated for a more radical response, in the creation of women-only spaces or facilities. As Max, a Manager, put it:

I would just have separate, male and female split...I get it because we can't always guarantee we're going to have female detainees, but...I think it'd be quite easy...have a separate entry and exit, booking-in desk, so that they're never really going to cross over.

The benefits of this were underscored in particular in relation to the potentially retraumatising impacts for victims of domestic abuse of being placed in spaces alongside men detainees who could be “shouting and swearing” (Jackson, E4) or “intimidating” (Sheila, CJP).

More fundamentally, some interviewees questioned the appropriateness of the use of custody altogether for many women, advocating for greater scrutiny of arrest practices and detention authorisation, as well as proactive use of voluntary interviews and diversions. Ashley (E7) underscored, for example, that:

If at the point of arrest, you’ve got options that allow diversion...if you do that early enough then, you know, there is a good chance that you will reduce further pathways into the criminal justice system.

Meanwhile, Helen, a criminal justice practitioner, exemplified a point, raised by several of our interviewees, about the structural conditions in which much of women’s offending occurs and the need to tackle this at its roots. As she put it:

Society needs to change, doesn't it...the reason why women are involved in criminal justice is because of their experiences of violence against women and girls. So, if you stop violence against women and girls, you stop women offending, and then we all live happily ever after.

In sum, the overarching view amongst participants was that custody needed to change significantly to improve women’s experiences and better address their needs in the future. These included changes to: the material conditions, welfare checks on women, improved gender-specific and trauma-informed police training, especially for those most likely to support women in custody, more information for women so they could be empowered to make decisions that are in their best interests, improved partnership working with women’s organisations, prioritisation of criminal investigations involving women and to some extent more women staff to enable more opportunities for gender-matching of staff to women. More radically, there were also some who questioned whether women should be arrested to the extent they are in the first place, especially given the higher proportion of

cases of no further action being taken against women. At its most fundamental, there was a sense, though, that regardless of any necessary changes around custody processes and environment, there also needed to be wider societal changes which address the structural causes of women's offending.

NEXT STEPS

5.1 Dissemination plan and knowledge exchange activities

This project addresses the lacuna of academic evidence, as confirmed in the project's literature review (see Skinns et al., 2026). We are therefore planning a number of academic outputs, based on the summaries of the findings set out in Section 4. These summaries come from lengthier but yet unpublished reports, which will provide the basis for a series of conference presentations, policy reports, book chapters, journal articles and accessible animations of findings. These are as follows:

Conference presentations and animations:

- In July 2026, Layla Skinns, Lexine Smyth, Katie Weir and Jackie Hodgson presented four papers on the culture of custody, the criminalisation of women, the pains of police detention and vulnerability in a panel entitled 'Police custody as a gendered space: Emerging findings and future directions' at the British Society of Criminology Conference 8-10 July 2026 hosted by Nottingham Trent University
- In September 2026, Layla Skinns presented a paper entitled 'Gendering police custody: Examining women's experiences of police custody in West Yorkshire Police, UK' at the European Society of Criminology Conference 9-12 September 2026 hosted by the University of Warsaw.
- In September 2026, Layla Skinns and Katie Weir presented key project findings at an 'Academic Research in Police Custody Event' for Independent Custody Visitors across England and Wales and coordinated by the Independent Custody Visiting Association.
- Working with Alternative View Studios, throughout July to October, we produced a short animation intended to provide an accessible overview of key findings and recommendations, which was launched alongside this report at the NPCC Custody Conference in October 2026.

Beyond this report, we are also planning book chapters and journal articles:

- As promised in the grant application, we will publish key findings from the research (in *Policing and Society*), including a focus on the relevance of gender to police custody (in the *British Journal of Criminology*). The precise focus of these will be determined in due course.
- Weir et al. (forthcoming in 2028) Police custody as a gendered space: Re-imagining women's experiences through an 'ethics of care' framework. In M. Beatrice (ed.) *Repositioning Criminal Justice: Critical Reimaginings*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Skinns et al. (forthcoming in 2028) "I do feel vulnerable but it's not something that the police would see": Translating vulnerability-informed research into changes to police custody policies and practices. In S. Fairclough, K. Doolin and H. Pierpoint (eds.) *Routledge Handbook on Vulnerability and Criminal Justice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

In terms of knowledge exchange activities, we held an end-of-project event on the 23rd of June 2026 at the University of Sheffield, attended by 40 people in-person and 4 online, including a mixture of academics, police practitioners, policy makers and third sector organisations. This was a highly

successful event, where we received important feedback, including on the recommendations from the research, which we have incorporated into this report. Following on from this meeting, we will be meeting with individual attendees to further develop the potential impacts of this research. This includes the NPCC lead for police custody and his staff officer, who we will work with to develop a new section on women in custody for the updated National Strategy for Police Custody.

