

NatCen

Social Research that works for society

Survivors' stories:

**Personal experiences of sexual abuse
and violence**

Author: Carol McNaughton Nicholls, NatCen Social Research

Date: March 2012

1 Introduction

Sexual offending is an emotive and complex social issue, and one that affects a significant proportion of the population in the UK¹. In 2011 NatCen Social Research conducted research for the Sentencing Council² focussing on public and victim/survivors³ attitudes to sentencing sexual offences. The objective of this research was to explore key issues pertinent to the sentencing guidelines on sexual offences, such as the aggravating and mitigating factors felt to be appropriate to take into account when sentencing these offences, and the appropriate length of sentence for different types of sexual offences. This article has only been possible due to the Sentencing Council research and the permission of the Sentencing Council to conduct further analysis of the data collected for it.

The research involved qualitative depth interviews with 46 victim/survivors or parent/carers of victims of sexual abuse or violence⁴. The research interviews focussed on the participants' views on sentencing and their own experiences of the offences committed against them. Specific research findings relating to sentencing sexual offences have been reported for the Sentencing Council and published⁵ (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2012). Further details of the methodology can be found in the appendix.

This article takes a different approach and reflects on the key findings to emerge from the research from the perspective of the victim/survivors that took part. The reasons for writing this article are threefold - researching sexual offences is a sensitive issue – for victim/survivors, disclosing the sexual violence they have experienced can be emotional and stressful and it is important to use data collected with them as fully as possible. Research also has resource implications and data and findings should be utilised as widely as possible to maximise the value of the research; third, it was apparent from the research that victim/survivors could feel they lacked a 'voice' and that taking part in research may be one way in which to communicate their experiences and influence policy surrounding sexual offending. With this in mind there is therefore moral, financial and ethical imperatives to ensure that the experiences of victim/survivors who take part in research is authentically presented, including those findings that may not relate directly to the aims of commissioned research.

This article has been written to reflect upon victim/survivors experiences outlined during the research interviews – to try to ensure that they are given a voice and that other aspects of their experiences that were not included in the research report on sentencing can be given due coverage. As such the author does not claim this to be research findings in the fullest sense – there are limits in terms of how comprehensively different aspect of victim/survivors experiences outlined here were explored with each participant, and the research was not designed to explore these issues specifically.

¹ Data from the British Crime Survey (2010/11) indicates that 19 per cent of women and 2 per cent of men have experienced sexual assault (including attempts) since the age of 16 (Britton et al, 2012). 2009/10 figures from the British Crime Survey indicated that only 11 per cent of those who had experienced rape in their lifetime had reported it to the police.

² The Council's statutory duties are to 'produce analysis and research on sentencing'; 'promote a clear, fair and consistent approach to sentencing' and 'work to improve public confidence in sentencing'. Further information can be found at <http://sentencingcouncil.judiciary.gov.uk/about-us.htm>

³ The term victim/survivor is used to indicate that some people who have experienced sexual abuse or violence prefer the term survivor to that of victim, while others feel the term survivor also does not encapsulate their experience.

⁴ Public attitudes to sentencing sexual offences were explored via 12 focus groups. This article relates exclusively to the findings from the victim/survivors who took part in the research.

⁵ [http://sentencingcouncil.judiciary.gov.uk/docs/Attitudes_to_Sentencing_Sexual_Offences_\(web\).pdf](http://sentencingcouncil.judiciary.gov.uk/docs/Attitudes_to_Sentencing_Sexual_Offences_(web).pdf)

This article does not reflect the view of the Sentencing Council or Government policy. It is intended to meet key objectives of: providing a concise and accessible reflection on some key issues to emerge from interviews with victim/survivors of sexual abuse and violence about their experiences; and outline how these may relate to some current issues in the literature on and policy responses towards victims of sexual offences. Quotes are used to ensure the victim/survivors 'voices' are evident.

