

**Female Rape Victim/Survivor Withdrawal from engagement with the Criminal Justice
System after reporting to Police: exploring the Professionals' perspective.**

By Cameron Doyle

Canterbury Christ Church University

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Abstract

There has always been a focus on our Criminal Justice System (CJS) in its efforts to secure convictions in cases of rape. Despite a litany of reports, numerous reviews, and a carousel of recommendations the failure remains. The literature review first focuses on the scale of the issue of rape attrition and commonly cited statistics to establish the scale of the problem before an overview of where attrition can and is most likely to occur. Outlining the key decision-making stages is critical in finding the points during an investigation at which a victim may choose to withdraw from the case. Great strides have been made in supporting victim-survivors of rape, bringing victim-survivors out of the shadows, and pushing them towards the heart of the process. Further improvements have been seen with regard to increased reporting however, ensuring victim-survivors remain within the CJS and assist an investigation remains difficult. As will be discussed below withdrawal rates are higher than ever and are one of the primary reasons for attrition. From analysing the available literature three research questions were identified (1) What do professionals that deal with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim-survivor choosing to withdraw? The study utilised phenomenological analysis to break down rich qualitative data produced from interviews. 12 professionals from 4 different organisations were interviewed to give a broad view of the professional perspective from various angles and stages of the CJS. The four groups of professionals were Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA), Counsellors, Intermediaries and Sexual Offence Investigative Trained (SOIT) officers. The interviews were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a method of analysis used to understand lived experiences, this will be analysed in more depth in the methodology section. The findings deduced from the views expressed by the professionals interviewed show a picture of improvement in the way victim-survivors are treated. However, all professionals agreed there was much left to do in improving the way victim-survivors are dealt with. The most common theme found

behind the reason for withdrawal was an apprehension of something yet to happen as opposed to an unsatisfactory experience of something that had already happened.

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Introduction

This study aims to increase our understanding of why victim-survivors withdraw from the perspective of professionals that interact with these victim-survivors every day. Rape attrition can be defined as any point at which a case of rape fails. Throughout the Criminal Justice System (CJS), there are multiple stages where rape cases may be discontinued. Initially, victims may decide not to report the crime or might withdraw from the process after reporting it. For cases that are reported, the police can choose not to pursue further action. Some cases advance to the point where charges are filed and referred to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), but the CPS may also decide not to proceed. The final stage where a case can falter is during the trial, where a jury might return a not guilty verdict (Brown, 2011). These areas identified and many more have always been an area of concern within our CJS. Attrition can occur at any point, from the victim's initial decision not to report the crime to the jury's verdict at trial, reflecting the complex and often challenging path that rape cases navigate within the CJS.

It is important to distinguish the term attrition from the term withdrawal and a victim-survivor's decision to disengage from the CJS process. In this study, the term withdrawal refers specifically to cases where the allegation remains, but the victim-survivor chooses not to proceed further within the CJS. Therefore, the victim-survivor has effectively withdrawn from participating in the CJS process. This type of withdrawal represents one of the various reasons for attrition in rape cases within the CJS. While attrition encompasses all points of case discontinuation, withdrawal specifically denotes the victim-survivor's decision to no longer participate in a CJS outcome, while still maintaining the allegation.

Various agencies such as the CPS, the police and charity organisations have endeavoured to support victim-survivors so that they continue within the criminal justice system. Changes in existing laws and the implementation of new ones have been made to increase the amount of support that can be afforded to victim-survivors, particularly those going to court. Figures show that the number of rape

cases progressing to court is scarcely improving despite an increase in the number of victims coming forward to report and the litany of reviews and policy changes, which will be discussed in more detail later (MOJ, Home Office and ONS, 2013). One particular area of concern is the number of victims who withdraw their allegations after reporting to the police. This is around 34%- 58% (Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005; Feist, et al. 2007; Bowcott and Barr, 2019; Waxman, 2019) of the overall attrition rate, which is under-researched. The term used to describe those people who report a rape to police will be victim-survivors throughout this study. It is an individual's preference as to whether people consider themselves to be a victim or survivor. So as not to ostracise any individual, the term victim-survivors will be used. The study focuses on victim-survivors who identify as female. The researcher acknowledges that some points made throughout the study will also relate to male victims however, this is another complex area of study that would require its own separate research.

This study will first discuss the literature currently available regarding rape attrition. The first part of the literature review will critically discuss the statistics regarding the prevalence of rape. It will discuss why the issue of rape reporting and attrition is so important. These statistics will be analysed throughout, and suggestions made as to why they cannot always be taken at face value. This will then lead on to the other areas of attrition, looking at the picture as a whole. It is important when discussing issues of such complexity that they are not taken in isolation, instead, an understanding of the wider issues is important. After discussing rape attrition as a whole the focus will then turn to the reason why victim-survivors withdraw their allegation. The studies that are currently available with regard to rape attrition will be analysed and discussed. Analysing the available literature will identify this study's following research questions (1) What do professionals that deal with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim-survivor choosing to withdraw? Following the literature review, the

methodology section will lay out the principles of the research. The research paradigm will be discussed along with the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher. This will lead to the research design where consideration is given as to why semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate for the study's aims. This is followed by the findings section, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the chosen analysis method, as it seeks to understand the participant's perception but also allows for the interpretative activity of the researcher.

Research in this field consistently shows rape victim-withdrawal to be one of the leading contributors to the issue of rape attrition (Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005) yet little is known specifically why victim-survivors make the choice to withdraw. Less still is researched is the professionals' perspectives on this issue. Professionals who deal with victim-survivors on a daily basis will come into contact with hundreds of victim-survivors who will choose or have chosen to withdraw from the CJS process. Therefore, by interviewing professionals instead of victims directly we can obtain a better understanding of the issue by interviewing fewer people.

Rape offence estimates and statistics regarding reporting, charging and convicting offenders give insight into the scale of the problem of rape in England and Wales. It is estimated that 85,000 women and 12,000 men are victim-survivors of rape or serious sexual assault every year (MOJ, Home Office and ONS, 2013). It is important to note that due to the complex nature of rape, and the reluctance of victim-survivors to report, these figures are not entirely accurate. Coupled with the clear limitations in the methodologies used to obtain these figures, the numbers are to be taken with caution. The exact numbers of rape victim-survivors will never be ascertained, as is the nature of these studies.

Literature Review

Introduction

Understanding the statistics, how reliable they are and the recent trends in the figures will be discussed throughout this chapter, this enables an understanding of the scale of the problem and thus how important it is to bring about change. This chapter will also consider the number of cases reported to the police, where these cases fail to progress and the main reasons why. Establishing where throughout a victim-survivors criminal justice journey will provide specific points of attrition that need addressing. Analysing why victim-survivors choose to withdraw can help to inform improvements and prevent future cases from suffering the same fate of not being progressed. It is important to understand the issue of rape attrition as a whole to provide a holistic understanding of why victim-survivors withdraw. The issue of rape attrition has long been recognised by academics, politicians and practitioners alike as an area needing to be redressed (Larcombe, 2011; Waxman, 2019). To prevent rape attrition, where appropriate, one should have a fair understanding of the figures associated and the limitations statistics hold. It is evident from analysis that estimates can be misconstrued as fact, and figures that are potentially wildly inaccurate and out of date can be damaging. Failing to update such estimates only increases the uncertainty around the area.

