

# Northern Ireland Victim and Witness Survey (NIVAWS): Quality Report



Department of  
**Justice**

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnstríe O tha Laa

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um Staitisticí agus Taighde

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# Quality Report: Northern Ireland Victim and Witness Survey (NIVAWS)

## Introduction

The purpose of the Northern Ireland Victim and Witness Survey (NIVAWS) is to seek feedback from victims and witnesses of crime on their experience of the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System. The survey, which is conducted through telephone interview, is currently targeted at victims and witnesses of crime involved in cases which had closed in the 6-9 months prior to the survey being administered. The NIVAWS questionnaire is extensive in scope and covers the entire criminal justice journey, from the point when victims and witnesses first came into contact with the system (e.g. the point at which a crime is reported) right through to the point of sentencing and beyond.

To date there have been 8 administrations of NIVAWS. The survey was initially administered annually between 2008/09 and 2011/12 in order to meet a performance indicator requirement linked to the Comprehensive Spending Review at that time. Subsequent to that and, in light of the fact that the findings were not found to change to any great extent from year to year, a decision was taken to reduce the frequency of the survey. It was subsequently run in 2013/14, 2016/17, 2019/20 and most recently in 2022/23. It is intended that the survey will continue to be administered on a regular basis. The precise timing of any future administrations will be dependent on the budgetary position at the time and the availability of the necessary funds.

## Relevance

Relevance is the degree to which the statistics meets the current and potential needs of users.

The key stakeholders for NIVAWS are policy colleagues within the Department of Justice and members of the Victim and Witness Steering Group (VWSG). The latter comprises representation from Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Services (NICTS), Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Public Prosecution Service (PPS), National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Victim Support NI and Youth Justice Agency (YJA).

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The NIVAWS questionnaire, whilst initially modelled closely along the lines of the equivalent GB Survey at the time (WAVES – Witness and Victim Experience Survey), was adapted for use in Northern Ireland and developed in consultation with DoJ policy colleagues and members of the VWSG. In the interest of monitoring change over time in the victim and witness experience and, in particular, enabling the assessment of the impact of any new policy initiatives, the survey questionnaire does not change extensively from sweep to sweep. DoJ policy colleagues and VWSG members are nonetheless consulted with in advance of each new sweep of the survey in order to establish if any of the survey questions have become redundant or if new questions are required to address any new policy initiatives implemented since the previous administration of the survey.

The feedback received through the survey is used by the various criminal justice agencies and partnership bodies to identify which aspects of their service for victims and witnesses are working well, which perhaps aren't working so well and which areas they should perhaps think about targeting for improvement.

### Accuracy and Reliability

Accuracy is the closeness between an estimated result and the (unknown) true value.

Reliability is the closeness of early estimates to subsequent estimated values.

A range of processes have been put in place to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the NIVAWS findings:-

#### (i) Sample Selection and Validation

Given the complexity of the criminal justice process it is important that victim and witness views of their experience are sought as soon as possible after their cases have closed in order that they will have good recollection of their experience with the various criminal justice bodies and partnership bodies with whom they came into contact.

The approach taken has therefore been to target victim and witnesses whose cases closed within the 6-9 month period before the fieldwork period.

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The NIVAWS sample is derived from PPS records. As far as is possible, PPS remove any ineligible individuals from the database that they send to the external provider contracted to undertake the survey interviews. Thus they remove the following categories of victims and witnesses:-

- expert witnesses (e.g. police officers or other criminal justice officials);
- those involved in cases where the offender was another family member or a member of the same household;
- those involved in cases where there had been a fatality;
- those associated with cases involving certain types of more serious or sensitive offence (see table below for breakdown of the categories of offence included and excluded).

On receipt of the sample database from PPS, the contracted provider will undertake further validation of the sample database to remove any duplicate entries on behalf of individuals (e.g. those who may have had more than one case concluded during the target period), and they will also validate the address and contact details of potential respondents (e.g. remove invalid addresses and phone numbers, add missing postcodes etc.). They also issue pre-alert letters to potential respondents to explain the purpose of the survey, how they got their contact details and to also give them the opportunity to update their telephone numbers or to opt out of the survey altogether at this point if that is their wish.

In recognition, however, of the fact that it may not always be possible for PPS to identify and remove all ineligible individuals from the sample at this early stage, some screener questions are included at the start of the survey questionnaire to identify and eliminate them at the point of initial contact and before they are asked the substantive survey questions.