2 Victim/survivor experiences

Analysing the interview data, pertinent issues emerged about the experience of sexual abuse and violence, each of which are outlined below:

The challenge of disclosure

For a criminal justice response to be made to sexual offending, such offences also have to be reported and recorded. Understanding the process whereby victim/survivors find themselves able to report an offence is an important factor in identifying and addressing sexual offences – if the offence is not reported it may remain 'hidden' and the offender undetected. 2009/10 data from the British Crime Survey indicates that 11 per cent of women that had experienced rape or attempted rape have reported this to the police. One of the issues to emerge from the interviews with victim/survivors was that of the very real challenge of disclosing a sexual offence they can face.

One of the reasons for this they gave was that - **Sexual abuse and violence is still felt to carry a stigma.**

Recently there has also been a resurgence in concern expressed in literature and in the media over the continuation of rape myths in society, which indicate a broader societal discourse of 'blaming the victim' in sexual offence cases or imply only certain types of people are raped (Bohner et al, 2009; Horvarth and Brown, 2009). Juries are drawn from society at large and research has also indicated that juries may ascribe to rape myths (Lovett and Kelly, 2009). Media coverage from prominent commentators such as Alison Saunders, the Chief Prosecutor of the Crown Prosecution Service⁶, have begun to reframe the debate – acknowledging the recent developments made by the criminal justice system can only go so far in improving victims experiences when the problem may also lie with long standing societal attitudes around sexual offences.

This awareness of the potential stigma and ongoing negative societal discourses surrounding sexual abuse and violence could result in victim/survivors describing how they felt they could not disclose what had happened to them or explain the impact that the offending had on them and their family to other people. This could also lead to participants in the research noting they were reluctant to report sexual abuse or violence to the police because they felt they would not be believed or would be stigmatised in some way (this was both by the police and also by other people in the community if their case became public). The following quote (from someone who had been raped) illustrates how societal attitudes towards sexual offences can affect victim/survivors' perceptions of how they will be treated if they report the offence:

"Maybe a year to two years ago there was a programme on Channel 4, and I watched it with great interest because I thought that it would be really interesting, but they just had

⁶ <http://www.carer.co.uk/society/2012/jan/30/rape-victims-acquittals-chief-prosecutor?INTCMP=SRCH> (01/02/12)

members of the public as a jury in a case, it was rape under the influence of alcohol, and the victim didn't report it for a couple of weeks, you know, which is very normal. But the perpetrator was found not guilty because the jury, who were supposedly a sort of an average representation of the public, didn't believe the woman at all. And I think that's an interesting representation of both the legal system, and of the view of the public, that they really don't have an understanding [of rape], and I think quite a lot of the public don't want to have an understanding, because [rape is] such a huge, horrible thing."

Victim/survivors in some cases reported that they had experienced harassment in their local area after reporting a sexual offence, with local people who knew the offender 'blaming' the victim or indicating they felt the accusation was 'made up' rather than believe someone they knew had committed such an offence. This harassment only ceased after a conviction for the sexual offence was made.

Given the impact that sexual abuse and violence can have (see below) victim/survivors may be already in a vulnerable position. The offence committed against them could then lead to them feeling 'ashamed', or harassed by the local community. These are reasons for not reporting these offences, and also were reported by victim/survivors to compound the negative impact of the offence. Some victim/survivors noted that due to this they almost 'wished they had not even reported it'. Victim/survivors therefore could be aware of the stigma that can be associated with sexual offences and would welcome measures to try to address this in the future. Additional consequences of addressing the stigma associated with some victims of sexual offences could be that in the longer term victim/survivors feel more able to disclose an offence; or may not be subject to such negative treatment as some had experienced within their community if they do.

Another issue that emerged from discussions with victim/survivors about disclosing sexual abuse or violence was that: **The experience, disclosure or discovery of sexual abuse or violence is traumatic and can lead to an intensely traumatic 'rupturing' of day to day life. This created a 'double-trauma' of both the offence itself and the aftermath of the offence being disclosed.**

The victim/survivors of sexual abuse and violence interviewed during the research had experienced a range of different sexual offences and abuse of a differing nature. However they all shared a sense of this being a traumatic experience. Disclosing sexual abuse or violence often occurred alongside or following a trigger point which was itself a traumatic experience – a mental breakdown or suicide attempts may have followed disclosure as they tried to come to terms with the abuse, having contained it for many years following it⁷. The following quote from a victim/survivor that experienced childhood sexual abuse illustrates this point:

