

Reporting sex offences

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Summary



Key reasons for reporting sex offences in this research include: protecting others from victimisation; ensuring the offence cannot occur again; and, a desire to move on from the abuse. The influence of professionals (nurses, social workers, counsellors) was also important to support reporting.

Key reasons for *not* reporting sex offences related to the stigma of sexual violence - the fear of not being believed and feelings of blame and embarrassment that survivors carried with them. Barriers also related, though to a lesser extent, to process issues, such as not knowing where to go to report an offence, mistrust of the police and not wishing to go to court.

More should be done to both reduce the stigma of being a survivor of sexual violence and also ensure the process for reporting sex offences is accessible and supportive. It is of note however that process issues were deemed less prevalent than stigma, indicating that addressing the stigma of sexual violence is a central policy concern for the future and that improvement in how the Criminal Justice System responds to survivors such as

RASASC (Rape and Sexual Assault Support Centre) South London support around 5000 women who have been affected by sexual violence a year. RASASC also provide support and information to families and friends of people affected by sexual violence, and training to professionals working with survivors of sexual violence.

RASASC services include:

- Training
- Research, campaigning and awareness raising

In March 2011 RASASC began to collect monitoring information from clients asking whether they had reported their sexual violence to the police, and the reasons they had for doing so/not doing so. The results of this research are presented here in the first of an

[I reported the offence to the police] because I didn't want to suffer anymore, and I wanted to put it all behind me and put him where he deserved to be: in prison (survivor)

- National Helpline
- Advocacy service for those who have reported sexual offences to the police
- Counselling and group sessions

occasional series of research and policy bulletins from RASASC.

Context

The actual prevalence of rape or other sexual offences in the UK is difficult to estimate, with

offences likely to go unreported. Recent data from the British Crime Survey (2009/10) suggested that the lifetime prevalence for rape and attempted rape for women

was 4.7 per cent, with any form of sexual assault reported by nearly 20 per cent of women (one in five) as having occurred since the age of 16. Only 11 per cent of those who had experienced a serious sexual assault had told the police. Thus the number of women affected directly by sexual offences, and the number of women who actually go on to report this to the police differs greatly. The number of those who report the offence and then see it prosecuted and the perpetrator convicted differs greatly again.

Attrition rate

Home Office figures since 2003 have shown a general increase in the number of rapes recorded as crimes, and an increase in the actual number of convictions. For example, analysis of sexual offences cases by the Stern Review found that 58 per cent of rape prosecutions in 2008 and 2009 resulted in a conviction for rape or another offence (6 per cent of reported rapes led to a conviction).

A series of government reports and reviews have highlighted the high level of attrition, in rape cases in particular, but sexual offences generally in the UK. There have been considerable developments made by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the courts to improve responses to the investigation, prosecution and

conviction of sex offences through better recording and provision of information, support and anonymity for victims. Such measures have a long history and developed in response to considerable criticism of the system via research¹². This led to the introduction of specialist police officers and teams, trained to work with victims (both adult and children) of sexual offences, and special dedicated suites within police stations where victims could be questioned in an appropriate space. Positive developments to how survivors of sex offences are supported have evolved further in recent years with for example the implementation of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) and funding for Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), who provide support, advice and coordination for complainants throughout their case.

The recent Stern Review³ praised the existing system in place for individuals reporting rape. For an offence to register with the CJS it has to have been reported.

¹ Chambers, G. and Millar, A. (1983)

Investigating Sexual Assault, Edinburgh: Scottish Office Central Research Unit.

² Hall, R. (1985) *Ask any woman: A London inquiry into rape and sexual assault*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

³ Stern, V. (2010) *The Stern Review: A report by Baroness Stern, CBE, of an independent review into how rape complaints are handled by public authorities in England and Wales*, Crown Copyright: Government Equalities Office and the Home Office.

As is explored below, many sex offences go unreported. Whilst the experience of women who have been raped, in terms of the harm that was rendered, how they recovered, or the process of reporting rape to the police has been documented in previous research what is less well understood is why women do, or do not, report offences in the first instance.