5.2 Impacts on policy and practice

Collectively the research, its dissemination and the academic outputs stemming from it will facilitate improved practitioner knowledge and evidence-informed application of, or adjustment to, national and local strategies, policy, guidance and training. From July 2026 onwards, we have been working towards the following innovations:

- A mapping of women detainees' needs and current responses, shared with WYP and other police forces.
- Evidence-based good practice recommendations, leading to a new WYP policy on women detainees.
- Recommended changes to strategies, policies and guidance, e.g. the NPCC Police Custody Strategy and Authorised Professional Practice (currently the section on 'female detainees' is brief and out-of-date), including on how to use terms such as female or women detainees.
- Recommended changes to training, including College of Policing 'Vulnerability in police custody' and WYP's initial/CPD training for new or continuing custody staff, which could be rolled out to other police force areas.
- Recommended changes to the PACE Codes of Practice, e.g. in relation to the use of the terms female or women detainees, and to voluntary interviews of women.

These innovations will ultimately bring change to police custody practices, and improve the treatment and experiences of women detainees, helping prevent a 'revolving door' for women into custody and thus to prevent crime, as well as improving public confidence in the police.

CONCLUSION

6.1 Conclusions

This research provides the first comprehensive mixed-methods examination of women's experiences of police custody in England and Wales, combining analysis of over 52,000 custody records with interviews with women, custody staff, criminal justice practitioners and national stakeholders, alongside extensive observations of custody practice. Together, the findings demonstrate that police custody is a gendered institutional space which women enter with distinctive needs, experience detention differently from men and are not consistently supported by existing policy or practice. To conclude this report, we return to the research questions identified at the outset, examining how they have been addressed by the research, before examining key recommendations that arise from it.

1. How do detainee populations vary by gender?

In terms of the first research question concerning how police custody populations vary by gender, quantitative analysis demonstrated that women entering police custody differ from men in important ways. Women accounted for around one in six detainees and were generally arrested for less serious offences, spent less time in custody and were more likely to receive a first disposal of No Further Action or conditional bail. However, women entered custody with considerably greater levels of complex needs than men, including higher rates of mental ill-health, self-harm, physical illness and were more likely to be taking prescribed medication, indicating that they have distinct health and welfare needs during detention.

The analysis also identified important differences in offence type and disposals. Women were disproportionately represented among those arrested for child neglect, assault on emergency workers and lower-level offences associated with domestic abuse incidents. Many of these cases subsequently resulted in no further action being taken, raising questions about the reasons for and the necessity of arrest and detention in the first place. The qualitative findings suggested that women who were themselves victims of domestic abuse were criminalised through counter-allegations or because responding officers struggled to identify the primary perpetrator. Although the study identified intersections between gender, domestic abuse, religion, caring responsibilities and ethnicity, these emerged primarily through the qualitative parts of the research. Overall, the findings demonstrate that women's pathways into police custody are shaped by gendered patterns of victimisation, offending and vulnerability that have implications for both detention and case outcomes.

2. How do women detainees describe their lived experiences of police custody?

As for the second research question concerning women's lived experience of police custody, although this varied amongst the detainees we spoke with, many women described being in police custody as a highly emotional and often traumatic experience. Whilst some women reported being treated fairly and respectfully, many others described arrest, detention, searches and interviews as distressing, degrading and lacking dignity. Women with previous experiences of domestic or sexual

abuse frequently found arrest by policemen, and the use of force and detention in a predominantly male environment re-traumatising.

The research found that women experienced a significant gap between formal procedural safeguards and their lived reality. Although legal protections and welfare provisions existed, they were not always experienced as meaningful in practice. Women's access to legal rights, healthcare, showers, food, menstrual products and other entitlements was inconsistent, often depending upon staffing levels, individual officers' practices and women's willingness to request assistance.