"I think over the 14-year period [since the abuse stopped] I've had, I would say, two major breakdowns, this last time, I can't explain where the strength came from, and I hit real rock-bottom, I've been suicidal several times, I just said, 'I need to get that justice now. It's not going to go away. It's going to make me ill'. [so I reported it to the police]"

Some victim/survivors also did not realise the abuse they had experienced in childhood would be 'taken seriously' by the police (although they found it was); or were unable to disclose the abuse to the police until after they had begun to access counselling or support to overcome the impact of the abuse. Indeed some victim/survivors did not feel

⁷ There were cases where the sexual offence had been reported immediately following the offence, though these tended to be offences committed by strangers or acquaintances as opposed to those committed by family members or partners.

they would ever want to report the offence to the police but even the act of disclosing it to others (such as a counsellor) could be a difficult event in their life.

For the parents of children that had been abused, discovering this had occurred (following a disclosure by their child) was also intensely traumatic. For example they may have discovered their partner had been abusing their own child for years; or their child may have been groomed and abused by multiple perpetrators over time. The understandable distress experienced by parents at this point could also lead to them reporting that they felt their child then felt further 'guilt' that the abuse that had happened to them had an additional impact on the family. Parents or carers also felt guilty that they had not detected or stopped the abuse from occurring. The following quote illustrates how the carer of a young adult who had been abused described the effect of finding out a family member had been abusing them in the past:

"Well, we were devastated. It's the best way I can describe it, devastating, shocking, to be honest, I was in disbelief and still thinking, '[They] wouldn't do that, [they] wouldn't do that', you know. It was just devastating and I walked around the house like a zombie for, oh, quite a while. I was like shut off from everything"

Finally victim/survivors could recount complex feelings when reporting family members who had committed sexual offences against them. They realised the sexual abuse and violence had to cease and were concerned with making sure others would not face similar abuse from the perpetrator. However they could also be reporting an individual to the police who was a close relative and in doing so felt that other family members, or the family member who had abused them, would be affected in negative ways. This could be in the context of having been groomed for many years by the person also sexually abusing them, and having been 'reliant' on their care, or formed complex emotional attachments to the abuser.

Thus, reporting a sexual offence is not necessarily an easy or linear process whereby an offence occurred and could be immediately reported (as typical images of rape and other sexual offences held by the public may assume). Each of the victim/survivors interviewed had distinctly different experiences and may have had to grapple with a range of issues as they made a decision to disclose or report the sexual violence or abuse they had had experienced. The reasons for this were multi-faceted but require an acknowledgment of the ongoing stigma directed towards those who have experienced certain types of sexual abuse or violence, and the complexity of inter-familial offences.

3 The Impact of sexual abuse and violence

Studies have identified clear links between poor mental health and a history of sexual abuse (Jonas et al, 2010). Victim/survivors of sexual abuse and violence can obtain support from the voluntary sector (such as counselling via Rape Crisis Centres⁸) or may be able to access counselling via the NHS (though some of this counselling may be provided by victim/survivors being referred back to specialist voluntary sector services and the NHS has limited capacity or expertise to provide specialist counselling for victim/survivors of sexual abuse and violence⁹). Organisations such as Victim Support

⁸ <http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/>

⁹ See the department for health guidance on commissioning services for women and girls who are victims of violence http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_125903.pdf

also provide specialist advice and support to victim/survivors. What was evident from the research interviews was the scale of primary, secondary and tertiary impacts that sexual abuse or violence can have and with it, the extent to which victim/survivors may require support from voluntary, health or social care services, and from within their local community, to address this.