The ONS and Rape Statistics

The Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) is important in facilitating the understanding of long-term trends in crime and is the most reliable indicator for common types of crime experienced by members of the public (Brimicombe, 2016; Leach, 2019). The survey is conducted by face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of households in England and Wales. The survey aims to interview around 35,000 people every year and has had a response rate of between 70% and 76% in the last 20 years (ONS, 2020) Through the survey it has been shown that only around 4/10 crimes are reported to police (ONS, 2015). Therefore, it is important to carry out the survey to gain further

information on the crimes that are not reported to the police. This is particularly the case for sexual offences more than most, with under-reporting higher for sexual offences compared to that of other crimes and one of the lowest conviction rates in Europe (Lovett and Kelly, 2009; Tolsma, Blaauw and Te Grotenhuis, 2011; Hohl and Stanco 2015), this will be discussed in more detail later. 'Sexual assault' measured by the CSEW covers, rape (including attempts), assault by penetration (including attempts), causing sexual activity without consent, indecent exposure and unwanted touching (ONS, 2020). It must be noted that this differs from the police term 'sexual assault', meaning the sexual touching of a person without their consent (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Furthermore, there are two time periods covered by the CSEW. They cover experiences of sexual assaults over the age of 16 years and experiences in the 12 months prior to the interview.

Considered by many professionals as the most reliable source of crime trends, the CSEW is not without its criticisms. The CSEW admits that headline estimates within the survey exclude offences that are difficult to estimate reliably, for example, sexual offences (CSEW, 2019). Due to the lack of respondents when asking about sexual offences, the CSEW had to collate and average findings across three years (MOJ, Home Office and ONS, 2013). When asking about sexual offences, the question posed asks whether in the last 12 months, when they had made it clear they do not consent or were incapable of consent, someone had; penetrated their vagina or anus, or mouth with a penis even if only slightly and/ or penetrated their vagina or anus with an object (Gittos, 2015). Respondents that answered yes to these questions compose the figure of 85,000 victim-survivors a year. However, this is not the legal definition of rape. The survey does not take into consideration whether the perpetrator reasonably believed the other party had consented. If this reasonable belief is held and proven by the perpetrator, then they would not be guilty of the offence of rape by the legal definition (Doyle, 2019; Sexual Offences Act, 2003, s.1). Consequently, the figure of 85,000 rape or sexual offence victim-survivors a year often cited in academia could be incorrectly encompassing victim-survivors who

should not be (Oishi, 2003). The survey admits that it simplifies complex definitions of crimes and thus in doing so incorporates victim-survivors that may not be (Gittos, 2015), thus, inflating the figures for the estimated number of sexual offences. While it is clear there are limitations to the survey, it is also understandable why these figures are widely used. The estimated number of victim-survivors enables comparative analysis against the number of reports.

It is widely reported that victim-survivors of rape are among the least likely to report their crimes compared to most other crimes (Lehner, 2017; MacDonald, 2002), due to various reasons that will be discussed later. To be cognizant of the figure that only 15% of victim-survivors report a serious sexual assault or rape to the police (MOJ, Home Office and ONS 2013), the number of rapes recorded by police will now be analysed.

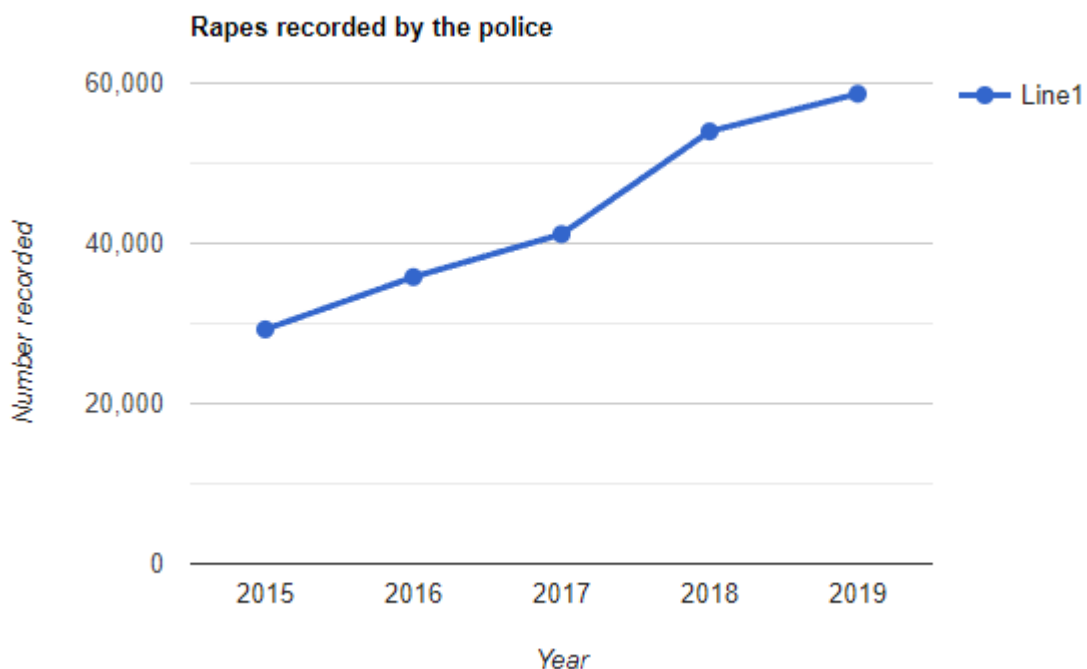


Figure 1. Rapes recorded by the police 2016-19 (Source: Personal collection)

As shown by the graph above, the number of rapes recorded by the police over the last 5 years has seen a rapid increase (CSEW, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019). In the year ending March – March, offences of rape recorded by police were 29,265 in 2015 (CSEW, 2015). There was an increase of 22% to 35,798 in 2016 (CSEW, 2016), a further increase of 15% to 41,150 in 2017 (CSEW, 2017), an increase of 31% to 53,977 in 2018 (CSEW, 2018), finally rising by 9% to 58,657 in 2019 (CSEW, 2019; Doyle, 2019). These figures by the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) show that year on year reports of rape have been on the rise. The CSEW states that crimes recorded by police do not provide a reliable measure of the trends of this type of crime (CSEW, 2019). It argues that this is not a reflection of more rapes occurring, rather improved police recording of crimes is the cause of the rise in numbers. The rise in the number of police-recorded crimes coincide with measures being put in place after a Her Majesties Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) report in 2014 which found 1 in 5 crimes were not recorded that should have been (HMIC, 2014). Since then, the measures implemented have been successful in ensuring more crime is properly recorded by police. This is supported by the fact that CSEW figures and police-recorded figures of crime are now closer than ever (CSEW, 2018). Thus, police are recording more crime not necessarily because there is more crime happening (CSEW observes an overall fall in crime) but, as a result of better recording practices by police (CSEW, 2019).

Despite this recent increase in police-recorded crime, there has been no increase in the number of victim-survivors estimated to have experienced rape. The government figure of between 60,000 to 95,000 male and female victim-survivors of rape every year was published alongside that only 15% of rape victim-survivors reporting a crime (MOJ, Home Office and ONS, 2013), recently updated to 17% in 2017 (ONS, 2017). However, these figures have not changed dramatically and therefore, it can be argued that they are no longer relevant despite being widely cited in academia still. In 2019 there were 58,657 recorded rapes by police. If only around 15% of victim-survivors reported to police, then

that would mean a total of 391,046 rapes occurred last year and that minus the 58,657 that were recorded would mean that 332,389 went unreported. This is a stark difference from the figure of between 60,000 to 95,000 estimated rapes occurring every year that was cited in the 2013 document (MOJ, Home Office and ONS, 2013). Thus, it must be assumed that instead, more people are coming forward to report rape and subsequently the figure that around 15% of rape victim-survivors report is no longer accurate.

