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## Rape and sexual assault of women: findings from the British Crime Survey

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The 1998 and 2000 British Crime Surveys included computerised self-completion questionnaires designed to provide the most accurate-ever estimates of the extent and nature of sexual victimisation in England and Wales. The questions were asked of both men and women aged 16 to 59; findings on the victimisation of women only are presented here.

### Key points

- 0.4% of women aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales said they had been raped in the year preceding the 2000 BCS – an estimated 61,000 victims.
- 0.9% of women said they had been subject to some form of sexual victimisation (including rape) in this period.
- Around 1 in 20 women (4.9%) said they had been raped since age 16, an estimated 754,000 victims. About 1 in 10 women (9.7%) said they had experienced some form of sexual victimisation (including rape) since age 16.
- Age is the biggest risk factor for experiencing sexual victimisation; women aged 16 to 24 were more likely to say they had been sexually victimised in the last year than older women.
- Women are most likely to be sexually attacked by men they know in some way, most often partners (32%) or acquaintances (22%). Current partners (at the time of the attack) were responsible for 45% of rapes reported to the survey. Strangers were responsible for only 8% of rapes reported to the survey.
- 18% of incidents of sexual victimisation reported to the survey came to the attention of the police; the police came to know about 20% of rapes. 32% of women who reported rape were 'very satisfied' with the way the police handled the matter, 22% were very dissatisfied.
- Less than two-thirds (60%) of female rape victims were prepared to self-classify their experience as 'rape' and less than three-quarters (70%) of women who self-classified themselves as having been the victim of 'attempted rape' also self-classified this incident as a crime.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) is a large random survey of private households, designed to give a count of crime that includes incidents not reported to the police, or those reported to them but not recorded. The main BCS interview takes place face-to-face, with no gender matching of

interviewer and respondent. This context is not conducive to accurately measuring levels of highly personal victimisation. Estimates of the level of sexual victimisation obtained by the main BCS are acknowledged to be underestimates (See Percy and Mayhew, 1997).

**The views expressed in these findings are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)**

Consequently, the survey now makes use of Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI), whereby respondents keyed their responses into a laptop computer themselves. This method provides respondents with an increased sense of confidentiality and minimises 'interviewer effects'.

Respondents who answered the self-completion modules were routed through a series of three 'screener' questions, designed to identify whether or not they had been a victim of a sexual offence. If they responded positively to one or more of these, they then answered a series of follow-up questions, designed to elicit the exact nature of the 'last incident' experienced.

### Extent of sexual victimisation

The 2000 BCS self-completion module was used to generate prevalence estimates for sexual victimisation (the number of women that had been victimised on one or more occasions in the survey reference period). Prevalence estimates were calculated for victimisation 'since age 16' and for the 'last year' (the year preceding the date of interview; interviews took place between January and June 2000). Due to the design of the questionnaire, prevalence estimates could only be generated for 'rape' and 'any sexual victimisation' (including rape).

### Definitions

'Rape' is defined in this report as 'forced to have sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal penetration)'. This is not entirely synonymous with the legal definition, which stipulates penetration must be 'penile'. It is possible that respondents could have included incidents of digital penetration, or penetration by objects.

There is no legal offence of 'sexual assault', but this term is used to refer to any incident reported to the survey that did not fit the criteria of rape. Although this could include a wide range of incidents, all three 'screener' questions included the word 'force', which implies an assault.

The total number of women aged 16 to 59 who answered the 2000 BCS sexual victimisation module was 6,944. From this sample of women, 64 reported experiencing some form of sexual victimisation in the last year. Of these 64 cases, 32 could be classified as rape. The prevalence and risk analysis in this report uses the categories of rape (32 cases) and any sexual victimisation (64 cases, including the 32 rapes).