Victim/survivors themselves **described a range of impacts of sexual violence or abuse that could be described as primary, secondary and tertiary and went on to affect every aspect of their life.** The initial 'primary' impacts included fear, shock, depression, confusion. However these did not dissipate easily (especially when awaiting a trial having reported an offence, or for example or if the offender continued to live in the area or within the same family). These primary impacts also had additional 'secondary' impacts. Victim/survivors may have felt uncomfortable leaving their house or travelling on transport following an offence; they may have emotional issues to work through that made employment or training difficult such as post-traumatic stress. They also reported relationships with their family, friends, partners or children becoming difficult as they tried to come to terms with their experience while also maintaining the appearance of a 'normal' life. On a tertiary level they could find this led to financial difficulties, family estrangement or additional difficulties such as substance misuse, which they directly attributed to the sexual abuse or violence they experienced. The following quote illustrates how victim/survivors described the aftermath of sexual abuse or violence:

“This might sound a little bit strange, but I think often the effects after the sexual abuse has stopped, are almost more painful than when it actually happened. Because, I mean in my case anyway, when it actually happened, I had such low self-esteem and I was so disassociated the whole time, and drunk a lot of the time as well because I really got into alcohol to try and cope with it; it meant that I was in a real sort of place of survival, I was just getting on with it and I was just trying to keep living every day. But then when you do actually try to grab your life back when it's finished, then you realise how much affect has really happened, and, you know, a lot of survivors really have problems in sexual relationships, problems with intimacy, low self-esteem, eating disorders, self-harm, I mean the list just goes on. You know, it can completely destroy you really, and I certainly feel like I'm still struggling to get over it and, well, not get over it, because you can never get over it, but to live a normal life in comparison to other people, as in functioning like other people. So I think when someone's been abused in their childhood and adolescence, you know, so much is taken away from them, and it's not something that the legal system really understands.”

A number of victim/survivors interviewed that had experienced sustained sexual and/or ritual abuse in childhood also lived with disassociative identity disorder (DID)¹⁰. DID is often associated with experiences of sustained sexual and physical abuse in childhood. Though they could manage this, it had impacted on their entire adult life and identity. Therefore victim/survivors often had a range of additional social, physical and financial difficulties to address following the sexual abuse or violence that they experienced that could last throughout their lives.

These effects were also felt by parents and carers of abused children who in the interviews described how they felt they had to move house to avoid a perpetrator once they were released, they may have lost their jobs in the process of the move, or have to take long periods absent from work to recover from the offence or support their children

¹⁰ The psychiatric diagnosis of DID is that an individual has two or more identities or personality states that recurrently take control of behaviour.

to do so. In doing so their income dropped and they may then have had additional concerns around how to manage day to day. Victim/survivors and parents of abused children could describe ever increasingly circles of the negative impact of sexual violence and abuse. They could go from having what they considered a 'normal' life to feeling they had lost 'everything' due to someone else committing an offence against their child, as the following quote from the mother of a teenager abused by multiple perpetrators describes:

"...through this process [the abuse and subsequent effect on their child] I lost my marriage, I lost my business; I lost my son; I lost my home. And I lost my life, basically, apart from losing my child. My whole life came crumbling down."

So another key message from victim/survivors to come from the research was an acknowledgment that **sexual abuse and violence affects not only the immediate 'victim' of the abuse, but often a much wider network of individuals. This includes their family, friends and even the local community.** The families of people who have experienced sexual abuse or violence may feel 'guilty' they could not prevent the offence that occurred; angry at the person that committed the offence; and themselves described how they had experienced deep trauma as a result of being close to someone who has experienced sexual abuse or violence, as the following quote from the parent of child abused by a family member, illustrates:

"Family and friends around us, you know, anyone who - who knew [the offender] was completely devastated by the knowledge of what he'd done. And the upshot is that this has a lifelong impact on us. You know, he might have appeared to the community and to life in general, to be a good bloke, you know, salt of the earth, but the reality is so different, and the damage that that does is so significant to all of the people that it touches."

The findings in this article have outlined the impact sexual abuse and violence can have, on both victim/survivors and those around them. Some of the victim/survivors interviewed had been able to access support, advice or counselling and work through the impact of the offence however. They felt they had now been able to rebuild a 'normal' life once more. In exploring victim/survivor's experiences, positive examples of how they were responded to and supported by voluntary sector and criminal justice agencies were provided. What was clear was that there are services and support that can assist victim/survivors and their family to overcome the impact of the offence – though as has been found elsewhere, access to this remains all too inconsistent (Stern, 2010). In the final section of this article these positive experiences are reflected upon, to draw out some examples of good practice.

