

Vulnerable women most likely to seek out sexual assault centers

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Psychiatrist Bjarte Vik reports in his doctoral dissertation that the most vulnerable women received the least thorough police investigations after reporting a rape. Credit: Colourbox

Women already considered vulnerable visited the sexual assault center in Trondheim far more often than others.

Vulnerable [women](#) were also more often subjected to moderate violence and suffered more bruises.

And yet, the police investigated their cases less thoroughly.

These are some of the conclusions reached by psychiatrist Bjarte Vik at St. Olav's hospital in Trondheim in her doctoral dissertation from NTNU.

Vik's doctorate is new, but the data stems from the period 2003 to 2010.

Vik used this material because he had access to to a unique link: Few previous studies anywhere have been based on data where police and hospital records were linked in rape cases.

Reviewed 223 rape cases

"Our research group investigated a total of 223 rapes of vulnerable women," says Vik.

The researchers linked criminal cases (investigative material) in rape cases with hospital records from the Trondheim sexual assault center at St. Olav's hospital, which gave them a unique data set.

The women were considered vulnerable if they met at least one of the following criteria:

- Intellectual or physical developmental disability
- Mental health problems
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Previously experienced sexual abuse

Majority of cases were vulnerable women

"We found that almost 60 percent of the women who sought out the

abuse clinic in Trondheim had at least one of the mentioned vulnerability factors, and 29 percent had more than one vulnerability factor," says Vik.

He also discovered that the more vulnerability factors were present in a woman, the more often the rape led to moderate violence.

The most vulnerable women also received the least thorough police investigations after reporting the rape.

The number of reported rapes has risen sharply in Norway in recent years, from around 400 at the beginning of the 1990s to close to 2000 now. At the same time, the proportion of rapes that end in prosecution and conviction has decreased.

The probability of a less thorough police investigation was twice as high if you were a particularly vulnerable woman.

"This finding could have several reasons. But even though vulnerable women are sometimes more skeptical than less vulnerable women about cooperating with the police, we found a difference in investigation quality," says Cecilie Therese Hagemann, head physician at the sexual assault center in Trondheim. She is also an associate professor at NTNU.

A lot has happened with investigations in recent years

Here's what John Ola Volden, a section leader for investigation, joint unit for intelligence and investigation at Trøndelag police district, has written about this research:

The data that has been reviewed is historical data. The criminal cases are 11 to 18 years old. A lot has happened with investigations in recent years. Completely different requirements have been developed for

investigating criminal cases. New investigation methods have been implemented and we work in a different way. Among other things, several investigative steps are now taken in the initial phase to ensure better quality when we interrogate and gather trace evidence.

In 2014, the Trøndelag police district conducted a major investigation into the 50 most recently prosecuted rape cases. All cases were thoroughly reviewed according to established criteria. The background for the investigation was an acknowledgment that our results within this case category (rape of adults) were sub-standard.

The result of the investigation was that the police district focused on these cases and implemented measures, including training patrol crews, introducing new routines, creating professional positions with special responsibility for rape cases and specialization of [investigators](#) in these cases.

These measures quickly had a positive effect. Today, the police district has a case processing time for rape cases (from received case to prosecution decision) of about 130 days, with a clearance rate of about 40 percent.

In the last four years, the police have undergone reforms in which the specialist groups have been further strengthened so that our ability to conduct effective, high-quality investigations has increased. Today, virtually all criminal cases contain evidence in the form of electronic tracing. Strengthening these groups has enabled us to obtain and interpret this electronic evidence in a much improved and more precise way than before.

The police provided descriptions of the investigative steps that are usually included when investigating a rape case.

Good investigative work is characterized by thorough interrogations of victims and suspects and possibly of other witnesses. This involves carefully investigating the scene of the incident, and the police collecting and analyzing biological evidence that could contribute to obtaining the perpetrator's DNA and other evidence.

Neat and clear record keeping is also very important in all stages of the investigation.

Alcohol less often involved

The victims without vulnerability factors were often young students who became susceptible to being victimized after consuming large amounts of alcohol, often by someone they were only slightly acquainted with.

A disturbing finding was that as many as five percent of the women who visited the abuse clinic had an [intellectual disability](#).

In the cases of vulnerable victims, the women had not consumed as much alcohol prior to the rape. This finding indicates that alcohol was less "necessary" for abusers to be able to subject these women to sexual abuse.

"That one party has an obvious vulnerability exploited by another party, apparently systematically, seems to be a common phenomenon among individuals who seek out easy victims," Vik says.

Intellectually disabled are susceptible

A disturbing finding was that as many as five percent of the women who visited the sexual assault center had an intellectual disability. This rate is ten times higher than the registered incidence of intellectual disability in

Norway's general population.

Little research is being done on rape of individuals with certain types of health problems. But some data exist, including from the United States, that indicate that people with an intellectual disability have a seven times greater risk of being raped than the general population.

"This problem has also been referred to as 'the epidemic no one talks about'", says Vik.

The Nordic paradox

The number of reported rapes has risen sharply in Norway in recent years, from around 400 at the beginning of the 1990s to close to 2000 now. At the same time, the proportion of rape cases that are prosecuted and convicted has decreased.

"More than 80 percent of the reported rapes are not investigated by the police. This doesn't necessarily mean that the officer doesn't believe the person reporting, but that the burden of proof is often too weak for the case to be taken to court," says Hagemann.

Norway is not alone. This is what Amnesty International calls the "Nordic paradox": The high degree of equality and women's liberation that has been achieved in many areas in the Nordic countries does not apply in the case of rape.

There is no indication that the extent of sexual abuse in Norway has decreased in the last 50 years. The prosecution rate for rape cases reported to the police has been alarmingly low for many years and has also decreased in all the Nordic countries in recent years.

Never the victim's fault

Research on sexual assault of people with various forms of vulnerability is scarce. The topic is also controversial, because "rape myths" still held by many assert that the victim's vulnerability puts them at fault..

"It's always been important for us to convey that a [rape](#) is never the victim's fault. At the same time, it is important to convey the great extent of sexual abuse that takes place in our society against [vulnerable women](#). With this information, politicians, health professionals, [police](#) and the judiciary can invest more resources in preventing this type of abuse in the future," says Vik.

Vik is employed as a psychiatrist for individuals with autism, intellectual disability, ADHD and Tourette's syndrome, among others.

More information: Bjarte Frode Vik et al, Is police investigation of rape biased by characteristics of victims?, *Forensic Science International: Synergy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.fsisyn.2020.02.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsisyn.2020.02.003)

Bjarte Frode Vik et al, Psychosocial Vulnerability Among Patients Contacting a Norwegian Sexual Assault Center, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260516659657](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516659657)

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