

Trends in Reporting of Rape and Sexual Assault : Findings from the Policing Just Outcomes Project Online Survey

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Researchers from the *Policing Just Outcomes Project*, which examines adult sexual violence and is being conducted by Edith Cowan University in collaboration with Victoria Police, has completed analysis on data from the first ever state wide online survey of rape/sexual assault victims. A total of 336 respondents from across Victoria completed the survey with regard to their decision making about whether or not to report their sexual victimisation to police. While this survey was contained to Victoria, it is the first collaborative police/university survey of its kind in any Australian or international jurisdiction.

The research also included in-depth interviews with 76 victim/survivors.

This document provides a snap-shot of some of the findings relating to reporting trends from the survey respondents; who they sought support from and duration of abuse.

The study highlighted some concerning ongoing attitudes with regard to the range of responses received by rape victims by some police, family members, friends and the wider community as well as drawing out deeper understandings of the barriers faced by rape victims that inhibit reporting and inhibit help seeking from professionals such as GP's. These attitudes included disbelief of the disclosure; minimising the assault and in other cases blaming the victim for the rape/sexual assault. Many victims reported that family support was often inadequate or unhelpful and even resulted in hostility towards the victim and repercussions if they reported or disclosed further. A fear of how others might react prevented many women and men from disclosing and reporting. Within the sample we found many respondents who did report the crime to police did so out of a sense of civic duty and a desire to protect others from the offender.

Overall findings include:

Online Survey of 336 rape victims:

12% of respondents were male.

88% of respondents were female.

35% of respondents (130) reported the crime to police with just over half having reported in the last 4 years.

The study found that police have improved in the last 5 years with regard to keeping victims better informed post reporting; providing information to victims about rape crisis services; explaining a range of options to victims with regard to making a report.

- 70% of respondents did not regret their decision to contact police.
- Of concern is the lengthy duration of time that lapses before victims of sexual assault report to police. Of the 130 who reported to police, the vast majority reported more than 10 years

after the offence with a significant number reporting 2-6 years after the last offence. Around 25% made a recent report, that is, within 72 hours. However when we looked at the victim/offender relationship, those who made a recent report were victims reporting an offender either unknown to them or an acquaintance. The vast majority who made historical reports were victimised by a person intimately known to them.

More than 200 respondents did not report to police. Of this, just over 60% said they 'regretted' NOT reporting the offence to police. They felt that pressure from family members; fear of the offender; fear of being disbelieved or blamed; and mistrust of the legal system for ill-treating rape victims had unfairly prevented them reporting. Many victims testified that their inability to report to police was detrimental to their ongoing physical and mental health and well-being.

With regards to fears about disclosing and reporting:

- 68.8% reported a 'fear of not being believed' with this figure higher for females
- 66.1% reported concerns for their safety if they disclosed
- 33.1 reported concern for the safety of others if they disclosed
- 43.3% reported experiencing fear of others finding out they had been sexually victimised
- 37.9% reported fear of losing friends if they were found out
- 76.6% of respondents reported feelings of 'shame' as a result of sexual victimisation. Female respondents disproportionately reported feelings of shame
- There was a correlation between feelings of 'fear' and 'shame' and victims being 'less likely to seek support' and less likely to report to police without external support

Sexual Violence and Duration: **Time variable analysis**

Researchers were interested in the duration of sexual violence because a plethora of studies highlight the fact that sexual assault in childhood consists of multiple incidents, and occurs over longer periods of time where the abuse is intrafamilial (occurring within a family setting). Researchers also asked respondents about multiple offenders because this is a terrible reality for many abuse victims – especially when the abuse occurs within the family unit, is repetitive and occurs across a continuum of time. Previous published research by Professor Caroline Taylor, the project leader, has highlighted the duration, intensity and of multiple offenders in childhood sexual abuse within the family unit and how this increases vulnerability both for the child in terms of being targeted by other offenders and leads to further abuse across time into adulthood and the serious health and psychosocial impacts across the life span.

In our sample, of the 336 respondents, 243 reported multiple offences over an extended period of time.

We undertook time variance analysis with a cross-tabulation of variables relating to reports of multiple abuses, duration of abuses reported, victim/offender constellation (relationship to

offender) and reports of multiple offenders. Applying Anova analysis of variance generated a statistically significant correlation between duration of abuse and victim/offender constellation.

The data showed that the duration of abuse was linked to the relationship of the offender with those abused by a family member experiencing long term abuse with a *mean* length of 9.7 years (fathers predominated as the reported offender). Where the abuse involved multiple offenders who were both related and not-related, but known to the victim, the abuse was even longer with a *mean* length of 18.5 years.

Of considerable concern is the finding that of the 72.9% (n=205) respondents who reported multiple instances of sexual assault, 43% (n=88) experienced sexual violence over a period of 6 years or more with 72% of the entire cohort (N=205) reporting sexual violence occurring over a period of 2 years or more.

Moreover, concerning was the presence of multiple offenders over an extended time frame. Just over 50% of respondents reported they had experienced sexual abuse by multiple offenders in their lifetimes. In the vast majority of cases these victims reported abuse occurring first in childhood with incidents of sexual abuse by other offenders occurring both during childhood and in adulthood. In other words, childhood abuse that was ongoing often led to multiple offenders in childhood as well as making the women vulnerable to further sexual victimisation across the life span and was concomitant with significant delays in reporting to police or no report whatsoever. In summary, the statistics reveal:

- Multiple incidents: 20% abused more than 10 years (N= 41) ; 23% abused 6-10 years (N=47) and 29% abused 2-5 years (N=59) out of 205 respondents.
- Of the 205, 43% abused for 6 years or more
- And abused 2 years or more 72%
- Significant relationship between multiple offenders and duration of abuse and delays in reporting.
- Significant relationship between duration and multiple offenders and vulnerability to abuse across the life span.

Seeking help and further disclosing:

Similar to the Women's Safety Survey conducted by the ABS in 1996, this 2010 survey found that victims were less likely to seek support from GPs and other health/welfare professionals. Approximately 65% and 93% of respondents in total disclosed to, and sought support from family and friends respectively with only 35% seeking support from their GP. This is worrying for several reasons. Respondents reported significant physical and mental health issues across the lifespan as a result of sexual violence but were unlikely to seek appropriate medical/health support. The majority relied on informal supports as opposed to formal supports yet the majority of victims in our study reported that these same informal supports (family and friends) were often poor forms of support and were responsible for setting up barriers and inhibiting reporting, which led to poor outcomes for victims.

The study found that family and community barriers continue to militate against reporting and compromise the recovery of victims. In addition, many victims who did report or eventually reported often did so for altruistic reasons with the two dominant reasons being to protect others and out of a sense of civic duty. However, reporting for these reasons was not without significant personal costs to the victim which included being disbelieved, treated in a hostile manner, being blamed or losing support of family and friends for disclosing and reporting.

In essence, many victims make the tragic 'choice' not to seek medical support and intervention, even when they endured injuries; and decide against reporting because of their fears of being disbelieved or blamed, being rejected by family and fear of/lack of confidence in the criminal justice system.

The majority of victims were unable to surmount the considerable barriers that exist to the reporting of sexual assault, and these barriers are most often erected and maintained by the community and public institutions designed ostensibly to protect citizens and prosecute crimes.

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