4 Examples of positive interventions to support victim/survivors

An issue of particular salience to research on sexual offending is that of long standing criticisms regarding criminal justice responses to victims and the low conviction rate (HMCPSP/HMIC, 2007; Stern, 2010; Fiest et al, 2007). However there have been considerable attempts by the police, the CPS and the courts to improve their responses to the investigation, prosecution and conviction of sexual offences over the previous decade. Such measures have a long history. For example research in Scotland in the mid-1980s identified the difficulty that rape complainants faced, attending inappropriate

interview rooms at police stations, being aggressively interrogated by police and then feeling they were removed from and ill-informed during prosecution (Chamber and Millar, 1983; Chamber and Millar, 1986). This led to the introduction of specialist teams, trained to work with victims (both adult and children) of sexual offences, and special dedicated suites within police stations where victims could be questioned in an appropriate space. A similar process occurred in England and Wales throughout the 80s and 90s (Tempkin, 1998) including the establishment of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs). SARCs are specialist centres that provide medical and other support in the immediate aftermath of rape or sexual assault and can act as a gateway to reporting the offence to the police. These positive developments have evolved further with the implementation of specialist units such as Project Sapphire in London, a programme from the Metropolitan Police aimed at improving the treatment of victims and the conviction rate; training for judges residing over rape cases; and funding for Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), who provide multi-agency support, advice and coordination for complainants (Robinson, 2009). Research has informed and assessed existing knowledge and practice in responses to rape (Brown et al, 2010). Recent reviews of different aspects of these changes have praised the improvements to the existing system, however have still found that there is variation in experiences reported by victim/survivors and a lack of consistency in response to their needs (Fawcett Society, 2009; Payne, 2009; Stern, 2010). Recent research has also noted the need to improve the detection of sexual offenders following a reported offence via existing methods such as using DNA and linking police intelligence (HMIC/HMCPSI, 2012).

It is important at this stage to caveat that this article enables reflection upon deeply personal experiences of the aftermath of a sexual offence and the positive measures that some victim/survivors noted had assisted them. The author does not make claims that this reflects a systematic review or research project on what works to support victim/survivors. Existing literature on this includes a comprehensive review by Brown et al, (2010). However it was clear from the narratives of the victim/survivors included in the research that the response of the justice system, and/or access to adequate support, counselling and information from voluntary sector services had a significant role to play. These could assist with victim/survivors feeling they could report the offence and move forward in a way that afforded them dignity, a chance to feel they had a 'voice' and that they had regained some control over their life (all aspects of themselves they may have felt the sexual abuse or violence had compromised). This was in direct and stark contrast to those who felt they had been stigmatised, discriminated against, unable to access support and counselling or had been treated poorly or indifferently by agencies when they tried to report or access support following the offence.

As noted in a previous section, disclosing a sexual offence could itself be a complex and difficult process. Those who had done so in some cases had been surprised at the level of support and understanding they had received. The quote below from an adult who was abused as a child and reported it as an adult, illustrates an example of these positive experiences:

"Then I got in touch with [support agency] and that's when the process started, that they've been there to support me all the way during the interview process [with the police when reporting the offence] and I decided to do a video interview. It's amazing how things have changed from years ago, where [now] the options are there if you are a victim of sexual abuse, the flexibility that is there, you can choose whether you want either sex [of interviewer] with the interview process; you can choose if you want to go to a specific suite to go and report the crime; you've got the option if you want to go

into a police station. They are there to support, you know, victims of this crime, which I've realised is amazing compared to years ago, so in a way I am glad that I didn't [report it] until I did, because I don't think I would have even got the justice that I have got with regards to the overall sentencing that took place finally last year [in the past]."

This participant clearly reflects on the positive impact that developments to how the criminal justice system responds to victim/survivors had for them, and the significance of additional support from the voluntary sector. There were by no means all positive experiences reported by the victim/survivors who were interviewed. However those that were, indicated that when applied consistently these measures can have a significant positive impact on the victim/survivor experience.

Another key issue that was raised in terms of positive experiences was that of feeling 'listened to'. Victim/survivors who described positive experiences could outline the difference that being 'listened to' had on them when they reported the offence. The following quote outlines how a victim/survivor would suggest this process should be undertaken:

"It has a huge [affect], I mean it sounds silly, but it has a huge affect on the victim/survivor to listen to their story and to say, 'I'm really sorry that that happened, I believe you'. And then also to not place blame. So to say, 'it's really not your fault what happened, it's their fault', is a huge weight off their shoulders. Especially if it's one of the first times that they disclose, that can be really powerful to help them".

