

Study identifies 'justice gap' for rape victims

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Rape cases involving vulnerable victims, such as those with extensive mental health problems, are least likely to progress through the criminal justice system and not result in conviction. This is just one of the findings from a new University of Bristol study that investigated the high 'drop out' rate in rape cases.

Recent figures show that around 85,000 people on average are [victims](#) of [rape](#) each year and there has been a 26 per cent increase in the number of cases recorded by the police in the three years to the beginning of 2012.

However, there has been a continual decrease in the overall proportion of such crimes reported to police resulting in a conviction and a high number of cases that 'drop out' suggesting a justice gap for victims. A

lack of national data on the progression of individual cases through the [criminal justice system](#) has meant it difficult to gauge a clear picture of outcomes and identify the reasons why.

The Northern Rock Foundation-funded study aimed to address these concerns by tracking 87 individual cases from reporting to conviction stage across three police force areas in the North East of England. The research team, led by Professor Marianne Hester, examined data involving 98 victims and 97 alleged perpetrators (that took up to 23 months to progress through the criminal [justice system](#)).

The perpetrators were nearly all known to the victims in some way. Most were partners or ex-partners (31 per cent of cases), or were people who had known the victim more than two hours after via friends or family (28.7 per cent of cases), or were family or step family (24.1 per cent of cases). A small number had known the victim less than 24 hours (13.8 per cent of cases). Four different groups of cases were identified; [acquaintance](#), [domestic violence](#), historical and recent family.

Key findings from the study showed that cases involving very vulnerable victims, such as those with extensive [mental health problems](#), were also those least likely to progress through the [criminal justice](#) system and did not result in conviction. Three quarters of the cases examined, of which many were deemed as vulnerable cases, were known to have dropped out at the police stage.

Although domestic violence cases were most likely to be seen as crimes, the study found that historical cases were more likely to result in a conviction. There was also some evidence that prosecutors were questioning whether juries would take a 'stereotypical' view of rape cases.

The study found that a victim-focused approach, alongside a concerted

effort to develop a wide range of multi-agency involvement, led to the highest proportion of cases proceeding through to charges, more cases going to court and also a higher rate of convictions.

Professor Marianne Hester, OBE, the study's lead author who is based in the University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies, said: "It is clear that the justice gap for victims of rape has widened despite attempts by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts to improve their responses to investigation, prosecution and conviction of rape offences. What is concerning is victim vulnerability, which is identified as an aggravating factor in the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, is in practice deemed to undermine victim credibility leading to a large 'drop out' in rape cases.

"This alone, highlights the need for the agencies to further improve their responses to rape cases and work with a victim-focused approach."

Penny Wilkinson CEO of Northern Rock Foundation said: "Northern Rock Foundation has been funding work to improve provision for victims and survivors of sexual violence for several years. This study makes an important contribution to our collective understanding of what happens to individual victims when they report rape."

More information: The study, entitled 'From Report to Court: Rape cases and the Criminal Justice System in the North East' by Professor Marianne Hester at the University of Bristol in association with the Northern Rock Foundation is published today [Friday 12 July]. www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources-research-reports/

Provided by University of Bristol

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