Furthermore, frequently stated in the CSEW is that incidents of rape are not on the rise, instead due to increased reporting and better recording methods by police the number of rapes recorded by the police is on the rise (CSEW, 2019). However, this cannot be entirely the case. To fail to consider that this is not also as a result of more rapes happening would be naïve. If it were still the case that there are approximately between 60,000 to 95,000 victim-survivors of rape a year, then with last year's number of police-recorded rapes at 58,657 this would mean a reporting rate of 61%. This would mean a dramatic rise in reporting from 15% quoted in the government report in 2013, to 61% seven years later. To suggest that the increased reporting of rape is down to purely more people reporting, a rise to 61% of all rapes, would be unreasonable considering other crime types don't boast such high reporting rates (Tarling and Morris, 2010; Torrente, Gallo and Oltra, 2016). This would suggest that contrary to the CSEW there is indeed an increase in the number of rapes occurring every year. It is quite clear that the seven-year-old statistics are no longer accurate. Further studies need to be carried out to assess how many rapes occur every year and subsequently how many are reported/ not reported. Thus, the increase in police recording of rape is a result of better recording practices and more victim-survivors coming forward. It would also seem that an increase in the number of rapes is also due to more rapes occurring yearly since the last estimate given in 2013.

From reporting to conviction – Key decision-making stages

Once a crime has been reported to, and subsequently recorded by police; it is the duty of officers to investigate. Sometimes an offence will be 'no crime by police. This is whereby officers, on the basis of evidence, decide that a crime did not take place. Fiest, et al. (2007) found that in a sample of 676 cases, 15% were classified as 'no crime'. Of these, the two main reasons for classing as 'no crime' were due to verifiable information that no crime took place 86%, and due to the victim-survivors failing to substantiate the allegation 6%. The study also found that of those police had classed as 'no crime' 17% were done so incorrectly under the National Crime Recording Standards (NCRS) Rules, the largest number of which were due to the officer incorrectly believing that there was a lack of supporting evidence (Doyle, 2019). Thus, almost one out of five cases were incorrectly classed as 'no crime' and dropped when a further investigation should have taken place. However, it is important to note that the study was conducted in 2007 and may not still be accurate today. It was found by HMIC (2014a) that sexual offences were under-recorded by 26% nationally and 800,000 crimes overall were not recorded by police.

This under-recording of crime by police forces is coined by the phrase dark figure of crime. This phrase was first introduced in 1832 and used to describe crimes that are not reported or recorded by law enforcement (Berlinski 2009; Penney 2013). The dark figure of crime is commonly illustrated as an iceberg, where just the tip is visible. The tip of the iceberg is thus compared to reported crime. Yet what lays underneath the surface is far greater, this is compared to unreported/ unrecorded crime (Biderman & Reiss, 2017). The reason victim-survivors are unwilling to report a crime can be due to a number of reasons such as not knowing they are a victim, lack of trust or faith in the police, or the offender is someone known to the victim. For victim-survivors of sexual offences, studies show that often the relationship between the victim-survivor and offender is the driving force behind why victim-survivors do not report (Jones et al., 2009; Patterson & Campbell, 2010). These factors can also be attributable to why victim-survivors withdraw after reporting (Jones et al., 2009).

Trust and legitimacy of the police are influential in reporting rates. Studies have repeatedly shown that when the public perceives the police to be legitimate, they are much more likely to report a crime to the police (Noppe et al., 2017). However, from 2016 to 2019, as outlined above, the number of crimes reported to the police saw an increase. During this same period public satisfaction with the police service was falling (MOPAC, 2019). The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) records victim satisfaction through a survey in London. MOPAC recorded falling satisfaction rates since 2014 to the lowest on record at 64% for the year 2020 with only 43% of victims stating they would report a crime again (MOPAC, 2022; Victims Commissioner, 2021). Therefore, it could be suggested that police legitimacy is not the primary factor influencing reporting rates. Others have attributed the increase in reporting of offences, particularly sexual offences, to social movements such as the 'me too' movement (Hillstrom, 2019, pp1-6). The me-too movement gained traction in 2017 after a number of Hollywood celebrities raised the issue of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace (Lee, 2018). Since then, the social media movement has gained attention globally pushing for reform and encouraging women to feel empowered by coming forward to report sexual abuse.

The work of Tim Newburn provided insight into unreported crime; his work has increased our understanding of this complex phenomenon (Newburn, 2007). His research has explored the different reasons behind the underreporting of crime and the various influences that victims face. What informs their decisions to decide not to engage with the CJS (Newburn, 2013). Newburn encompasses criminology, psychology and sociology to examine societal perceptions, fear of reprisals, lack of trust and social barriers within the CJS, which he considered to be significant contributors to victims not reporting a crime (Newburn and Rock, 2006). Newburn's studies use a range of qualitative, empirical methods such as official crime statistics, interviews and surveys to provide a multifaceted overview of the size and scope of unreported crime and the effects this has on victims and the CJS (Newburn,

2017), he also highlights the limitations of crime statistics in his research. Newburn's work assists to inform policy and practice in addressing underreporting and improving the way the CJS works with victims of crime. Similarly, Dame Angiolini's review (2005) focuses on the investigation and prosecution of rape cases. Angiolini highlights the many challenges that victims can face when they report a crime and the barriers that can hinder an effective investigation.

The Angiolini Inquiry, led by Dame Elish Angiolini, was initiated in response to the abduction, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan Police officer. This inquiry aimed to uncover systemic failures within the police force that permitted such a heinous act to occur. The initial report, published in June 2023, identified critical issues within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). The systemic failures and cultural issues identified by the Angiolini Inquiry have direct implications for the confidence rape victim-survivors have in the police, which is a significant factor in their decision to continue or withdraw their reports.

The Angiolini Inquiry uncovered multiple missed opportunities to identify and act upon Wayne Couzens' predatory behaviour. Despite prior allegations of indecent exposure, the police failed to conduct thorough investigations or connect these incidents (Angiolini, 2023). This reflects broader deficiencies within the police force, such as a lack of commitment to pursuing leads in cases of sexual misconduct. Research by Brown et al. (2019) supports this, indicating that police often exhibit a lack of thoroughness in sexual offense investigations, which can undermine victim-survivor confidence. The perception of police ineffectiveness or disinterest is a critical factor in rape victim-survivors' decisions to withdraw their reports (Venema, 2014). When victim-survivors perceive that the police do not fully investigate or prioritize their cases, they may conclude that pursuing the case further is futile, leading to withdrawal.

The Angiolini Inquiry exposed a pervasive culture of misogyny within the Metropolitan Police, where inappropriate behaviour towards women was often tolerated, and a "culture of silence" prevailed (Angiolini, 2023). This finding is consistent with broader research that identifies misogyny as a significant issue within policing cultures (Silvestri, 2018; Rowe & Garcia, 2020). The presence of such a culture can severely impact the experiences of rape victim-survivors, who may feel marginalized or disbelieved when reporting their assault. The anticipated bias or discrimination stemming from this culture can lead victim-survivors to withdraw their reports, as they might predict a lack of empathy or fair treatment from officers (Campbell & Raja, 2005). This highlights the need for cultural reform within police forces to improve victim-survivor confidence and reduce the rate of report withdrawals.

