

Victims' Experiences of SmartWater in Domestic Abuse Cases

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CONTEXT

SmartWater has recently been used in some domestic abuse cases to help victims feel safer and deter offenders from approaching victims and their property. It is delivered in various forms and transfers onto an offender when they approach the victim or try to access property illegally. If an offender is marked by SmartWater, this can be used as evidence in court. The current study aimed to explore the experiences of victims who have used SmartWater products.

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KEY FINDINGS

- SmartWater was highly recommended by participants and viewed as essential for victims of domestic abuse.
- Victims report feeling significantly safer when using SmartWater products.
- Nearly all participants felt SmartWater had a positive impact on mental well-being and quality of life.
- SmartWater was reported by victims as a key deterrent to offenders.
- Only a small minority of victims have been contacted by offenders since using SmartWater.
- Of those offenders, most changed their approach, which victims credited to SmartWater.
- Participants reported a significant increase in confidence and trust in police since using SmartWater
- They also reported a higher level of confidence in possible future prosecution.

INTRODUCTION

SmartWater has recently been used in some domestic abuse cases to help victims feel safer and deter offenders from approaching victims and their property. While other protective measures exist (e.g., Domestic Abuse Protection Notices), these rely on victims reporting breaches and providing evidence in court, placing responsibility on already vulnerable individuals. Additionally, evidence is difficult to corroborate and often victims do not want to provide testimony in court. SmartWater overcomes these issues by focusing on offenders and making the idea of approaching victims and/or their property less appealing due to the outcome for offenders. It thus aims to deter offences from being committed, and if this cannot be achieved, provide best evidence in court.

SmartWater is delivered in multiple ways; for example, a grease used on door handles, fence posts, windows and other property belonging to victims; a spray for use if offenders approach victims or if victims are away from their property; and an alarm system used to notify police of offenders' activities. When offenders are marked by SmartWater, it cannot be easily removed, and police can use this as evidence in cases. Offenders are informed that the victim and their property is protected by SmartWater, and stickers are also used on the property as a reminder warning about this. As such, SmartWater is not being used to 'catch the offender in the act', but rather being used as a deterrent. The current study aims to explore the experiences of victims who have used SmartWater products. The findings will impact on police policy and planning in terms of shaping the future use and development of SmartWater in domestic abuse cases.

METHOD

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data from victims of domestic abuse who were using SmartWater products. A survey was carried out in South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, which 48 individuals completed. This was then followed by interviews for a more in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences (n = 5). All participants were female, with a mean age of 36 years. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey responses, while thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

FINDINGS

The survey found 83% of victims felt SmartWater products have a positive impact on their life, and 78% felt safer due to SmartWater. Additionally, 70% of victims had not been contacted by the offender since using SmartWater. Of the victims who had been contacted, nine were asked if the offender changed the way he contacted them. Four victims (44%) reported a change, where the offender moved from in-person to remote means (e.g., telephone, text, online; 3 cases) or use of an intermediary (1 case). Of the offenders who changed their pattern of contact, 75% mentioned SmartWater to the victim, suggesting their change in contact was influenced to some extent by SmartWater. The survey also found that 73% of victims felt more confident in the police since receiving SmartWater products, and 62% indicated that their trust in the police had increased. Indeed, 95% of participants would recommend the use of SmartWater given their experiences with these products.

The quantitative results were supported by the interview findings, which explored participants’ experiences in more depth. Thematic analysis identified three themes across the interview data. The first theme relates to the victims’ current state – one of significant mental strain. The remaining two themes are outcomes following the introduction of SmartWater: (1) deterrence, resulting in victims feeling safer, and (2) evidence against the offender, making victims feel reassured their case has been taken seriously. Both outcomes impact on the first theme as victims feel safer, reassured and more confident in the police (see Figure 1). The themes are described in more detail below.

Figure 1. Diagram illustrating key themes



Theme 1: Mental strain

The first theme relates to the victims’ current state of well-being. All participants discussed the significant mental strain of past or ongoing domestic abuse incidents. They regularly noted *“heightened anxiety”*, *“suicidal thoughts”*, and *“feeling isolated and intimidated”*. This was amplified for those living with existing mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety), and participants characterised the offender as playing mental games to frighten them. The most common adjectives used to describe offenders were *“clever”*, *“arrogant”*, *“sly”*, *“antagonistic”*, and *“manipulative”*, with a view to *“cause terror”*, *“play mental games”*, *“cause mental abuse”*, and make the victim feel *“constantly afraid”*. As highlighted by some participants: *“What he was doing was mentally abusing me over a long period of time so that my mental health was rock bottom. So in my opinion, I would rather get a smack in the face than just have constant living in fear”* (Participant 22).

“What he does is a lot of mind games. He drives past my house very slow and he knows that he is not supposed to be there. He has targeted my car...” (Participant 21).

