

# Criminal justice and you

An essential guide for victims and witnesses

## Investigating a crime

By Detective Sergeant Matt Sinker

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Hi, I'm Matt Sinker a Detective Sergeant in Devon and Cornwall Police. I'm currently the Deputy Force Lead for tackling violence against women and girls. I've been a police officer for over 23 years and worked in a variety of roles and this video I want to talk about what to expect if you are a victim within a criminal investigation.

The first thing to say, and be honest about, is that an investigation can take a long time. The primary role of the police is to gather evidence, to take to court. And in order for us to do that, we need to look at two main things: information that points towards someone being responsible for a crime and also information that points away from someone being responsible. This means we may need to speak to many people to review digital evidence on phones, etc, look at CCTV and try to build the best possible picture that we can of the events.

We look to do that by investigating the perpetrator. You may think that sounds obvious because without a perpetrator, there wouldn't have been a crime. And that's exactly right. In the past, the criminal justice process has been criticised for making victims feel like they're the ones under investigation. And this has led to phrases like "digital strip search" being used in the media when we've asked to look at evidence on your phone, for example. We're moving away from this and the criminal justice process should no longer make victims feel like they're on trial.

You're likely to become involved in the evidence gathering process. This can be giving a statement, viewing images to try to identify a suspect or perhaps showing officers around an area to explain what happened there.

I know that coping with a long investigation can be challenging and you'll want to know what's happening. The investigating officer should be keeping you updated, and the frequency and type of contact is something that you'll discuss early on in the process. Sometimes there may be a lot of activity in a short space of time, and sometimes

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if we're waiting for responses from other agencies or from phone downloads and so on, there may be less frequent activity. That doesn't mean the investigation isn't happening, but I know it can feel unnerving and frustrating if you don't hear anything for a while.

You should have a name of an officer in the case, and ideally that officer will see your case reach a conclusion. Don't be afraid to ask questions. I do know that contacting the police can be difficult in itself, either because it's daunting or just sometimes because it takes a long time to get through to us. You can ask the investigating officer how best they can be contacted, and if you want to know something, do get in touch. Communication is really important right through the whole investigation.

When all the evidence has been gathered, a decision is made about what to do next. There are a number of outcomes and these will be explained to you. Sometimes it's not possible to take an investigation to a positive outcome because the evidence isn't available to cover all the points to prove. It doesn't mean that we don't believe that the crime hasn't happened, it just means that we don't have everything we need to be able to go to court.

In other cases, the evidence will allow a suspect to be cautioned or charged. In some cases, the police make this decision and in others it's the Crown Prosecution Service. It depends on the type of crime and the victim circumstances. You can find out more in the linked video.

If you need support or help because the crime is affecting you this should be discussed with the Victim Care Unit or with the investigating officer. If it's having an impact, say so to the police officers and staff you speak to.

People sometimes ask if there's anything they need to do during an investigation. I say that telling the police how you feel is the most important thing, especially if you're looking for support. You can hear more from Sarah West at the Victim Care Unit in one of the linked videos.

Thanks for your time and I hope this is helpful.

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## Useful links

[Report a crime to Devon & Cornwall Police](#)

[Relay UK](#)

[Find your nearest police station](#)

In an emergency, call **999**. For non-emergencies, call **101**. You can also report a crime at any police station front desk. Click the link above to find your nearest station.

## Glossary

**Investigation** – where the police gather evidence.

**Violence against women and girls** – VAWG.

**Perpetrator** – a person who carries out harmful, illegal or immoral act.

**Digital strip search** – how police gather data-based evidence to investigate certain criminal cases.

**Points to prove** - Use a system such as Police National Legal Database (PNLD) to obtain the points to prove for the offence. It is essential to cover all of these details in the interview so when obtaining a charging decision, you can outline these points to a sergeant or the Crown Prosecution Service.

**Outcome** - In April 2013, a new outcomes framework was introduced, replacing the detections previously recorded. The move from detections to outcomes was a marked change, with an emphasis on greater transparency on how all crimes recorded by the police are dealt with.

**Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)** – the CPS prosecutes criminal cases that have

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been investigated by the police and other investigative organisations in England and Wales. The CPS is independent and make their decisions independently of the police and government.