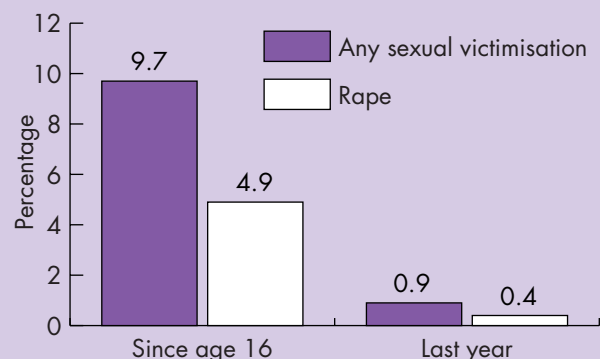
9.7% of women said they had experienced some form of sexual victimisation since age 16; 4.9% said they had been raped (Figure 1). In total, it is estimated that there are approximately 754,000 females aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales who have been the victim of rape once or more since the age of 16.

### How accurate are the estimates?

There are several reasons why the BCS self-completion modules are likely to underestimate the true level of sexual victimisation in England and Wales for women aged 16 to 59:

- general survey errors associated with response, sampling and coverage – in particular, the BCS does not cover institutions, the homeless or women under the age of 16, which excludes some 'high risk' women
- the 'crime context' of the BCS may lead to some women not reporting incidents they do not view as criminal, particularly where the perpetrator is known
- the 'screener question' format will exclude women who do not identify with the particular terminology used in the questions
- the BCS interview is not always conducted in private and the presence of other people in the room may inhibit disclosure, especially if this includes the perpetrator of an attack.

Figure 1 Extent of sexual victimisation

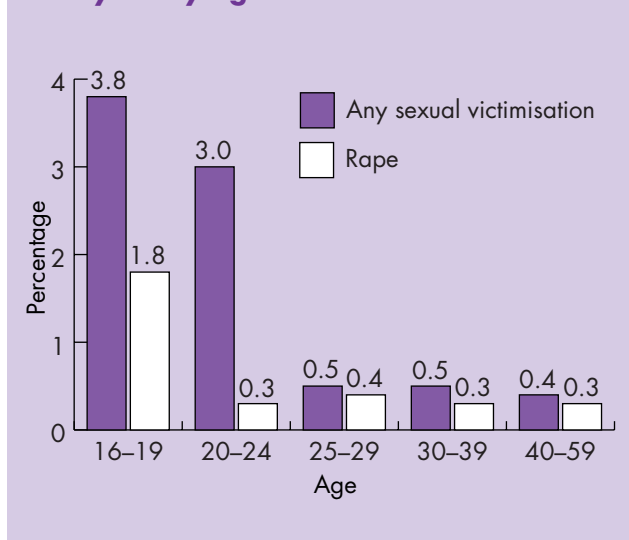


### Who is at risk?

Age is the biggest risk factor for being a victim of a sexual offence (Figure 2). Young women aged 16 to 19 are most likely to be victimised. Women aged 20 to 24 have an almost equally high risk of experiencing some form of sexual victimisation. With regard to rape, 16- to 19-year-old women were over four times as likely to have reported being raped in the last year than women from any other age group.

This finding is in line with those from most other surveys on violence against women. The significantly higher risks revealed for younger women are likely to be 'real', reflecting the lifestyles and circumstances of younger women. A related point is that the key characteristics could be those of men, rather than women. Young men are more likely to be the perpetrators of crime than any other group and young women are more likely to socialise and be in the company of men aged under 25.

**Figure 2 Extent of sexual victimisation, last year by age**



Women from households with an income of less than £10,000 per year were more than three times as likely to have reported being raped than women from households with an income of more than £20,000 a year. This risk was not influenced by a disproportionate number of young women being concentrated in the lowest income group and indeed is consistent with findings for crime more generally: the 2001 British Crime Survey also suggests people from low income households are more likely to be the victim of a violent offence, or a burglary (see Kershaw et al., 2001).

### The nature of sexual victimisation

In order to examine the nature of sexual victimisation, the 1998 and 2000 modules were combined giving 1,183 'last incidents' of victimisation since age 16 (see Methodological note).