Another of the findings to emerge from the research is that there can be inconsistent access to suitable services or advice available for victim/survivors from voluntary sector agencies – though this was variable depending for example on where they lived and the nature of the offence they had experienced. In the context of the intensely difficult experience of sexual abuse and violence and ensuing impacts, victim/survivors and families of abused children could report feeling 'bewildered' and completely unaware of how or where to access support or advice. Even if they were aware of where to access support, funding constraints on service provision could still lead to there being waiting lists or limits to who could access support (for example they had to live in a certain area or be a certain age). This all points to the need to ensure access to adequate support for survivors, something that research has found repeatedly is inconsistent, yet has considerable positive affects when accessed (Brown et al, 2010).

Criminal justice responses

There was also an indication that recent developments with regard to how the criminal justice system supports victim/survivors (if they were able to access them or they existed in their local area) were having a positive effect. Victim/survivors described positive experiences of being referred to liaison officers, ISVAs (Independent Sexual Violence Advisors), and of having understanding and supportive police officers and judges. The following quote illustrates an example of this, focussing on how a judge responded to a victim/survivors in court, from someone who had experienced sustained sexual and physical abuse as a child and reported it as an adult:

"I had a brilliant judge, who I take my hat off to, [they were] very, very supportive. I was very lucky that he, I presume, was very experienced in the type of case that he was dealing with, and at each stage I felt as though he was there to support me. I did do my statement from behind the screen. It was just harrowing, because the first day that I attended, I went in the courtroom whilst the jury were listening to my video statement, which helped me to refresh my mind, because it was over a year ago I had done the

statement. And I suppose for any victim having to give evidence that was the most harrowing part. However, the judge did point out to his side in front of me that, 'Bear in mind the type of case it is, and be very careful how you cross-examine the person,' meaning myself, or any of the witnesses, because it is such a very sensitive case, and it did help".

The same victim/survivor went on to describe how their experience in court had been more positive than they expected, again indicating the type of interventions that can assist victim/survivors and a perception that this has improved over time:

"I just didn't have any faith generally in the court system, because of, again, ignorance. I've never sat in a public gallery and heard a court case. I just couldn't have asked for a better judge. He was brilliant. It made me feel that the justice system has gone a long way to take into consideration the victim, and has been very conscientious with regards to what my feelings were at the time, what they were afterwards, what I'm still suffering with now"

As the quote above summarises, sexual offences can have a real, long term effect on victim/survivors. Reporting the offence (if they chose to do so) and the ensuing investigation and court appearance can also be challenging. However with support from external agencies, sensitive policing, special measures in place in court, and informed judges and court staff these challenges can be overcome, and go some way to help the victim/survivor move forward.

As victim/survivors repeatedly stated in interviews, they could not change what had happened to them, but much could be done in the future to assist them survive and move on from it, some of which is already being implemented. One missing link to this however appeared to be in accessing support for the additional tertiary difficulties they had then experienced – for example having to move home and risking homelessness after an offence has been experienced due to a victim/survivor wishing to avoid the perpetrator once they have been released from prison.

5 Conclusion

This article reflects on the experiences of 46 people who had experienced sexual abuse or violence of some sort or their parents/carers; 27 had obtained convictions for these offences. These victim/survivors each had unique experiences of sexual abuse or violence – some in childhood, others adulthood; with multiple or single perpetrators and over long or short periods. However analysing their experiences some clear consistent themes emerged and these have been outlined in here.

Victim/survivors' experiences indicated that recent developments in how the criminal justice system responds to victims of sexual offences are working to improve their experience and support the victim/survivor. Positive experiences were in stark contrast to those that remained negative – and the attitude and awareness of criminal justice staff (including judges) towards victims of sexual offences seemed particularly significant. So inconsistencies still emerged although improvements that had been implemented seemed to work – indicating that further resources being allocated to voluntary and other services known to have positive impacts could assist fill these gaps.