Rape Myths

The low level of reporting of sexual offences and high level of attrition has been attributed to the stereotypes and myths surrounding sexual offending. 'Rape myths'⁴ include for example assumptions that rape must be accompanied by high levels of violence; or that certain types of women or behaviour encourages rape such as wearing 'revealing' clothing or consuming alcohol. These assumptions return to responsibility being unfairly placed onto the survivor of sexual violence. Recent research indicates that the public continue to hold negative, stereotypical and unhelpful views regarding sex offences⁵ and the culpability

⁴ Burt, M. (1980) 'Cultural myths and the support of rape', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38 (2) pp. 217 - 230.

⁵ Havens (Sexual assault referral centres) (2010) prepared by Opinion Matters, *Wake up to rape*, http://www.thehavens.org.uk/docs/Havens_Wake_Up_To_Rape_Report_Summary.pdf, March 2011.

of survivors. Sexual offences are an area of regular scrutiny by the media, with the issue of false allegations often raised as a concern. In the consultation for the Stern Review it was suggested that perceptions that women make false allegations of rape are strongly held by sectors of the public, and may affect the way rape complaints are dealt with by police, prosecutors and juries. They may also affect whether people report an offence or not because they feel they will not be believed.

Little is actually known about the decisions and processes that act to facilitate or prevent reporting of sex offences from the survivor perspective however. RASASC has recently monitored survivor experiences to add some additional understanding to this issue and the finding from the research are presented here.

Methods

To avoid undue burden on clients and staff the research was conducted in a simple and flexible manner. A brief one sheet of questions was devised asking two questions – had the sexual violence been reported to the police or not, and the reason for the answer given. The response category for reporting to the police was ‘open’ and could be answered in any way. Reasons for not reporting the offence could be selected from a

set of 10 responses, with an open category at the end to capture any additional reasons not listed. The questions were distributed to RASASC clients receiving counselling, and, when appropriate, asked to callers on the helpline. To avoid duplication of responses, the questions were only asked to new callers calling for the first time. If the caller was particularly distressed then the helpline staff could make the decision to not ask the questions.

The data was collected between March 15th and June 20th 2011. A total of 147 responses from female survivors of sexual violence have been collated. The results are outlined below:

Findings

Of the 147 responses, 55 (38%) had reported the offence to the police and 91 (62%) had not.

Reason for reporting sexual violence

Though each individual will have different experiences, the reasons for reporting sexual violence fell into seven thematic categories:

1. Desire to protect others and ensure the abuse does not happen to them
2. To assist in putting the abuse ‘behind them’ and moving on from it

3. To stop the abuse from happening to them again, and in response to fear they were at risk from the perpetrator
4. That the perpetrator should be punished and see justice because they had committed an offence
5. That they felt they would be supported and able to access support once it was reported
6. Professionals convinced them or supported them to do so; they were injured and had to report it to emergency services
7. Family members reported it for them

Particularly salient factors emerged that may assist in understanding what motivates women to report offences.

Where cases were high profile (i.e. had involved more than one victim) or were violent attacks committed by a stranger, survivors who had reported it to the police noted felt they ‘had’ to report it. This was a rape free from stigmatizing rape myths.

Reporting the offence could also be viewed as a way to ‘move on from the offence’ and seek justice. There was an indication that this occurred sometime after the offence with survivors noting for example they ‘finally felt able to [report the offence]’ and they decided it would assist them to

Reason for not reporting sexual violence/offence	Number	Per cent
I felt that in some way it was my fault	37	41
Too embarrassing, I didn't want anyone to know	32	35
I didn't think I would be believed	27	30
I just wanted to forget it and get on with my life	24	26
I didn't want to upset my family/parents	22	24
I wasn't sure whether it was a crime or not	18	20
I was afraid of repercussions from the perpetrator/his family	16	18
I didn't know what to do/where to go	16	18
I do not trust the police/afraid of police	13	14
I didn't want to go to court	4	4
Base	91	

'finally' move on. This may indicate that a time-lag should be expected when some survivors report the offence to the police from when it occurred. They first were seeking support and had to feel in a situation where they were 'strong' enough to report it as part of their recovery process.

