

South Wales police under investigation over handling of crimes against women

Exclusive: Victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and rape say they were left at risk following fundamental errors

Sandra Laville, crime correspondent
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A woman who alleges to be a victim of domestic abuse says her husband who serves in the South Wales force was tipped off by colleagues that she had reported him. Photograph: Dimitris Legakis/Athena Pictures

A **police** force is at the centre of six investigations into serious failings in the handling of **domestic violence, rape** and sexual assault complaints, the Guardian can reveal.

Victims say they were left at risk by fundamental errors by police in south **Wales** in responding to their reports of violence. The revelations again focus on alleged police mistakes and errors when dealing with violence against women and young people and come after recent criticism of the Metropolitan police's Sapphire sex crimes unit.

Chief constables across Wales and all four police and crime commissioners have been called in to see Tom Davies, commissioner for the **Independent Police Complaints Commission** (IPCC) in Wales, over his concerns that basic errors are still being made

when dealing with allegations of sexual violence.

The investigations come after the deaths in 2009 of four women from domestic violence in Wales in tragedies which resonated across the country and forced the police to face up to their mistakes. In an attempt to stop another woman dying unnecessarily, a national conference on domestic violence was held in June 2011. But within two years of its taking place the actions of the police in Wales are again at the centre of a string of investigations.

Five investigations into the force are being carried out by the IPCC. The sixth is an inquiry by the South Wales force's directorate of professional standards into a complaint from a victim of domestic violence that details of her allegations about abuse at the hands of her partner, a South Wales police officer, were leaked to him by colleagues, putting her at risk. Her request for an outside force to investigate has been refused.

"The public are going to be greatly alarmed that we seem to be having a recurrence of failings in domestic violence cases and in one particular case in the licence and management of a man convicted of domestic violence and a serial sex offender," said Davies. "And it isn't the only investigation I am leading at the moment that involves the management of people with sex offences in their recent past.

"It is just not good enough to give a trite phrase saying we will learn lessons if you don't learn the lessons and if you don't make sure on a regular basis that the lessons have filtered down to your officers.

"Some of the basic principles are not being adhered to and saying that the lessons have been learnt is beginning to ring hollow."

The independent investigations by the IPCC include an inquiry into how and why the force failed to monitor a rapist with a history of violent attacks on women who had been released from prison on licence. The man – Christopher Veal – moved in with a woman in Cardiff on his release from prison. In August 2011 his girlfriend went to Fairwater police station in the city and told officers that her partner had assaulted her.

But the officers sent the woman and her children home and took no further action. The inquiry is examining why the officers did not appear to make even cursory checks that would have identified the suspect as a violent serial sex offender who had been in prison for rape.

Two days later Veal attacked the woman again with a claw hammer, in an assault of such extreme violence she was hospitalised. Veal was then arrested and recalled to prison, where he later killed himself. The South Wales force did not refer the case to the IPCC. The watchdog only learned about it when the woman's MP took up her complaint this year.

"The fact that she and her children were allowed to return home where she was then subjected to a serious violent attack raises serious concerns," said Davies.

"Even more concerning is that the man was released from prison on licence and had a record of violence."

The Guardian can reveal the four other inquiries focus on one area covered by the South Wales force, the northern command, based in Merthyr Tydfil, where there are not only concerns about complaints from women being ignored, but also an investigation into whether two supervising officers covered up or were complicit in what was going on. A detective sergeant from the command unit is at the centre of two inquiries into evidence that he failed to act on reports of rape and sexual assault. One is investigating his failure to act on a report of the rape of an underage girl in March last year. His actions were uncovered when the alleged perpetrator was investigated at a later date for other sexual assaults and rapes which he carried out after the first complaint to the detective sergeant.

The suspect has since been charged with three counts of sexual assault against three individuals which took place after the officer allegedly failed to act.

The same officer is under investigation for failing to take appropriate and timely action over allegations about the rape of another child despite four police forces providing information.

A man and a woman have now been charged with conspiracy to rape a child under 13 and other offences relating to indecent images of children.

The officer has not been suspended.

Within the same command unit in Merthyr Tydfil the IPCC has carried out another investigation into an officer who is charged with abusing his position to indecently assault women he met in the course of his duties.

Laura Richards, a behavioural analyst who advised the Association of Chief Police Officers on domestic violence, said: "There are some forces where culturally they are just not getting it. You can be as process driven as you want, but if you don't change your culture, and if you don't understand that these offenders are manipulative, and that you have to put them at the centre of your investigation, then you will continue not to get it."

South Wales assistant chief constable Matt Jukes said he recognised there would be public concern about the investigations but the force was committed to reducing domestic abuse. "We have introduced a range of measures to improve training and to ensure that incidents are properly managed and thoroughly investigated," he said.

"There are currently cases which have been voluntarily referred by South Wales police

to the IPCC for investigation.

"The force continues to cooperate fully with these independent investigations – none of which have reached their conclusions. Therefore it would be wrong to prejudge any findings although we recognise that these matters are of serious public concern."

Victims who contacted police before their deaths

Four women who were killed in 2009 in Wales had been in contact with police before their deaths.

North Wales

Karen McGraw, 50 Killed by her former partner at her Flintshire home. IPCC said police should have done more to protect her.

Gwent & South Wales Joanna Michael, 25 Killed by her boyfriend despite dialing 999 twice during the attack. The IPCC said both police forces had failed her because of a fatal combination of technological and human errors.

Gwent

Bobbie Stokoe, 23 Killed by her partner Darryl Smith. Her body was found later rolled up in carpet on wasteland. IPCC found a Gwent police control room operation had downgraded a call relating to her despite police knowing she was trying to escape a violent partner.

Dyfed Powys

Sasha Jones, 17 Killed by her father Gary Fisher. The IPCC said previous concerns raised by her mother – who contacted police 102 times – had not been dealt with properly by officers.

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