A major contribution of the study is its identification of the gendered pains of police detention. Like all detainees, women experienced uncertainty, isolation and loss of control. However, these pains took distinctively gendered forms. Women worried intensely about children and other caring responsibilities, feared interactions with male officers and detainees, and experienced additional anxieties relating to menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, menopause, miscarriage and privacy. Religious identity also shaped experiences, particularly for Muslim women who expressed discomfort interacting with male officers or being without religious clothing, such as their hijabs. These findings demonstrate that women's experiences cannot simply be understood as those of detainees who happen to be women; rather, gender fundamentally shapes how police custody is experienced.

3. How do staff describe women detainees' experiences of, and needs in, police custody?

For research question three, which focuses on women's needs and responses to them, it was found that staff broadly recognised that women entered custody with more complex needs than men and identified mental health problems, trauma, domestic abuse, caring responsibilities and reproductive health as common concerns. However, these needs were frequently understood through a broad discourse of vulnerability rather than through a more nuanced understanding of gender or trauma. Although many officers demonstrated compassion and care through practical acts of kindness, support often relied upon individual staff commitment rather than consistent organisational practice.

The research identified significant operational barriers to meeting women's needs. Custody remained a predominantly male environment, with too few women officers available. The SPOC initiative represented an important form of support to improve women's experiences, but implementation was inconsistent because of staffing shortages, competing operational demands and limited training. Consequently, many women who expressed a preference for speaking with a woman officer were instead dealt with by men.

Staff also acknowledged wider organisational challenges, including limited trauma-informed training, pressures arising from busy custody suites and uncertainty about how best to support women with complex needs. At the same time, some staff reproduced gendered assumptions, describing women as simultaneously vulnerable, needy or manipulative. The findings therefore suggest that whilst staff recognised many of women's distinctive needs, there remained tensions between organisational priorities centred on risk management and aspirations towards gender-responsive care.

4. To what extent do existing laws, policies and guidance address the needs of a diverse range of women detainees?

For the final research question on guidance and policy relating to women in police custody and any changes that may be needed, the research found that existing legal and policy frameworks provide only partial recognition of women's needs in police custody. While legislation, PACE Code C and national guidance include important safeguards for detainees generally, they pay relatively limited attention to women's specific experiences or to the needs of survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Similarly, although broader criminal justice policy has increasingly recognised the importance of gender-responsive approaches for women in the criminal justice system, police custody has received comparatively little attention.

The findings demonstrated a consistent gap between policy and practice. Women's access to key provisions, including female officers, menstrual and menopause support, privacy, healthcare and information about their rights, was inconsistent across custody settings. Policies such as the SPOC role reflected positive intentions but were undermined by staffing constraints, limited training and inconsistent implementation.

Overall, therefore, the findings indicate the need for a more gender-responsive approach to police custody. As discussed in more detail in the recommendations below, this should include greater use of diversion and voluntary interviews where appropriate; improved identification of primary perpetrators in domestic abuse cases to reduce unnecessary criminalisation; enhanced trauma-informed training for frontline and custody staff; stronger implementation of women-specific welfare provisions; and national custody policy that explicitly recognises women's distinctive pathways into custody and their diverse health, welfare and safeguarding needs. The research demonstrates the importance of recognising how gender, trauma, caring responsibilities and structural inequalities shape women's experiences throughout the custody journey.

6.2 Key recommendations

These recommendations have been derived from the empirical evidence presented throughout this report and are aimed at improving the experiences of women and girls in police custody in England and Wales and at more effectively meeting their needs. Here we focus on 40 from a longer and more preliminary list of 69 recommendations, which were shared with participants at the end-of-project event in June 2026 for feedback. Discussions there helped to reduce this preliminary list to those recommendations considered of greater priority. These recommendations should be of benefit to a range of audiences, including police officers, detention officers, custody managers and other criminal justice practitioners (and their managers) who work in police custody. They will also be of value to police custody policy makers at the national and regional level, who support the updating and development of policies and guidance such as Authorised Professional Practice, the Police Custody Design Guide and Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code C.