The role of professionals also appeared to be pronounced. This could involve professionals such as nurses or counsellors helping survivors to make the decision to report the abuse and explain to them where to go and what to expect. It could however involve survivors being forced to report it –for example if they were young and social workers or teachers reported it to the police. In cases where the attack involved violence, then the emergency services may have attended, including the police, leading to the offence being reported.

The most prevalent reasons given for reporting offences was

fear of the perpetrator – either that they would abuse commit the offence again; they were being harassed by the perpetrator and wanted it to stop; and a desire to ensure the perpetrator did not abuse any more people.

There were also reports of a second episode of abuse occurring, even after it was reported to the police, and in some responses, survivors reported regret that they had reported the offence. This was due to the trauma and difficulty of trying to navigate the CJS, recount their story again, and especially if the case was not proceeded with.

Reasons for not reporting sexual violence

91 survivors had not reported the abuse. They were asked from a list of 10 possible responses to identify reasons why they had not reported it. They could select

as many responses as applied. The results are in the table above ordered in list of prevalence. Feelings of blame, embarrassment, and feeling they would not be believed were the most prevalent reasons. This indicates that (perhaps contrary to expectations given the long history of criticism of criminal justice practices in handling rape cases) fear or distrust of the police or going to court were the least prevalent reasons for not reporting an offence. This may indicate that the improvements that have been made to criminal justice processes are beginning to filter through to the public.

However there are key concerns that can be brought out from these findings. Not knowing where to go or what to do was reported by 18 per cent of the survivors as a reason for not reporting the offence, followed by a lack of trust or fear of the police. This indicates that more could be done to ensure

information about where to go is clearly available and survivors are reassured that the offence will be fully investigated and they will be treated fairly and with respect. Recent high profile cases where the police have come under criticism for how offences have been investigated, such as that of John Worboys the taxi driver, may add to a feeling of distrust that women have about reporting an offence. It is therefore imperative that processes are in place to ensure that reported sex offences are responded to and investigated in an appropriate manner and survivors can trust in the police.

Respondents in the research were also able to give additional reasons why they have not reported the offence to the police. Among these responses, the low conviction rate, trauma of going through the CJS and a reluctance to talk about the offence to professionals were cited. Survivors that had reported the offence could also be critical of the response they received. Therefore the findings from the

research are mixed in terms of how the CJS is currently operating. On the one hand, it appears that fear or distrust of the police or a reluctance of going to court are not prevalent barriers to reporting sex offences. However this does play a part, and more could be done to continue with recent improvements that have been made and ensure survivors reporting offences can access consistency high quality support and advice when they do so.

The second key finding to emerge from the data is perhaps most perplexing for understanding barriers to reporting sexual violence. The four most prevalent reasons given for not reporting sexual violence related to internal factors and fears that the survivor may have – they feel to blame, that they will not be believed, they are too embarrassed, and wish to ‘get on with their lives’ indicating an ongoing stigma surrounding being a survivor of sexual violence. This stigma acts as a

barrier to reporting the offence. Stigma survivors feel therefore acts to protect perpetrators, and a policy priority should be to continue to tackle this stigma, and ensure there is more publicity and education aimed at dispelling rape myths. For example the recent campaign on London transport aimed at discouraging the use of unlicensed mini-cabs may have inadvertently acted to indicate that using an unlicensed cab could lead to culpability on the part of a victim.

‘Feeling to blame’ in some way was the most prevalent reason given for not reporting sexual violence in this research, highlighting how important it is to tackle the stigma and myths that continue to be associated with rape, and not inadvertently reassert a discourse that ‘blames the victim’ whilst doing so.

This research bulletin was compiled by Dr. Carol McNaughton Nicholls with Yvonne Traynor, for RASASC. With thanks to all staff, volunteers and survivors who assisted with the research.

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