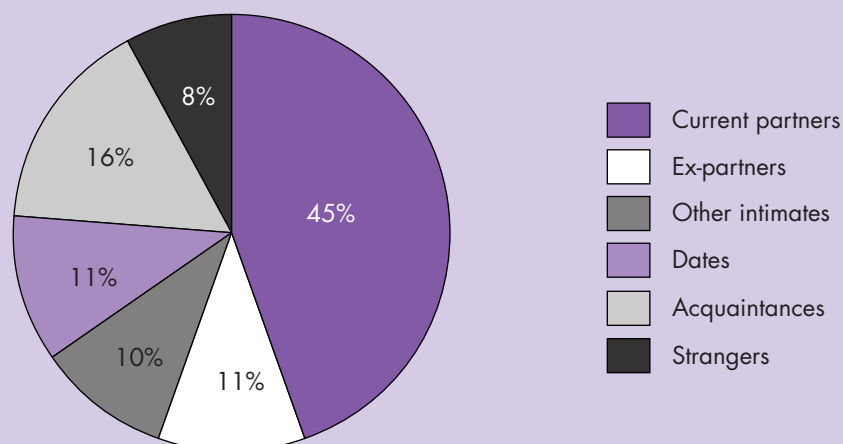
Women are most often sexually assaulted by men they know. Harris and Grace (1999) found that only 12% of rapes recorded by the police in 1996 were categorised as 'stranger' rapes (down from 30% in 1985). The BCS found an even lower proportion of rapes to be committed by strangers (8%). Nearly half (45%) of rapes reported to the survey were committed by perpetrators who were victims' partners at the time of the incident (Figure 3).

The highest proportion of sexual assaults were committed by 'acquaintances' (28%) followed by strangers (23%). Overall, women are more likely to be sexually victimised by a partner/ex-partner (26%) than by any other perpetrator.

Just over two-fifths (41%) of women who reported sexual victimisation experienced more than one incident. Relationship to perpetrator has an impact on the number of times women are sexually victimised. Women were most likely to experience multiple attacks at the hands of partners (62%). Multiple victimisation was also common at the hands of ex-partners (52%) and other intimates (48%). There is no way of being sure from the self-completion modules whether or not women experienced victimisation from the same partner.

These findings are important, as conventional wisdom suggests rape, in particular, is a single event. Interventions that have been applied to domestic violence and repeat victimisation have tended not to be viewed as relevant to sexual victimisation. Data from the BCS also indicates that sexual attacks by partners and ex-partners are by far the most likely to result in some injury to the victim. Attacks by partners are more than twice as likely to result in a physical injury (39%) as attacks by strangers (19%). This evidence suggests that some sexual victimisation should be recognised as part of the domestic violence 'syndrome' and that its role in the cycle of violence should be explored further.

**Figure 3 Relationship to perpetrator, victims of rape**



**Figure 4 Location of last incident**

The 'myth of the safe home' is well established in the literature surrounding violence against women. Evidence from the current study confirms that women are far more likely to be sexually victimised in their own home than any other location (Figure 4). Not surprisingly, nearly three-quarters (74%) of incidents involving partners occurred in the victim's own home and a further 16% occurred in the offender's home. This pattern is almost exactly the same for attacks by ex-partners. Attacks by 'dates' occur in a variety of locations, but are most likely to occur in the home of the offender. Over half (55%) of female rape victims were raped in their own homes. Sexual assaults are almost three times as likely to occur in a public place than are rapes.