The long term and wide ranging impact of sexual abuse and violence was also clear from victim/survivors' accounts, and some in potentially surprising ways. Access to

counselling and support was cited as being very important (and there could be a lack of access to this) but support with secondary and tertiary issues such as mental health and housing is also significant. This points to an ongoing need to ensure that policies on health, social care, benefits and housing continue to develop their response to victim/survivors of abuse and acknowledge and respond to their long term needs.

Finally, another concern to emerge from victim/survivors was that of the ongoing stigma of having experienced sexual abuse or violence. Societal attitudes and awareness of the reality of sexual offences and the multi-faceted impact they can have may indeed be another area requiring reform. Such reform may also assist in preventing sexual offences occurring by acting to educate people who may be at risk of committing a sexual offence that such behaviour is damaging, unacceptable and can be prevented¹¹.

Thus, responding to the needs of victim/survivors of sexual offences (and their families) involves a multi-faceted response that includes tackling negative social attitudes, ensuring a consistent and appropriate response from the criminal justice system, and providing support and resources to meet their health, social and economic needs. This should be underpinned by an acknowledgment that sexual violence and abuse can have long lasting effects, but that these can be overcome and minimised with the right support.

¹¹ Stop It Now for example is a campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by educating offenders and those at risk of offending <http://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>

References

References

Ashe, J., Fiest, A., Lawrence, J., McPhee, D. & Wilson, R. (2007). Investigating and detecting recorded offences of rape. London: Home Office 18/07.

Bebbington P, Brugha T, Cooper C, Jenkins R, Jonas S, King M, Kuipers E, McManus S, Meltzer H, Sexual abuse and psychiatric disorder in England: results from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. APR-2011:709, 719: Psychol Med:41.4.

Bohner, G., Eyssel, F., Pina, A., Siebler, F. & Viki, G.T. (2009). Rape myth acceptance: cognitive, affective and behavioural effects of beliefs that blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator. In M.A.H. Horvath and J. Brown (Eds). Rape: Challenging contemporary thinking. Collumpton:Willan.

Britton, A., Lau, I., Osborne, S. and Smith, K. (2012) *Homicide, firearm offences and intimate violence 2010/11*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/hosb0212/hosb0212?view=Binary>

Brown, J. Horvath, M. Kelly, L. and Westmarland, N. (2010) *Connections and disconnections: Assessing evidence, knowledge and practice in response to rape*, Government Equalities Office.

Chambers, G. and Millar, A. (1983) *Investigating Sexual Assault*, Edinburgh: Scottish Office Central Research Unit.

Chambers, G. and Millar, A. (1986) *Prosecuting Sexual Assault*, Edinburgh: Scottish Office Central Research Unit.

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (2008) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative research*, Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter.

HMIC and HMCPSI (2007) *Without consent: A report on the joint review of the investigation and prosecution of rape offences*, http://www.hmcpai.gov.uk/documents/services/reports/THM/Without_Consent_Thematic.pdf?P_HPSESSID=501eb4a297d449ffba2b90f8839338ac. March 2011.

HMIC and HMCPSI (2012) *Forging the links: Rape investigation and prosecution*, <http://www.hmic.gov.uk/media/forging-the-links-rape-investigation-and-prosecution-20120228.pdf> March 2012

Kelly, L. and Lovett, J. (2009) *Different systems, similar outcomes? Tracking attrition in reported rape cases in 11 European countries*, CWASU <http://www.cwasu.org/>.

Kelly, L., Lovett, J. and Regan, L. (2004) *Sexual Assault Referral Centres: developing good practice and maximising potentials*, Home Office Research Study 285. London: Home Office.

McNaughton Nicholls, C. Mitchell, M. Simpson, I. Webster, S. and Hester, M. (2012) *Attitudes to sentencing sexual offences*, London: Sentencing Council. [http://sentencingcouncil.judiciary.gov.uk/docs/Attitudes_to_Sentencing_Sexual_Offences_\(web\).pdf](http://sentencingcouncil.judiciary.gov.uk/docs/Attitudes_to_Sentencing_Sexual_Offences_(web).pdf)

Payne, S. (2009). Rape: The victim Experience Review. London: Home Office.