The inquiry further found that public complaints, including those regarding Couzens' indecent exposure, were not handled with the seriousness they warranted (Angiolini, 2023). Literature on victim-survivor experiences with the criminal justice system underscores the importance of a responsive and supportive police force in maintaining victim-survivor engagement (Hoyle & Zedner, 2007; McMillan, 2015). When victim-survivors perceive the police as dismissive or unresponsive, they are more likely to lose faith in the criminal justice process and withdraw their reports (Hohl & Stanko, 2015). This underscores the critical need for the police to adopt a more proactive and victim-centred approach to handling complaints and investigations.

The Angiolini Inquiry made several recommendations aimed at addressing the systemic failures identified within the Metropolitan Police, including improvements to the vetting process, the handling of complaints, and the need for cultural change (Angiolini, 2023). These recommendations align with broader calls for police reform in the context of sexual violence investigations (Greeson & Campbell, 2013). Implementing these reforms is essential for rebuilding trust between the police and victim-survivors of sexual violence. Studies have shown that when victim-survivors perceive that the police are making genuine efforts to improve their practices and culture, they are more likely to engage with the criminal justice process and less likely to withdraw their reports (Rich & Seffrin, 2013).

The findings of the Angiolini Inquiry provide a critical framework for understanding police perceptions of rape victim-survivor withdrawal. The systemic issues identified—ranging from investigative failures and inadequate vetting to a culture of misogyny and dismissiveness—significantly contribute to a perception among victim-survivors that their reports will not be taken seriously or handled appropriately. This perception is a primary driver of report withdrawal, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reform within the police force. Such reforms are not only necessary for preventing future tragedies but also for restoring victim-survivor confidence in the criminal justice system and ensuring that more rape cases are brought to a just resolution. Both Newburn and Angiolini's work has contributed to our holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding unreported crime. Their research serves as a foundation for policy development aimed at enhancing the investigation and prosecution of rape cases and provides insights into the need for improved responses to address underreporting.

As a result of the inadequacies found in 2014, HMIC made several national recommendations aimed at improving the crime-recording arrangements across all forces in England and Wales. Individual forces also received additional recommendations specific to their inspection findings (HMIC 2014, b). Despite this, recent inspections and reports by HMICFRS have found that several police services are still failing to record crimes that are reported to them (HMICFRS, 2019; 2020). Recent crime data integrity inspections have shown that while some police forces have improved and received an 'outstanding' by the inspectorate, namely Kent Police and Essex Police, many forces are still falling short (HMICFRS, 2019; 2020). For example, Lincolnshire Police failed to record one out of five crimes overall reported to them, resulting in 9,400 crimes overall not being recorded (HMICFRS, 2018). Furthermore, Thames Valley Police failed to record 35,000 crimes overall (HMICFRS, 2019). Thus, despite recommendations being made to improve police recording, this has only been effective in promoting change in some police forces. Not only is this troubling as many victim-survivors go without

justice, but the disparities between forces when it comes to recording crime brings about its own issues. It is important that all victim-survivors, wherever they are, have an equal and fair opportunity of having their voice heard and their crime recorded by the police (MOJ, 2020a). However, the biggest point of attrition is during the police investigative stage between the police recording the offence of rape and then later referring the case to the CPS for a charging decision (MOPAC, 2019).

There are various reasons why during the police investigation a case is not progressed. The two main reasons are victim-survivor withdrawal and, lack of evidence. Kelly, Lovett and Regan, (2005) found that victim-survivor withdrawals accounted for the largest proportion (34%) of cases lost at the police investigation stage. This is further supported by findings from a study carried out by Fiest, et al. (2007) that found of the recorded offences that failed to result in a charge 35% were due to withdrawal of the complaint and 40% due to insufficient evidence. However, more recent studies have found the victim-survivor withdrawal rate to be much higher, around the 50% mark (Bowcott and Barr, 2019), with a rape review in London finding it at 58% (Waxman, 2019). It is clear that victim-survivor withdrawals during the police investigative stage are the single largest reason cases are not progressed further. Thus, it is imperative to understand the reasons behind withdrawal in order to combat the high attrition rate during the police investigation stage. Studies that investigate the issue of why victim-survivors withdraw describe the issues as deep, complex, and often inter-related. It is not as simple as that victim-survivors do not wish to cooperate or support a police investigation and prosecution. These studies and issues will be discussed in more depth in a later section.

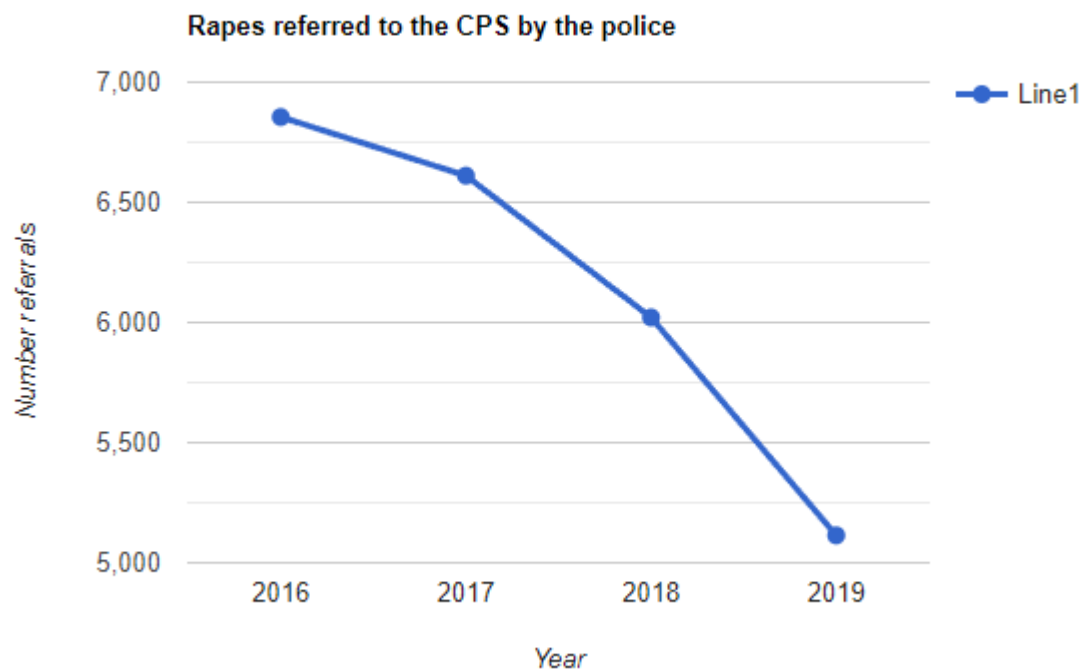


Figure 2. Rapes referred to CPS by Police 2016-19 (Source: Personal collection)

As displayed in figure 2, the number of cases that police refer to the CPS for a charging decision is also where attrition occurs. This area of attrition is growing more concerning with year-on-year declines in the number of cases referred to the CPS for a charging decision as shown by the graph above. From 6,855 in 2015-16 to 6,611 in 2016-17 a reduction of 244 referrals equating to 3.6% (CPS VAWG, 2017). The decline has continued, with a further fall from 6,611 in 2016–17 to 6,012 in 2017-18, a fall of 599 referrals, or 9.1% (CPS VAWG, 2018). Finally, last year’s referrals stood at 5,114 in 2018-19 – a decrease of 14.9% (CPS VAWG, 2019; Doyle, 2019). Thus, over the last 4 years in total, referrals have fallen by 1,741 cases equating to a reduction of 25% since 2015-16. It has been suggested that the decrease in police referrals to the CPS for a charging decision is due to the high evidential threshold tests, that cases must pass to secure a charge. A case must pass both an evidential and a public interest test. As part of the evidential test, prosecutors must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction. To pass the public interest stage prosecutors must ensure that it is in the interest of the public to prosecute. They must take into consideration several factors

such as the seriousness of the offence, the harm caused to the victim-survivors, the impact on the community and whether a prosecution is a proportionate response to name a few (CPS, 2018). Once these two stages have been met a charge can be brought against the suspect.