However, these recommendations must be situated within relevant contextual factors, which make them important but also, in some instances, harder-to-achieve. More specifically, the recommendations must be seen first in the context of the complexity of women's needs. By this we mean that women in police custody are considerably more likely than men to experience mental ill-health, to be taking medication, to have tried to self-harm and to have an illness or injury, as shown in custody record analysis conducted as part of the research. As well as being more likely to have caring responsibilities than men, the context of women's offending behaviour is also more often

marked by trauma, abuse and poverty and by the effects on them of men and their offending, meaning that there is a risk of re-traumatising them as a result of their arrest and detention (Skinns et al., 2026). Second, in making these recommendations, we wish to also recognise the organisational and cultural challenges that may be associated with their implementation, particularly in light of limited resources, both staff and money, and cultural resistance. This does not diminish the importance of many of the recommendations that we make, but it does acknowledge that progress towards them may be incremental or that wider changes beyond the immediate confines of police custody policy and practice may be required in order for them to be fully capable of being realised.

These recommendations should be read alongside those of the Baird Inquiry (Baird, 2024). In several areas, our findings provide further empirical support for Baird's recommendations, whilst also extending the evidence base beyond Greater Manchester Police and identifying additional priorities relating to diversion, caring responsibilities, organisational capacity and systematic monitoring.

When making changes to police custody policies, guidance and codes of practice in the future, attention should also be paid to the language used to ensure consistency and fidelity to commonly understood distinctions around sex and gender (see also Section 1.2).

6.2.1 Prevent unnecessary criminalisation and reduce women's entry into and time spent in custody

These recommendations respond to the finding that many women were arrested for lower-level offences, often received 'no further action', and were sometimes criminalised in the context of domestic abuse. Therefore, police custody should be seen as a last resort for women wherever possible.

1. Introduce presumptions against detention for women, especially when they are pregnant, breastfeeding, or have infant dependants, unless there are immediate concerns regarding the safety of alleged victims or the public.
2. Police responses to domestic abuse should explicitly guard against the criminalisation of women victims, such as through counter-allegations, women's trauma-related responses to the police or the misidentification of the primary perpetrator. This must be borne in mind in proactive policing policies for domestic abuse.
3. Ensure there is a women's diversionary pathway through the Liaison and Diversion (L&D) team and dedicated funding for this. All women should be routinely offered L&D assessment, with appropriate and consent-based onward referral to women's centres for support to address needs that may contribute to repeated contact with the criminal justice system and thereby reduce the likelihood of future arrest and detention. L&D staff should work collaboratively with women's Single Point of Contact (SPOC) and other relevant custody staff and practitioners to identify women for assessment and referral.
4. Increase the use of voluntary interviews at police stations for women. They should be the default for women when the necessity for arrest is not met to prevent any harms of police

detention. In order to deliver this recommendation, police forces should identify and address organisational, evidential and procedural barriers to voluntary interviews for women.

5. Reduce avoidable delays and time spent in custody by improving investigative preparedness, conducting interviews as promptly as possible, ensuring timely access to legal advisors, Appropriate Adults and interpreters, and strengthening case management processes.
6. Pilot a 12-hour detention clock for women suspects, building on the use of a shorter detention clock already piloted for children (e.g. Kemp and Bevan, 2026). This is justified by the distinctive context of women's offending and backgrounds and the greater harms that custody risks creating for them and any dependants. A shorter detention clock would encourage the speedier progression of investigations and reduce the time women spend in custody, although its effectiveness would also depend on adequate staffing and investigative capacity.

6.2.2 *Embed trauma-informed and gender-responsive practice*

These recommendations reflect one of the report's strongest findings, namely, that many women entering custody have experienced domestic abuse, sexual violence and trauma, and that custody practices may therefore re-traumatise them. Therefore, every stage of arrest and detention should minimise risks of re-traumatisation for women.