Fawcett Society Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System (2009) *Engendering Justice: From Policy to Practice* <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=933>

Horvarth, M. and Brown, J. (2009) *Rape: Challenging contemporary Thinking*, Collumpton: Willan.

Robinson, A. (2009) *Independent Sexual Violence Advisors: A Process Evaluation*, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/resources/ismvareport.pdf>

Stern, V. (2010) *The Stern Review: A report by Baroness Stern, CBE, of an independent review into how rape complaints are handled by public authorities in England and Wales*, Crown

Copyright: Government Equalities Office and the Home Office,

http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/Stern_Review_of_Rape_Reporting_1FINAL.pdf

Temkin, J. (1999). Reporting rape in London: A qualitative study. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38, 17-41.

Appendix A

Methods

The research was informed by a literature review of recent research on public and victim/survivors attitudes to sentencing sexual offences. This review was used to set the context for the research and also to explore the methodologies that have been used previously in such research and ensure the methods used in this research were appropriate. In addition the research team was made up of very experienced qualitative researchers and led by a researcher who also volunteers at a rape crisis centre and has completed training on working with victim/survivors. Victim/survivors were recruited to the research using an 'opt in' method. The research was advertised via a range of sources such as victim/survivor networks and online bulletins; posters and leaflets placed in support services, and virally by being emailed onto additional networks of victim/survivors and advertised on social media sites such as twitter by participants. The researchers also spent time in support services for victim/survivors explaining the research to potential participants. Those who were interested in taking part could contact the researchers using a freephone number or their email addresses, and once the research was explained in more detail, if they wished to take part an appropriate time, place and mode (such as face to face or telephone interview) was arranged. Most of the victim/survivors took part via an in-depth interview, but two group discussions were also held at a support service for victim/survivors. The interviews lasted between 30 – 90 minutes. A topic guide was used to guide the discussion but the interviews were also led by the participants who disclosed and discussed issues relating to the offence they had experienced that were significant to them. The interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed. All were stored securely and will be destroyed on completion of the research.

The transcripts were analysed using the Framework approach. The Framework approach involves developing a matrix of key research questions and themes. Each transcript (case) is then coded into the thematic matrix, with the findings from each theme building up a comprehensive summary of the content of each interview that can be compared across cases (each participant) and themes. In this analytical process, the initial set of themes focussed on issues pertinent to sentencing and the specific objectives of the Sentencing Council research. A second trache of analysis was then completed looking into a sub-section in the thematic matrix of 'other' categories that had been developed as each transcript was coded during the first phase of analysis, taking a 'grounded' approach to the analysis (Glaser and Strass, 2008). This discussion article outlines some of the key issues that emerged from this 'grounded' approach to analysis conducted following the initial analysis.

The aim of this second phase of analysis and subsequent discussion article has been to give a voice to the victim/survivors that took part in the research by focussing on:

- Their experiences
- The effects of sexual abuse and violence
- Examples of what 'worked' to support them following their experience of sexual abuse or violence

Victim/survivor characteristics

The participants had experienced a diverse range of sexual abuse and violence. This included cases of long term childhood sexual abuse only disclosed as an adult, organised and ritual child sexual abuse, violent rape, grooming, exploitation and recent childhood abuse. They had also experienced offences where single or, multiple perpetrators were involved, with perpetrators including family members, acquaintances such as neighbours or employers and strangers.

Table 1 Achieved sample characteristics - victim/survivors	
Type of sexual offences	
Rape	23
Sexual assault or assault by penetration	26
Possession of indecent image	3
Administering a substance with intent	2
Inciting a child to engage in sexual activity	2
Other offences (inc. grooming, voyeurism, exposure)	Had been experienced across the sample
Stage reached in terms of reporting and sentencing of main sexual offence/s reported	
Not reported	9
Reported but did not go to court	10
Convicted and sentenced	27
Total	46
Gender	
Female	43
Male	3
Total	46
Age	
Under 16, parent interviewed	5
16-20	3
21-30	4
31-40	10
41-50	16
51+	4
Age not disclosed	4
Total	46
Ethnicity	
White	42
Asian (Indian)	1
Mixed ethnicity	1
Not disclosed	2
Total	46