It has been suggested in the media that the CPS were only choosing to prosecute 'stronger cases' and drop 'weaker' ones (Topping, 2018) and that a rape conviction target was urging them to do so (Newman, 2019). This was shown before with the Met Police's Specialist Rape Sapphire teams. They had encouraged victim-survivors to withdraw rape allegations to boost detection rates in 2008-09 (BBC, 2013). However, the accusations were investigated by Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI) who found 'no evidence that CPS prosecutors are risk-averse, or that they are only charging 'easier' cases to increase the conviction rate' (HMCPPI, 2019). HMCPPI (2019) also concluded that the legal test was properly applied in 98% of cases. Despite this finding, the CPS failed to notify HMCPPI inspectors of their internal review revealing rape case failings. The internal report by CPS found that prosecutors made disproportionate requests in 56% of administratively finalised cases examined, 65% of rape cases referred by police to the CPS for early investigative advice (EIA) had disproportionate requests for information and police failed to complete all actions asked for by prosecutors in 78% of cases (Barr and Topping, 2020). Thus, having access to disproportionate information could implicate the CPS's decision to pursue the case. The information which they should perhaps not have requested can affect their decision to charge and thus cases will be dropped incorrectly.

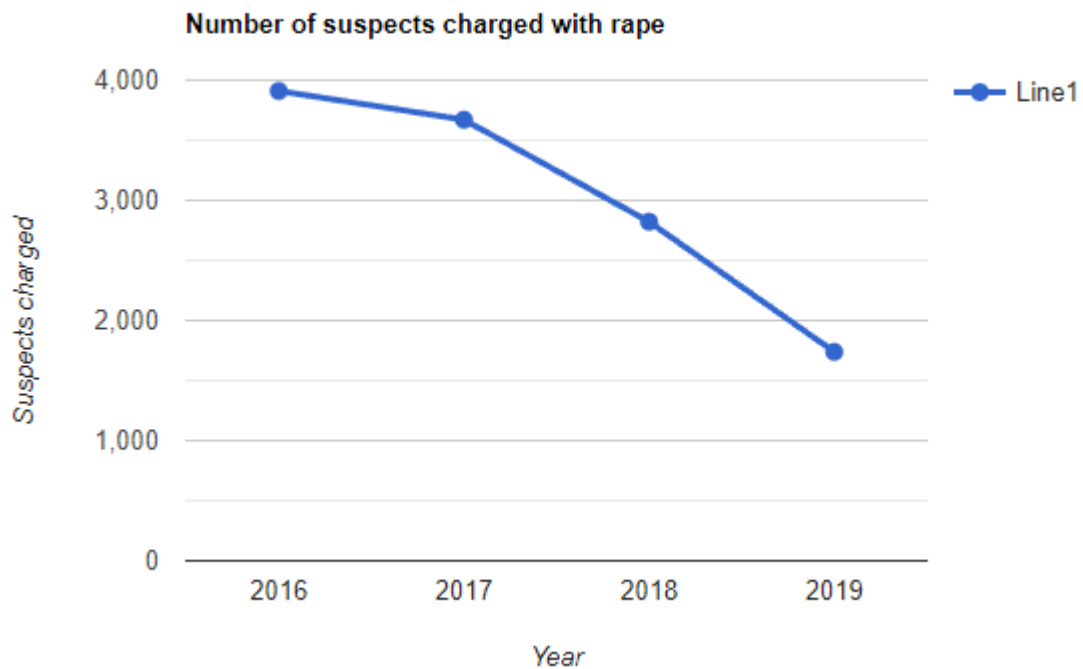
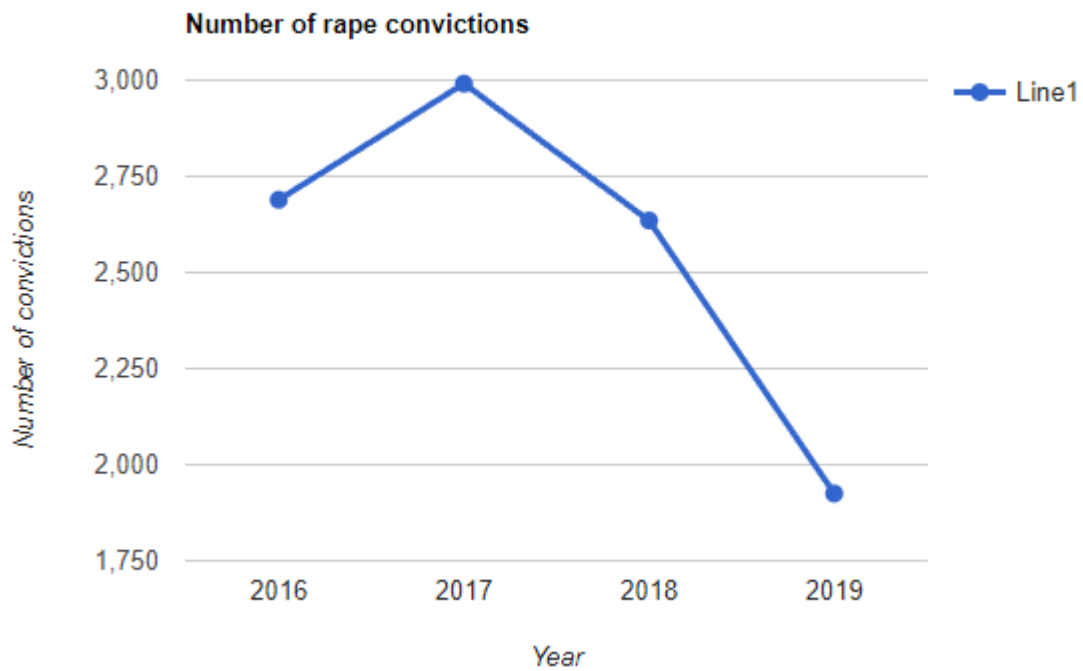


Figure 3. Number of suspects charged with rape 2016-19 (Source: Personal collection)

As shown in figure 3, CPS charging rates have continued to decline in recent years, and this is another instance in which attrition occurs. In 2015-16 there were 3,910 individuals charged with rape, 57% of the referrals that year (CPS VAWG, 2016). In 2016-17, 3,671 suspects were charged equating to 55.5% of referrals. A reduction of 239 charges can be seen, a fall of 6.1% in overall charges and, a decline in the percentage of referrals charged by 1.5% between the years 2015-16 and 2016-17 (CPS VAWG, 2017). Furthermore, there was a fall in the volume of 849 charged a year later in 2017-18, to 2,822 charges, meaning a reduction of 23.1% (CPS VAWG, 2018). Forty-six-point nine percent of police referrals in 2017-18 resulted in a conviction being brought against a suspect, a reduction of 8.6% from the years 2016-17 and 2017-18 (CPS VAWG, 2018). Charging took another fall to 1,739 charged in 2018-19, a decline of 1,083 cases or 38%. In the year 2018-19, 34.4% of police referrals of rape resulted in a conviction, this saw a reduction of 12.5% compared to the previous year (CPS VAWG, 2019).