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### (ii) Sample size

NIVAWS seeks to achieve a target sample size of approximately 1,150 interviews with victims and witnesses of crime involved in recently closed cases. While the achieved sample size has fallen short of the target for recent sweeps of the survey, the achieved samples have still been of acceptable magnitude in order to enable reliable disaggregation and assessment of both the victim and the witness experience. A sample size of 611 respondents (396 victims and 215 witnesses) was achieved for the 2022/23 sweep of the survey.

### (iii) Weighting of the 4 key global indicators

In the interests of summarising the survey findings, a series of 4 more global type questions are included towards the end of the survey to gauge satisfaction with (i) the information received in relation to the criminal justice process, (ii) how well respondents had been kept informed about the progress of their case, (iii) how satisfied they were with the way they had been treated by staff in the criminal justice system and (iv) how satisfied they were with the contact they had with the criminal justice system. The latter indicator has been routinely used in the past as a key performance indicator for summarising progress in the area of service delivery to victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system.

Given that the relative proportions of victims and witnesses in the achieved sample may vary from the relative proportions in the eligible population, weighting is applied for analysis of the key indicator questions. The weighting process makes the necessary statistical adjustments to the survey data in order to improve the accuracy of the survey estimates.

### (iv) Confidence Intervals

In addition confidence intervals for the 95% level are checked for each of the key survey indicators. For the 2022/23 survey, these indicators have all been in the range +/- 3.4% to 4.1% of the sample estimates.

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## Timeliness and Punctuality

Timeliness refers to the time gap between the publication date and the reference period for the statistics.

Punctuality is the time lag between the actual and planned dates of publication for statistics.

The 2022/23 survey targeted individuals involved in cases which had closed between January and September 2022.

Following some initial preparatory work to exclude ineligible cases (e.g. those involving expert witnesses or ineligible offences), the victim and witness sample file was passed to the external company in mid-October.

Following further validation of the database by the external company to exclude any duplicate entries for individual victims and witnesses, those for whom there were inadequate or invalid contact details and those who were victims or witnesses of crime involving a corporate business or organisation, pre-alert letters were issued in mid-January to advise potential respondents of the survey and to enable them to provide updated telephone contact details or to opt out of the survey at this point if that was their wish.

The mid-January date for issue of the pre-alert letters is routinely chosen in order to avoid the pre- and immediate post Christmas period. A period of 3 weeks is then allowed to lapse after issue of the pre-alert letters in order to give potential respondents time to respond to the pre-alert letter if they so wished i.e. either to opt out of the survey or to update their telephone contact details.

The telephone interviews for the 2022/23 survey took place during February and March 2022. Thereafter, the resultant SPSS database was derived and passed to the Department of Justice by the end of March.

The report of the key survey findings was published on 3 August 2023 in accordance with the pre-announced publication date.

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## Accessibility and Clarity

Accessibility is the ease with which users can access the statistics and data.

Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the commentary, illustrations, accompanying advice and technical details.

The report on the key findings from the 2022/23 sweep of the survey was published in pdf format on the DoJ website in line with the pre-announced publication date.

Analysis has been conducted at both overall and at victim and witness level.

The overall findings (i.e. for victims and witnesses combined) for the current sweep of the survey are presented with associated commentary in one section of the report alongside the equivalent figures for the previous sweep of the survey and also those for the base year when the survey was first conducted. Where considered beneficial, graphical representation has also been used in this section to highlight some of the findings.

The key victim and witness breakdowns are provided in tabular format alongside the equivalent overall findings in a separate section. In this latter section, instances where findings have differed significantly compared with the previous sweep of the survey are highlighted through the use of colour coding (green equates with improved performance; red equates with poorer performance, amber equates with significant change of an ambivalent nature and blank equates with no significant change).

Following publication of the survey findings, policy officials within Victims and Witnesses Branch (VWB) will include it as an agenda item for discussion at the VWSG and statistical staff involved in its production may be asked to attend the VWSG meeting to provide input to the discussion.

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## Coherence and Comparability

Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time, by region or another domain.

Coherence is the degree to which the statistical processes that generate two or more outputs use the same concepts and harmonised methods.

The findings for the current sweep of the survey are presented alongside the equivalent figures for the previous sweep of the survey and also those for the base year when the survey was first conducted. A link is also provided within the body of the report to the previous report which contains the key findings for all previous sweeps of the survey.