7. Provide gender-responsive and trauma-informed training for staff working in and around police custody, enabling them to better understand women's experiences of trauma and abuse, recognise and respond to their distinctive and diverse needs, and create conditions in which women feel safe to disclose matters relevant to their welfare and support.
8. Prioritise de-escalation and communication-based approaches as the primary response to women in distress, their non-compliance and behavioural challenges, with force used only as a last resort. This is especially important for women, in light of the risks of re-traumatisation.
9. Treat the strip searching of women as a measure of last resort, recognising its particularly intrusive nature and potential to re-traumatise women with histories of domestic abuse, sexual violence and other trauma. Strip searches should only be conducted where there is a clear, current and evidence-based justification. Decisions should not be solely based on historic warning markers and consideration must also be given to less intrusive alternatives.
10. Ensure consistency in the application of policies about not strip-searching women on welfare grounds and using Level 4 close proximity observation – sometimes also known as 'constant watch' – as an alternative where appropriate. This should become routine and normalised practice.
11. Improve timely access to high-quality legal representation for women. Whilst women should opt in to, not out of, legal advice, they should be encouraged to consider it prior to their first interview through the provision of timely and accessible information at multiple points.
12. Ensure women are given the opportunity to gain legal advice before accepting an OOCR and are fully informed of their long-term DBS implications, given their greater likelihood of working

in sectors where DBS checks are required. Women should understand that they may decline OOCRs and that their case would proceed to court.

6.2.3 *Improve dignity, privacy and women's welfare*

These recommendations respond directly to women's accounts of the gendered pains of detention, their experiences of indignity and limited access to support for their welfare. They emphasise the need for women's bodily needs and dignity to be proactively anticipated rather than dependent on requests.

13. When planning arrests of women at home, officers should take account of the likely presence and welfare of children, the timing of the arrest, women's caring responsibilities and their need to gather essential medication, clothing and other property. Women should also be given an opportunity to make appropriate arrangements for their children before being taken into custody.
14. Where resources permit, ensure that women are routinely separated from men throughout police custody, including on arrival, whilst waiting and booking-in, in cells and on release, with women-only areas staffed by women where possible. Longer-term consideration should also be given to the feasibility of gender-specific and trauma-informed custody facilities, balanced against the potential disadvantages associated with greater distances from women's homes and the availability of relevant custody services and practitioners.
15. As far as possible, ensure that cells that women are placed in have sinks for handwashing purposes and, if this is not possible, ensure that there is routine access to such facilities outside of the cells. Where police forces currently lack handwashing facilities in the cells, they should be incorporated into future refurbishment plans.
16. Support women's privacy in the cells, as far as this is possible whilst also keeping women safe. This requires recognising and being sensitive to the worries that women have about being observed - either through cell doors or on CCTV - by men working in custody, particularly whilst the women are in undressed states or using the toilet. It requires acknowledging that these concerns may be particularly acute, or manifest in specific ways, for women from some minoritised ethnic and religious backgrounds. Women should routinely be informed where CCTV camera images from in the cells are pixelated.
17. Ensure routine access to spaces and equipment for breastfeeding women, including breast pumps, breast pads and a suitable environment to express milk (not in the cells).
18. Enable access to menstrual products as a matter of course, e.g. by having pre-made packs of a range of menstrual products to offer and/or placing these in cells designated for women, so women do not have to ask for them.
19. Enable women to have timely access to appropriate amounts of toilet roll to meet women's needs, especially if menstruating, without them having to make repeated requests, ration their use or to wait unnecessarily. This could be provided either in small packs or by placing sufficient amounts in cells for women.

20. Ask relevant women (e.g. over the age of 40 years) as a matter of consistent practice if they require any menopause care during the risk assessment in the same way that women are asked about needing menstrual products, or routinely leave menopause packs in the cells they are placed in.
21. Where a strip search is necessary, clearly explain to women why it is being conducted and ensure that it is carried out in a way that protects their dignity, privacy and bodily autonomy as far as possible.
22. Provide clearer and more practice-oriented guidance for custody staff on searches involving transgender and non-binary detainees, to address uncertainty among staff about how such searches should be conducted.
23. Ensure consistency in explanations and the application of criteria about the removal of property and personal items, with clear guidance governing decisions relating to clothing, jewellery, hair accessories and religious items. This does not preclude a case-by-case response but will ensure consistent and clear criteria for the exercise of discretion in decisions about personal effects.
24. Routinely risk assess women at the point of release with the same care as at the point of detention, including to ensure that they are released with appropriate means of travelling home and/or travelling at appropriate times of day.

6.2.4 Strengthen communication with women to ensure their views are heard

These recommendations respond to findings that women felt uninformed, unheard and uncertain throughout detention. This suggests that better communication is central to improving these experiences and to addressing perceptions of unfairness.