From 2015-16 to 2018-19 there has been a decrease of 2,171 charges of rape brought about by the CPS. In this same period, the number of charges brought by CPS as a percentage of police referrals has also declined by 22.6% and currently stands at 34.4% (CPS VAWG, 2016; 2019). The CPS has stated several possible reasons as to why there has been a decline in the number of charges bough forward for rape. One such factor cited is that the volume of referrals to the CPS by police has decreased and thus this has impacted the number of charges made (CPS VAWG, 2019, pp 15). Whilst this could explain why the total number of charges brought by CPS has fallen, it does not explain why the charge rate as a percentage of cases referred by police has failed to be retained or even improved since the 55% seen back in 2015-16. While police referrals have fallen by 27% since 2014, CPS charges have fallen by 51% in the same period. Furthermore, the CPS states another reason for fewer cases going to court is due to an increase in the volume of digital data, which prolongs investigations, and cases take longer to reach the CPS. However, for the last 4 years, the trend of an increase in referrals and a reduction in both the number of charges of rape brought by CPS and the percentage of rape referrals charged by the CPS has declined. Whilst it is clear that digital data takes longer to investigate and would lengthen the time it takes to pass to CPS, this would have little effect on the charging rate over this 4-year period and thus cannot be attributable to the fall in charging rate as a percentage of police referrals alone.



(Figure 4)

Over the last three years, since 2016-17, the number of convictions has seen a steady decline. There was an increase from 2,689 in 2015–16 to 2,991 in 2016–17 in the number of convictions for rape however, since then statistics have shown there to be a year-on-year decline (CPS VAWG, 2017; 2018; 2019). The number of convictions for rape has seen a steady decline in the years following this peak. The following year 2017-18 saw the number of rape convictions fall by 365 (11.9%), to 2,635 convictions (CPS VAWG, 2018). A further fall was seen in 2018-19 of 710 convictions, resulting in a total of 1,925 that year, a reduction of 26.9% from the total number of convictions in the previous year (CPS VAWG, 2019). Furthermore, the conviction rate since 2015-16 has remained steady. In 2015-16 the conviction rate was 57.9%, falling slightly to 57.6% in 2016-17 (CPS VAWG, 2016; 2017). The following year 2017-18 saw an increase in the conviction rate to 58.3% and again in 2018-19 to 63.4% (CPS VAWG, 2018; 2019). It is evident that since 2015-16 there has been a reduction in the number of convictions for rape, falling by a total of 1,066 convictions for rape since the peak in 2015-16 (CPS

VAWG, 2016; 2019). However, the conviction rate remains steady and has seen somewhat of a slight increase in 2019. This reduction of charges and increase in the conviction rate seems to somewhat bolster claims as previously stated, that the CPS are turning away weaker cases and prosecuting only stronger cases. It is important to remember, however, that evidence around this claim is scarce and HMICPS (2019) found no evidence of said practice within the CPS.

Rape cases have consistently delivered lower conviction rates than that of other comparable offences. This is despite prosecutors having to be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction (CPS, 2018). One such reason often cited for lower conviction rates in cases of rape is due to jury rape myth acceptance (RMA). Beliefs wrongly held by jurors about rape, rape victim-survivors and offenders are often cited in academia as a driving force behind low conviction rates (Dinos et al., 2015; Temkin, 2010). The profound effect RMA can have on a case has led to some scholars arguing for drastic and fundamental reform of the CJS, including but not limited to, the abolition of juries in sexual assault cases (Temkin and Krahe, 2008, p.177). It is evident there are many reasons why attrition occurs within the CJS at the various stages identified above.

The attrition points identified above are clear, it is evident that there are various stages that a rape case can fall through the CJS and the figures are becoming more contentious every year. Using the figures taken from 2019, the police recorded 58,657 rapes. That same year only 5,114 cases were referred to the CPS for a charging decision therefore, 53,543 cases failed to proceed past the police stage (CSEW, 2019). Thus, only 9% of recorded rapes managed to proceed through to the CPS. From the 2018 data, which are the most up to date home office appendix tables available, recorded offences by police were 53,977 and referrals to CPS were 6,012, 11% of recorded rapes (ONS, 2018). Therefore, the average number of cases reported to police that resulted in referrals was 1 in 10. This results in 90% of cases being unable to proceed past the police stage. There are several reasons why cases are

dropped or fail to progress to the CPS, this will be discussed in this next chapter with specific scrutiny paid to victim-survivors withdrawal.

However, it is important to understand that there are limitations to presenting and comparing figures side by side in the same year. It takes time for cases to progress through the CJS and therefore, comparing the recorded number of offences in 2018 with the number of referrals, charges, etc in the same year should not be taken at face value due to the lag in case progression. Not all cases that were recorded by police, would have been referred, charged and received a conviction in the same year if at all. It is also important to note that most of this data relates to sexual offences as a whole and is not exclusively limited to just the offence of rape. Therefore, it must be accepted that some points made from data about rape are not conclusive but are inferred from what data is available regarding sexual offences as a whole. These next few chapters will explore the limited research available and critically analyse the reasons why victim-survivors withdraw as suggested by organisations. Often answers to the question of why rape victim-survivors withdraw are widely assumed.

Rape attrition through the lens of withdrawal studies:

Studies have found varying percentages of the withdrawal rate in cases of sexual offences, ranging between 30-50%. A study by Fiest et al., (2007) found that of recorded sexual offences that failed to progress victim-survivors withdrawal made up 35%. The reluctance of victim-survivors to assist was found in 11% of cases and insufficient evidence was the reason in 40% of cases. This was conducted using a sample of 383 recorded cases which did not result in a charge. Furthermore, victim-survivors reluctance to assist with a case combined with the cases where victim-survivors withdraw are the main reasons why cases fail to proceed. Therefore, victim-survivors are essential in ensuring a case can be progressed. This is supported further by the CSEW (2018) which found that of all sexual offences in 2018, 51% failed to progress due to evidential difficulties, and 32% of evidential difficulties

were as a result of the victim-survivors not willing to support further action. It is therefore evident that during the stage at which most sexual offence cases fail to progress a large portion is due to victim-survivors withdrawal and/ or reluctance of victim-survivors to assist in a prosecution. A recent rape review in London carried out by MOPAC (2019), the found that there was a notable number of victim-survivors/survivors withdrawing their allegations, 58% in total. It is therefore essential, that the reasons behind victim-survivors withdrawal are understood so as to better support victim-survivors and ensure more cases progress through to the courts. There are many ideas as to why victim-survivors withdraw their reports of rape after they have reported it to the police.

The CSEW (2018) suggests three main reasons why victim-survivors withdraw; worry that the process will be too distressing and/or a fear of being judged, the offence might have been committed by the victim-survivors' partner and the victim-survivors may not wish the police to take action against their partner and the victim-survivors wanted the crime recorded but didn't want further action taken on this occasion. While all these reasons stem from victim-survivors themselves, the CSEW itself does not conduct a survey asking why victim-survivors no longer wish to be involved in investigations, the basis for the points made is not done through a study conducted by the CSEW. It is often the case that reasons given as to why victim-survivors withdraw are based upon the few studies there are on victim-survivor withdrawal as well as being reliant upon other aspects of victim-survivor engagement, such studies focusing on why victim-survivors report or do not report. Research has shown that in most cases of reporting victim-survivors often cite wanting to prevent the offender from committing crimes against others as the main reason for reporting and fear of reprisal, embarrassment, or not wanting friends or family to know for not reporting (Sable et al., 2006; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2010, ONS, 2018). Findings such as these are used to inform why we believe victims may withdraw, as seen in the CSEW. While the issue of rape withdrawal is a complex one, a wealth of literature is needed to be drawn upon to gain insight into the thoughts of victim-survivors within the CJS. It is evident that research in

the areas of rape withdrawals specifically is in short supply and desperately needed to improve the holistic understanding of why victim-survivors withdraw.

