

# RAPE and SEXUAL ASSAULT

## RESEARCH

**We are proposing to undertake research into the crimes of rape, attempted rape and indecent assault, based initially in one London borough, embracing two police stations with very different practices. We are seeking firstly to discover the reasons why so many victims of sexual assault do not report the crime to the police; secondly to study the experiences of those who do report in relation to their progression through the criminal justice system; and thirdly, to provide an evaluation of the policies and practices of different agencies in terms of their service delivery to victims.**

A Home Office report indicates that there is widespread under-reporting of rape and sexual assault (Smith 1989) and other research evidence indicates that cases that reach court are the tip of the iceberg. The first British Crime Survey, carried out in Scotland in 1982, found that only 7% of sexual assaults were reported to the police (Chambers and Tombs 1984: 15) and other sources substantiate this. According to the London Rape Crisis Centre analysis of 1989 telephone calls, 69% did not report to the police; a survey by Women against Rape revealed an even higher level of unreported cases 92% (Hall 1985).

Complaints are not always recorded by the police. According to a number of studies, approximately one in four cases reported to the police were not recorded as crimes (see Wright's study of 384 cases in six English counties (1984) and Chambers and Millar (1986)). Recently the police have been encouraged to 'crime' all reports and the total number of recorded offences doubled between 1973-1985 and has risen by a further third between 1985 and 1987 (Lloyd and Walmsley 1989).

Between 1988 and 1989 sexual offences rose by 28% which included a 14% increase in rape and a 26% rise in indecent assault. This apparent rise in the crime rate has not however been accompanied by a rise in the conviction rate, despite occasional moral panics in the media, implying that this has occurred.

## Conviction Rates

Conviction rates for cases that do reach court are low. Quite apart from cases that

do not come to the notice of the police, only about 10% of reported rapes and 50% of rape prosecutions result in the conviction of a rapist (Lloyd & Walmsley: 1989). In 1987 the number of rape offences notified to the police in England and Wales was 2,500. 26% went on trial at the Crown Court of which one third were acquitted. The percentage pleading not guilty in rape cases, around 70%, is much higher than for other offences (34% for homicide and 12% for burglary).

During the last ten years concern had been expressed at the low sentences given to rapists, but sentences are now longer for convicted rapists and the maximum sentence for indecent assault was increased from 2 to 10 years in 1985. In February 1986 the Lord Chief Justice issued new guidelines on sentencing in rape cases which for the first time recommended a minimum of 5 years for each rape conviction. It follows that this recommendation is likely to extend the sentences given. There is, however, some evidence that longer sentences are leading juries to be even less willing to convict and the incentive for plea bargaining is greater (see Lees 1989).

It is lamentable that there has been so little research and so little consideration of alternative treatment initiatives to terms of imprisonment for sexual offenders. Long sentences are obviously inhumane but allowing men back into the community without any treatment is a serious risk to women's safety.

## Policy Implications

No studies in Britain have specifically sought to find out how sexual assault complainants themselves feel about police, prosecutors, courts and the law after having made a report, nor about the difficulties they experience in pursuing a complaint. The 1982 video of Thames Valley police officers interrogating a rape complainant brought harsh police questioning to the notice of the public and provided the impetus to reform the procedures by which violence against women is policed. Following publication of the Woman's National Commission Report on Violence against Women, the Home Office issued a circular (69/86) calling for new police training inputs on rape and sexual assault, the appointment of more women police surgeons, and better facilities for examination.

Thirty five special units to deal with domestic attacks have been set up in London and rape examination suites away from the main police stations are now operating in most areas.

A parallel can usefully be drawn between the treatment of rape complainants and of women subjected to domestic violence, where the police have in the past been unwilling to take action on the grounds that this would involve interfering in the private realm of the family. In 1987 new guidelines on violence in the home were issued, stressing that such offences were criminal not just 'domestics'. In 1988 crimes of domestic violence increased from 1,230 to 3,028 a year in the Metropolitan police area and arrests rose by 165%.

Our research would aim to establish what present police procedures are in relation to rape and to document changes that have recently occurred. It would aim to assess the impact of these policy developments and put forward recommendations as to how service delivery, including the role of victim support, police surgeons, rape crisis centres and social services could also be further improved.

## References

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