Theme 2: Deterrence

Following the introduction of SmartWater, one of the outcomes discussed by participants was deterrence. Participants reported SmartWater as a key deterrent to offenders and was seen as working best when part of a broader approach. Stickers, direct warnings by police, and the spray were all identified as making victims feel safer. As discussed by one participant:

“I think that it’s been several things all at once that has kept him away. But I would definitely say that him knowing that I had [SmartWater] stopped him from lingering around my property, so that definitely did make me feel a bit better and stopped him from vandalising the van” (Participant 22).

The spray was regularly identified as the most essential SmartWater product. Based on the survey findings, it also seems to be the most frequently distributed SmartWater product, with 74% of participants receiving SmartTag spray. It was often referenced in relation to making victims feel safer:

“I can carry it all the time, and all I have to do is take the top of it off, spray it, and then if he denies stalking me or being near me, there is going to be that physical proof” (Participant 18).

“I think the spray is probably the most important one...I think something that actually stains somebody so that they cannot say that they have not been at that property or near that person...is the most important” (Participant 21).

An in-person police visit to inform the offender of the use of SmartWater was seen as an important part of the products’ success. The visit serves multiple functions, including identifying further police involvement to the offender, signalling taking the victim’s claims seriously, and explicit warnings about the use of SmartWater. The participants felt this worked well for further deterring the offender. Additionally, offenders do not know which SmartWater products have been given to the victim or how they will be used, which was also considered an advantage. As mentioned by one participant:

“[The offender] had a very high level of interest in what protection was on the house or my vehicle...I think the fact that the police actually said to him, they made quite a big thing of it – they took it to him like a summons and he found that quite serious and that he thought – because they had explained and he got a pamphlet and it shows each level and I had only been given the very basic level, but he didn’t know that” (Participant 22).

All interview participants reported feeling safer after receiving SmartWater, which aligns with the survey findings. “Reassurance” was the most common word used across all interviews, alongside “relief” and “comfort”. SmartWater increased feelings of safety and ability to go about daily activities. The spray was highlighted as being particularly beneficial, as it made victims feel safer when leaving their home. The following quotes illustrate this:

“I do feel more confident about being on my own at work when I’ve got that at the side of me, because I know if he did approach me I would spray him...and I wouldn’t care if he beat me up again” (Participant 20).
“SmartWater...it did reassure me, because I thought if he does come near me he can’t deny [it] – because that is what he was getting away with” (Participant 21).

Theme 3: Evidence

A second outcome of SmartWater identified by participants is its use as evidence against the offender. Participants outlined how SmartWater can “talk for you” as proof. This is particularly important for those

who feel less articulate when talking to the police or in court. It also helps alleviate the anxiety of not being believed, as SmartWater provides evidence:

“They can’t deny that they’ve been near the person that they’re not supposed to be near. It is guaranteed proof if it does go to court, that they have been near that person” (Participant 21).

SmartWater also signals to victims that something is being done while investigations are ongoing. It provides reassurance and shows victims the police are taking their case seriously:

“I was very grateful that I was recommended for it. It was like they realised that I was going through a really hard time and so for that to be recognised...it did mean a lot” (Participant 21).

Overall, the participants highly recommend the use of SmartWater. They felt it should be given to victims as soon as possible, as they considered it essential for victims’ mental health and reassurance:

“It should be more widely available and it should be given to people a lot, lot sooner” (Participant 21).

CONCLUSION

Domestic abuse victims who have SmartWater feel it has a positive impact on their well-being, reducing mental strain by making them feel safer, reassured and more confident in the police. This is due to two outcomes of SmartWater, namely, deterring the offender and providing evidence. Participants felt their quality of life was significantly improved by receiving SmartWater, as it gave them the reassurance and confidence to go about everyday life activities. As a deterrent, a broad approach is considered most effective, where stickers, an in-person police visit to the offender, and the SmartTag spray all make the victim feel safer. In terms of evidence, SmartWater gives victims reassurance they will be believed when there are no witnesses and it is just their word against that of the offender. It also increases victims’ confidence and trust in the police, as they feel their case is being treated seriously. SmartWater was highly recommended by participants and viewed as essential for victims of domestic abuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Recruitment for this study proved challenging, and although there was a good response to the survey, the sample size for the interviews remained low. This seemed to be due to the vulnerability of the participants and an unwillingness to risk talking to ‘outsiders’ about their experiences. The survey conducted was purposefully brief (to encourage completion), but limited the data collected and subsequent analyses. As such, a more in-depth police-led survey with a larger sample would be useful to explore the issues covered by the interviews and determine whether the interview findings are shared by a wider population.

Additionally, it would be useful to explore offenders’ perspectives of SmartWater to determine how it impacts on their decision-making and the extent it serves as a deterrent. While the current study invited offenders to participate in an interview, all declined or did not respond to the invitation. An anonymous survey may be more successful for encouraging participation. Finally, it would be beneficial to conduct a full evaluation of SmartWater, which considers cost-benefit, process and impact. This would also identify scope for improvement, which was hinted at in the current study (e.g., size of spray, accompanying spray alarm, early introduction of SmartWater).

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