One study, by the London Victims Commissioner (LVC) that asked why victim-survivors of rape withdraw their reports, found the main reasons to be that of 'stress and trauma due to lack of police contact, lack of information or updates, or the sheer length of time it takes for investigations to progress' (Waxman, 2019 pp7). The LVC is a new role which aims to influence the CJS to enable access to an effective and transparent justice journey (Greater London Authority, 2022). This research was based upon a sample of 501 reports in April of 2016 and was confined to the geographical area covered by the Metropolitan Police Service. Whereas contradicting evidence by the Victim Commissioner for England and Wales has suggested that delays in the police process were one of the least mentioned reasons for complainants to withdraw. Their research showed this reason was only cited for the withdrawal of 1% of complaints, instead, the main reason cited for withdrawal was concern about criminal justice system processes (Baird, 2019). Baird's study was based on 521 complaints that were withdrawn in the Essex Police area. Rape Crisis practitioners select one, or several, reasons from a list of eighteen for each complaint when recording this data. The available reasons in this field are based on Rape Crisis' experience of working with victim-survivors and survivors. However, in this study, there was no option within the eighteen given that stated 'lack of police contact' or lack of updates' like the first study. Therefore, it can be argued that due to a limited number of reasons given to the practitioners to select from by the researcher, some reasons for withdrawal could have been omitted. Furthermore, both studies were conducted in different geographical locations and reports were made to different police forces. Therefore, care should be taken when interpreting these results due to the nature of the samples.

However, what both studies could show from their findings is that a victim-survivor's future anticipations are a driving force behind why victim-survivors withdraw. Very few reasons given are based upon something that has happened, i.e., a negative experience of the CJS. Instead, most reasons given within the findings show fear or apprehension of the CJS process or issues of disclosure. This is shown by the length of time it takes for investigations to progress and concern about criminal justice system processes as reasonings in the two studies shown above (Baird, 2019; Waxman, 2019). Thus, evidence repeatedly shows that in most cases the belief that the process through the CJS will be challenging and distressing is often a key cause for many victim-survivors to drop out after reporting. This is strengthened by the fact that most victim-survivors are likely to drop out in the initial stages of an investigation (Hester, 2013), 18% within the first 30 days of reporting and 48% within 90 days (Waxman, 2019). Furthermore, most victim-survivors (75%) found the police to be very or fairly helpful at first contact, and 63% found the police to be very or fairly helpful during the investigation (ONS, 2018). This strengthens the argument, that victim-survivors withdraw not because of a bad experience or something that has happened, but instead potentially due to a negative apprehension of processes to come. Several rape victim-survivors were contacted by Kent Police force, they were asked how satisfied they were with the initial police response. Of the 70 people surveyed between May and July 2019, 91.4% stated they were satisfied (Scott, 2019). This further supports the argument that a majority of victims are not withdrawing as a result of poor interaction with police. Despite this, the study did not include victim-survivors who; have requested no further police action, are unwilling to co-operate with the police investigation or have indicated that they are unwilling to be surveyed. Thus, the survey will not be entirely accurate as those victims would have not been included in the responses. If a victim is unwilling to be surveyed etc, this could be for several reasons, such as those discussed earlier as reasons for withdrawal. Thus, it can be assumed that the survey is not entirely accurate as respondents most likely to take part are those with a positive view of the police investigation.

Improvements, changes made

There has been a focus in recent history to improve the experience of women who report rape, with changes such as improving victim-survivors' care as a way to reduce the attrition rate and changes in the law to facilitate improved conviction rates. The creation of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) provided a single destination where both medical and psychological care for victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault can be found. The first SARC was established in the Greater Manchester Police area in 1986 however, was rolled out nationally in 2005 (ACPO, 2005). SARCs are comprised of mostly female staff and victim-survivors will have access to Specially Trained Officers (STOs, also called SOITs - Sexual Offences Investigative Trained officers and SOLOs - Sexual Offence Liaison Officers) to attend to rape and sexual assault cases. Though the role has remained mostly the same, there have been various names for these specialist officers that can change depending on location. Here victim-survivors can attend anonymously, to have medical examinations, counselling and therapy, among other services available to them. A forensic examination can be carried out here. Samples can be retained by the SARC if the victim-survivor does not immediately wish to report to the police (Rape Crisis, 2019; New Pathways, 2019). Therapy and counselling are provided by on-site Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA) whose role is to provide impartial, independent and tailored support to victims of sexual abuse (Home Office, 2017). Through studies into the effectiveness of SARCs, research has found the centres to be beneficial in assisting in the better preservation of physical evidence in rape cases, as well as providing an improved service and support network for victim-survivors. Victims are more willing to proceed with the case and respond with higher satisfaction if they have access to a SARC. Police have also responded positively to the implementation of the service (Eogan, McHugh and Holohan, 2013; Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005; Lovett, Regan and Kelly, 2004, pp63-67).

There have been significant changes made to the law in the last three decades, notably the implementation of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act (YJCEA, 1999), intended to improve victim-survivors experiences of the CJS, increase conviction rates for rape and serious sexual assault and re-shaping the law to reflect societies modern notions of sexual autonomy. In 1991 the House of Lords reaffirmed the position of the law that marital rape was illegal, removing 'a common-law fiction which has become anachronistic and offensive' that a husband could not be guilty of the rape of his wife (R v R, 1991). Later, in 1994, the law recognised that men could be raped under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994; Javaid, 2014). While it would seem the changes made had a positive impact on satisfaction rates with how victim-survivors were treated by police (Temkin, 1999; Harris & Grace, 1999; Lea, Lanvers & Shaw, 2003), women who knew their attacker were treated less sympathetically than those who did not. This first decade of law reform ended with the Sexual Offences review in 1999 which subsequently resulted in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. This act expanded the definition of rape to include oral penetration as well as vaginal and anal with the penis. The new legislation also added that children under thirteen years old cannot legally consent to sexual activity.

The changes to the law were welcomed by many commentators however, the new law brings its own set of challenges. Capacity to consent remains a contentious issue around sexual offences with academics and reports finding that there is little evidence to suggest the changes have done anything to make it easier to secure convictions or clarify issues with consent itself (R V. Bree, 2007; Elvin, 2008; Wallerstein, 2009). Further limitations are that rape, by its current definition, is restricted to offences that include penile penetration of another person without consent. Therefore, if a man is forced into having sex by a woman, under current legislation that woman would not be prosecuted for rape. Rather the offence 'causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent' under Section 4 would apply (SOA, 2003). This is problematic for several reasons, foremostly that 'rape' carries a life

sentence whereby 'causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent' has a maximum sentence of 10 years, provided the victim is not being penetrated (SOA, 2003). Though this law is a significant improvement, it is not above criticism. It is evident awareness about the Act and its provisions remain patchy (Horvath, Tong and Williams, 2011). The recent Stern Review (2010) has also found that although police practice slowly continues to improve, there is cause for concern around the varying inconsistent responses to victims based upon their location (Brown et al, 2010; Jordan, 2011).

While the changes made have widely been welcomed by many rape victim-survivors' groups, feminists and academics, many commentators have criticised the effectiveness of tackling the issue of attrition (Kelly, Temkin and Griffiths, 2006; Brown, 2011). The investigation of reports of rape and the experience faced by victims is constantly under scrutiny. Despite the litany of reports and reviews making recommendations to improve practice, there is no shortage of victims struggling to have their cases progress through the justice system (Jordan, 2011).

