

# 'Real' rape stereotype may affect child rape trials

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New research has found that two factors—an outdoor location and the presence of a weapon—have a significant bearing on the verdict of juries in cases of child stranger rape.

The study, the first of its kind to focus on real [jury](#) verdicts in cases of [child](#) stranger rape in England and Wales, was led by Criminal Psychologist Dr. Samantha Lundrigan, of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), and the findings have been published in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

The researchers explored the factors that predict juries' decisions to convict or acquit in 70 cases of child stranger rape in London between 2001-15. By better understanding exactly what can influence jury verdicts—19 different factors relating to the child, the accused and the offense were examined—it is hoped to improve the chances of guilty defendants being convicted in future cases.

The study found that verdicts were predicted by two offense-related factors. The presence of a weapon increased the odds of conviction by 412% and an outdoor location increased the odds by 360%.

No evidence was found that indicated that factors relating to either the victim or the perpetrator, such as age and ethnicity, influenced jury verdicts. Furthermore, neither a delay in a child's report nor a child's use of alcohol or drugs appeared to affect the chances of securing a conviction.

The researchers believe that a possible explanation for the significant influence of the two offense-related factors is that juries in these cases might have held stereotypical beliefs about the most likely circumstances of stranger rape—commonly known as the "real" rape [stereotype](#).

Dr. Lundrigan, Director of the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region (PIER) at Anglia Ruskin University, said: "Researchers have proposed the existence of a 'real' rape stereotype that describes an offense where an attack takes place in an outdoors location by an unknown perpetrator, often with a weapon.

"It is argued that rape cases most closely corresponding to this stereotype are more likely to result in conviction, whereas cases that deviate from the 'real' rape stereotype are less likely to be convicted. This argument is typically applied to rape involving adult victims but our study suggests there may be evidence of the stereotype also being applied in cases involving [child victims](#).

"Our findings have potential implications for prosecution case building and courtroom policy. We show that in arriving at a verdict, juries may focus less on the characteristics of the victim and defendant, and more on the characteristics of the offense.

"Therefore, prosecutors could gather and present as much information as possible about the factors found to be of importance to juries and pay less attention to factors of lesser importance, such as the victim's behaviour, which can also help reduce distress for victims.

"The findings also have potential implications for courtroom policy. Specifically, it may be necessary for judges to warn juries about incorrect beliefs and stereotypes. Disparities in court outcome for different types of rape suggest that some victims are less likely to receive justice than others. It should not be assumed that stranger rape trials involving children are immune to the effect of stereotypical, pre-conceived beliefs about what happens in a [rape](#)."

**More information:** Samantha Lundrigan et al. Factors predicting conviction in child stranger rape, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104242](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104242)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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