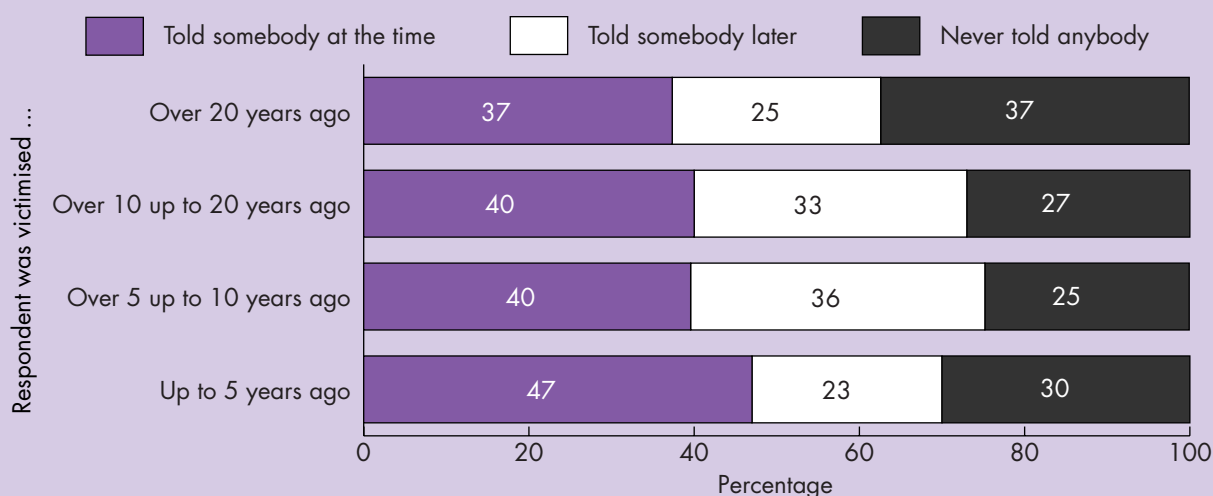
### Seeking help

Rape in particular is one of the most under-reported crimes. In 1999 the police recorded 7,707 incidents of rape. The 2000 BCS best estimate of the number of victims of rape in the last year is 61,000. The highly personal and traumatic nature of sexual victimisation means that apart

from often not reporting their experiences to the police, victims will also be reluctant to share their experiences with anybody. The voluntary sector in recent decades has invested much effort into trying to prevent victims having to deal with their experiences on their own, should they not want to do so. However, this has often been concentrated in the area of domestic violence. There are now networks of rape crisis organisations and support services for both male and female victims of sexual attacks, but they tend to be under-funded and less widely available.

### Do victims report?

The proportion of victims of sexual attacks willing to tell somebody about their experience appears to be increasing (Figure 5). This could be because there is less stigma attached today than in the past, or because there are now more voluntary and professional support agencies. Less than half (47%) of women who experienced sexual victimisation during the last five years recalled telling somebody at the time of the last incident, although

**Figure 5 Whether victim told somebody**

**Table 1 For victims who told somebody, who they told**

	Rape	Sexual assault	Any sexual victimisation
	%	%	%
Friend, relative or neighbour	91	89	90
Doctor or nurse	43	10	24
Counsellor, psychiatrist or psychologist	25	4	13
Victim support, Rape crisis or similar	14	2	7
Unweighted no.	128	165	299

Note: Based on those victims who actually told somebody.

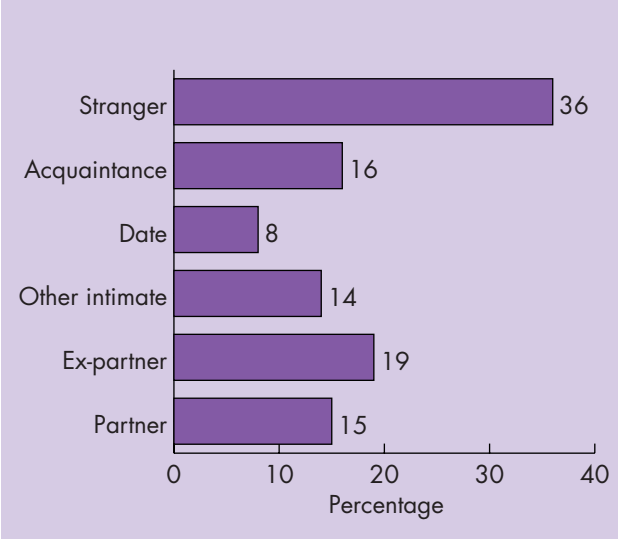
the women last victimised in this time-span were still more likely to have told somebody at the time than women who were last victimised more than five years ago. Women victimised over 20 years ago were least likely to have told somebody at the time. Women victimised over 20 years ago were also more likely than more recent victims to have never told anyone about their experience.

When people were told, victims most often confided in friends, relatives or neighbours about their experiences, followed by doctors, psychiatrists and voluntary support organisations (Table 1). This finding is similar to results on domestic violence from a self-completion module in the 1996 BCS (Mirrlees-Black, 1999).

The proportion of women seeking the help of, or being contacted by, support organisations appears to be quite low. It should be remembered, though, that these figures are based on whether respondents have ever been victimised; so some of these incidents could have occurred before such organisations became well-established. Also, victims were asked who they contacted at the time. Many of the calls received by voluntary support organisations are from victims seeking support months, or even years after the incident.