25. The women's SPOC should not just be offered to women on booking-in but delivered in ways which ensure proactive steps are taken to routinely provide opportunities for communication with and support to women allocated to them, with dedicated time allowed for women custody staff to fulfil this role. There should also be consistency in the title used for the role, alongside a clear and consistently understood role description. In other words, there should be meaningful compliance with PACE Code C requirements about the SPOC, not just formal compliance.
26. Ask women whether they consider themselves vulnerable and on what grounds, for example, as part of risk assessment procedures; listen to and act on their disclosures; explain the role of the Appropriate Adult, where relevant, and ensure appropriate assessment of need and provision of an Appropriate Adult.
27. Improve communication with detainees by ensuring that women are routinely informed about the reasons for detention, expected timelines, the progress of investigatory processes (e.g. when they might speak to their solicitor or be interviewed) and any delays in proceedings, as well as about reasons for searches, the process involved, and their rights throughout.

28. Women should also be asked about any time-critical caring, health or other responsibilities outside custody. Ensure that these concerns are addressed in a timely fashion and relay any steps taken to address these concerns to the women detainees. This must be done in the knowledge that worries about children were one of the biggest sources of concern for women in the research.
29. Cell buzzers should be responded to promptly, with particular attention to women's potentially urgent welfare needs; any muting should require authorisation and be exceptional.
30. Increase transparency with women detainees and arrestees by clearly explaining processes, decisions and the reasons for any use of force. This ought to help reduce confusion, distress, and perceptions of unfair treatment.
31. Enable women and other people with dependants to make regular telephone or video calls during the daytime to those caring for children, as far as this is practicable, given any concerns about police investigations or availability of staff to support this.

6.2.5 Build workforce capability and organisational capacity

The report showed that staff were often compassionate but constrained by staffing levels, limited training and organisational pressures. Changes are therefore needed to ensure that staff have the knowledge, time and organisational support to meet women's needs consistently.

32. Ensure that custody staff receive ongoing training and professional development on women's needs in custody, supported by opportunities for reflective practice and the sharing of learning and good practice. This training should be differentiated by role for response, investigating, custody and detention officers and for those who may be SPOCs for women. Training for all staff should also be in-person, not online, practical and scenario-based, and involve those with lived experience of women's needs in the criminal justice system.
33. Regularly review workforce numbers in custody, looking carefully at the gender balance of police officers and police staff per suite and per shift. Relatedly, ensure there are ample numbers of women in the workforce to meet women's needs effectively and that gender-matching requirements can be met without placing undue pressure on staff, compromising detainee dignity or delaying women's release from detention.
34. Where resources permit and, if in line with women's wishes, enable gender-matching and thus more routine access to women custody staff. This may enable better disclosures of any welfare needs and improve their overall custody experience.

6.2.6 Strengthen accountability and continuous improvement

These recommendations ensure that improvements become embedded within policing rather than relying on individual officers to deliver them. They also recognise that gender responsive custody requires systematic monitoring and accountability.

35. Establish an oversight mechanism for detention authorisation decisions for women to ensure that detention is only authorised where necessary and that refusal decisions are actively supported and monitored.
36. Establish guidelines about when and whether muting of cell buzzers is acceptable and then monitor and review when and with whom cell buzzers are muted, including gendered patterns to this, as well as why it happened, who authorised it and whether and how women's needs were met where cell buzzers were muted. Relatedly, establish IT systems, if not already present, to ensure such monitoring can take place.
37. Collect and analyse data on women's arrest experiences to identify patterns, monitor compliance with policy, and support continuous improvement in practice. These patterns might include identifying escalating numbers of arrests and detention of particular women for particular offence types, who may therefore require help and referral to support services, such as women's centres.
38. Routinely monitor and independently scrutinise strip searches of women, including the grounds for their use and whether less intrusive alternatives were considered, to identify unnecessary, disproportionate or inconsistent practice.
39. Strengthen routine monitoring of detention lengths and outcomes, including analysis by gender, ethnicity, age, and caring responsibilities, to identify disparities and areas for improvement. These should be reported and, where possible, published routinely at force and national level.
40. Improve scrutiny of diversionary measures. This should include the recording of OOCRs decisions and their justification so that scrutiny panels can sufficiently scrutinise the use of OOCRs for women. Assessments of women by L&D and referrals to women's centres should also be monitored, examining the uptake of support and outcomes for women, including subsequent contact with police/custody where feasible.

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