The number of interviews involved is not sufficiently large to enable regional analysis of the survey findings. It's unlikely that it would ever be feasible to conduct a regional analysis as recent experience of conducting the survey has shown increasing challenges in achieving the target sample size. Despite targeting cases which closed over a 9 month period for the 2022/23 survey, the external company was still unable to achieve the full quota of interviews. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be down to the increased use of mobile phones e.g. possibly due to people regularly changing their mobile phones.

There are no equivalent surveys against which to compare the NIVAWS survey findings. The equivalent England and Wales survey – WAVES – on which NIVAWS was based is no longer running. The only other Northern Ireland survey that would address aspects of the victim experience would be the Northern Ireland Safe Communities Survey (NISCS) but this has a different emphasis from NIVAWS. NIVAWS has a focus on service delivery from the various criminal justice agencies and partnership whereas the NISCS has a focus on crime victimisation and perceptions of various justice related elements.

## Trade-offs between Output Quality Components

Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.

Not applicable in the case of NIVAWS.



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## Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions

The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.

VWB within the Department of Justice and VWWSG which has representation from all criminal justice agencies and partnership bodies, are the key stakeholder groups for NIVAWS. In advance of each new sweep of the survey, both groups are consulted with regard to any changes they consider ought to be made to the questionnaire. In order to facilitate comparisons over time, only those changes deemed necessary will be made to the survey – essentially the removal of any redundant questions or the addition of new questions to address new initiatives introduced since the previous sweep of the survey.

The DoJ also seeks customer comments and feedback via an online survey on various aspects of publications produced by its Analytical Services Group (ASG). The survey covers the content, presentation of data, commentary and timeliness of the published reports. It also addresses the extent to which the publications meet customer needs, and invites any suggestions for improvement to publications.

Comments and feedback can also be submitted directly to ASG via e-mail, a link to which is available from the Statistics and Research page of the DoJ website.

## Performance Cost and Respondent Burden

The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.

NIVAWS is wholly funded by the Department of Justice. For the most recent year (i.e. 2022/23), the external cost was in the region of £41k. The work around the preparation for the survey, the analysis of the findings and the reporting on the findings is undertaken by statisticians within the ASG within the Department of Justice.

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## Confidentiality, Transparency and Security

The procedure and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.

Given that the survey interviews are typically contracted out to an external company, a series of steps are routinely put in place to safeguard the personal details of potential respondents.

### (i) Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)

In the first instance, as the survey process involved the sharing of the personal details of potential respondents with an external company, a DPIA was undertaken. This outlined the lawful basis for the data processing and also the various steps that would be taken in order to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulations and, in particular, the steps that would be taken in order to reduce or eliminate any risks involved in the sharing of the personal data. The DPIA was approved as a way forward by the Data Protection Officer (DPO) within the Department of Justice and signed off by the Grade 5 policy official with responsibility for the subject area.

### (ii) Consultation with the Data Protection Officer (DPO)

There was extensive consultation with the DPO throughout the process in relation to the safe processing of the personal data. On the advice of the DPO, an Information Sharing Agreement was put in place between PPS and the Department of Justice. The purpose of the agreement was to facilitate the legitimate and secure sharing of information between PPS and the DoJ's contracted provider. The agreement involved DoJ setting up a contract with the external provider to ensure that only those staff at the external provider with a clear business need were given access to the personal information, that they would have received appropriate information assurance and data protection training and be made fully aware of their responsibilities under data protection legislation to maintain the security and confidentiality of the personal information. DoJ also agreed a retention and disposal schedule with the external provider in relation to the personal information.

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### (iii) Communication with Potential Respondents

Informing potential respondents how their personal data would be treated was an important aspect of the process. Thus, respondents who had agreed for their addresses to be used for correspondence purposes were issued with a pre-alert letter by the external provider which explained why the survey was being undertaken, how the company had got their personal details and how their personal details would be used. They were also provided with links to the relevant privacy notices of the organisations involved in the administration of the survey (i.e. Department of Justice, PPS and the external company). Those potential respondents who had not consented to their addresses being used for correspondence purposes were provided with the equivalent information by telephone.

Potential respondents were also informed that the survey would be anonymous and that the Department of Justice would not at any stage know who had been approached to participate in the research.