#### Contact with the police

Almost one-fifth (18%) of sexual victimisations reported to the self-completion modules also came to the attention of the police. The proportions of rapes and sexual assaults the police came to know about were quite similar, so this means that, according to this evidence, the police never come to know about approximately four-fifths of adult sexual victimisations. Relationship to perpetrator has a major effect on whether an incident comes to the knowledge of the police (Figure 6). Stranger attacks are far more likely to come to the attention of the police than attacks involving any other perpetrator. The least likely incidents to come to the attention of the police are those taking place in 'date' scenarios.

**Figure 6 Whether police came to know, by relationship to perpetrator**

About a third of rape victims (32%) were 'very satisfied' with the way in which the police handled their case. However, about a fifth (22%) were 'very dissatisfied'.

#### Victims' perceptions of sexual victimisation

Only three-fifths of victims whose most recent incident could be classified as a rape using the follow-up questions actually self-classified the incident as 'rape'. A further fifth of victims whose most recent incident could be classified as rape avoided self-classifying into any of the legal categories offered. These findings can be seen to provide further evidence to support the notion that the concept of 'rape' carries with it a specific set of meanings, assumptions and stereotypes. Rape victims may not wish to identify themselves as such since they may perceive that this has associations of stigmatised and degraded status. It may also be difficult for women raped by somebody they know, perhaps even somebody they liked or loved, to label this person a rapist. As we have seen, a relatively small proportion of incidents picked up by the self-completion modules fit the stereotypical 'stranger attack'. It is also likely that some victims have to overcome the shock of being attacked before they can admit, even to themselves, that they have been raped.

Victims were asked whether they considered their experience to be a crime or not. Only 70% of victims classified as experiencing attempted rape self-classified this experience as a crime. Victims of sexual assault are generally less likely to view their last incident as a crime than victims of rape. Relationship to perpetrator also had an effect on victims' perceptions. Most strikingly, only just over half (51%) of women whose last incident involved a current partner considered it to be a crime, compared to just under three-quarters (74%) of women whose last incident involved a stranger. Under half (44%) of attacks by dates were defined by the victim as criminal. Further to this, around a fifth (18%) of women victimised by a 'date' considered the incident to be 'just something that happens'.

## Discussion

Estimates generated from the BCS self-completion modules suggest sexual victimisation is a widespread problem in England and Wales. Young women aged under 25 reflect higher risks than older women. The results also suggest that the traditional perception of rape as perpetrated by strangers in public places is a false one. This has important implications for policy and practice.

These findings suggest that a large proportion of rape and sexual victimisation occurs in domestic settings. It is also apparent that sexual attacks by partners are more likely to result in physical injury and are more likely to be repeated than attacks by any other perpetrator. However, victims of sexual attacks by partners are the least likely to view these as criminal. It is likely that popular stereotypes surrounding the status of rape victim and that of the 'rapist' contribute to this. Although it should be emphasised that sexual victimisation can and does occur

in any social and physical location, it needs to be recognised that such abuse is often an integral part of the wider domestic violence syndrome.

Only one-fifth of rapes reported to the BCS also came to the attention of the police and just over one-fifth of victims were very dissatisfied with the way the police dealt with the matter. Previous research reveals that police handling of rape cases varies between forces (see Harris and Grace, 1999) and this report suggests that criminal justice agencies should be better informed about the nature of sexual victimisation. In particular, it should be recognised that victims of attacks by known perpetrators may need different help and support than other victims, as their experiences may be part of a wider picture of physical and emotional abuse.

## Methodological note

A nationally representative sample of 6,944 women aged 16 to 59 answered the 2000 self-completion module. The response rate was 98% of those eligible to participate. The responses of these women were used to estimate the extent of sexual victimisation. In order to examine the nature of incidents, the 1998 and 2000 modules were combined, to give a total of 1,183 female victims. The authors carried out extensive checks on the data before combining the modules, to ensure that minor question changes had not led to different types of incident being recorded.

The 1998 BCS was carried out by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), now the National Centre for Social Research. A consortium of the National Centre and the Office for National Statistics conducted the 2000 BCS. For further details see Hales et al., 2000. Further details about the BCS can be found at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/bcs1.html>.

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