Conclusion

The largely researched and often contentious area of rape attrition and victim-survivor withdrawal always attracts attention. Rape statistics are often in the news, paraded as a failure of our criminal justice system to secure convictions for victim-survivors that have been subjected to such abuse. The vast amount of literature in this field focuses primarily on what changes can be made around policy and law to make it easier for victim-survivors to come forward. The number of rapes that go unreported is the focus of research in this area. However, past that point of reporting, looking specifically at why victims withdraw is relatively under-researched in comparison to various other points of attrition within the area of reports of rape. What research there is does not focus holistically on the perceptions of multiple professionals, which is where this study aims to fill that void. The

following three research questions were identified from analysing the available literature (1) What do professionals who deal with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim-survivor choosing to withdraw? Rape attrition is arguably largely avoidable, particularly when victim-survivors have come forward to the police to report. Often it takes immense courage for a victim-survivor to report, once reported agencies then start working in the background to build their case to take to court. However, the literature suggests that once reported victim-survivors often feel that the CJS lengthens their trauma, and as a result of ongoing investigations and CJS processes they feel they are unable to move on with their lives. It is imperative to develop a holistic understanding of professionals' views on rape victim-survivors and their reasons for withdrawal. This enables policy and practice to be informed by those who use it most and are dealing with these victim-survivors every day.

Methodology

Introduction

The study's research questions as established from analysing the available literature above were identified as (1) What do professionals who deal with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim-survivor choosing to withdraw? The study set out to develop an understanding of why rape victim-survivors withdraw from the CJS from the perspective of professionals directly involved with them; generating data to further develop an understanding of this phenomenon rather than attempting to test a theory or prove/ disprove hypotheses. In light of this, the current chapter details; the research paradigm; research design; participants; recruitment; data collection; procedure; ethics and finally, analysis of data.

Research Paradigm

It was important for the researcher to understand how their ontological and epistemological position may inform the choices they make and the effect this could have on the study. Various academics have advocated for a sound understanding of ontological and epistemological positions before conducting research as they underpin the assumptions individuals hold about reality and knowledge (Lowndes, Marsh and Stoker, 2017). Ontology refers to the philosophy of existence and the assumptions and beliefs that we hold with regard to the nature of being and existence (Hurtado and Nudler, 2012). Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge and the nature of the relationship between the inquirer and the known (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). These philosophical beliefs are what inform many different research paradigms and philosophies. The researcher holds the philosophical view of interpretivism, this is what informed their ontological and epistemological views and subsequently influenced their research. This next section will explain and critique various paradigms before concluding why the researcher came to the view that interpretivism was the most appropriate for the aims of this study.

Positivism is one such paradigm that is arguably the most historically established and has been the standard philosophical view of natural science (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.21). Although, it has been acknowledged that positivist research philosophy is difficult to define in a succinct manner due to the differences in settings in which positivism is used by researchers. Positivist ontology states that the world is external and objective (Carson et al., 2001). Thus, positivism is based upon the concept that direct experience is the only way to gain knowledge on the truth. This moves onto the epistemological view of positivism which states only factual knowledge gained through direct experience or observation, with theoretical entities rejected, is credible (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.21). Thus, when conducting research, the positivist paradigm takes a controlled, strict and

procedural approach, following the notion that science becomes credible when more scientists researching the same bit of reality come to the same conclusions (Bogen, 2017; Ryan, 2018). A heavy reliance on quantitative methods is more common when based upon a positivist paradigm. Positivist epistemology holds the belief that due to the minimal interaction between researchers and research participants, researchers themselves are therefore independent of the research they are conducting and thus, research can be purely objective (Wilson, 2010). This is important in remaining neutral whilst undertaking the study, enabling researchers to make clear distinctions between reason and feeling (Carson et al., 2001). Positivist epistemology believes that time and context free generalizations are possible because human actions can be explained as a result of real causes that temporarily precedes their behaviour. This is facilitated by the researcher and research subjects remaining independent of one another (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Positivist researchers seek objectivity and use consistently rational and logical approaches to research, focusing mainly on quantitative data, although a range of data can be analysed.

However, the positivism paradigm is not without its criticisms. Positivism relies on direct experience as one of the main sources of gaining factual knowledge. However, a wide range of basic and important concepts such as cause, time and space are not based on experience. Furthermore, there are doubts from various academics and observers who claim that direct experience is not a sound basis for scientific knowledge (Blaikie, 2007, p.183; Bogan, 2017). In addition, positivism maintains that purely objective knowledge is obtainable through researchers remaining independent and taking structured and controlled approaches to research. However, studies have shown that what observers see is not solely determined by the characteristics of the thing being observed. Instead, the perspective of the researcher can have an influence over the thing observed, thus facts and values cannot be separated (Davydova and Sharrock, 2003; Jacobs, 2013; Reeves, 2016; Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.21). Furthermore, when looking to investigate an understanding of why rape

victim-survivors withdraw, the researcher deemed that a controlled, strict and procedural approach was perhaps not the best method for developing that understanding. Particularly when reasons for rape withdrawal have been deemed complex and inter-related (Waxman, 2019). Thus, other paradigms more fitting to exploring in-depth phenomena with a focus on increasing understanding were deemed more appropriate by the researcher.

Stepping away from the notion of 'the truth' another paradigm considered was that of pragmatism. Pragmatism as a research paradigm refuses to get involved in contentious metaphysical concepts such as truth and reality (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019) and thus, does not have an established ontological position much like other paradigms. Pragmatism as a paradigm rejects the idea that research using a single scientific method can access truths regarding the real world. Instead, it advocates that the focus of research should be on 'what works' rather than what might be considered absolutely and objectively 'true' or 'real' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Feilzer, 2009; Frey, 2018). Pragmatist epistemology states that knowledge is always based on experience. A person's perceptions of the world are influenced by their social experiences thus, all knowledge is social knowledge (Morgan 2014). Pragmatism advocates for a mixed-method approach to research promoting the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. A pragmatic approach is one of finding a middle ground between philosophical dogmatism and scepticism, it advocates getting on with the research instead of philosophising (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.28-30). The aims of a pragmatic researcher are to reconfigure problems in order to move inquiry in unanticipated directions (Siegesmund, 2019). Pragmatism is very similar to constructivism, discussed in the next section, in that it often lacks presuppositions of the knowledge to be achieved (Siegesmund, 2019).

However, pragmatism with its emphasis on multi-strategy research raises various difficulties and criticisms. Design strategies that are used traditionally by researchers that favour quantitative

methods differ greatly from those in qualitative research. This can cause problems when integrating findings from the two sets of methods (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.30). The recent move towards favouring multi-strategy research requires researchers to be more methodologically multilingual than ever before. Another criticism of pragmatism is that often pragmatists have a blinkered worldview due to their reluctance to involve themselves with the debate around truth and reality, pragmatism thus lacks the insight that ontology and theology can offer (Stemhagen and Waddington, 2011). The flexibility that pragmatism provides in its investigative techniques is something required when conducting research into rape victim-survivors reasons for withdrawal. However, pragmatism's lack of an ontological position and presuppositions of the knowledge to be achieved when conducting was an issue for the researcher in this study (Siegesmund, 2019).

As noted, another paradigm that in some ways resembles pragmatism is that of constructivism. Constructivism and interpretivism are not as clearly defined or established as their positivist counterpart. There is some argument as to what exactly constructivism and interpretivism are. Some argue that constructivism is a paradigm and interpretivism is a theoretical perspective (Gray, 2004), others argue that the terms are much the same and are frequently used as synonyms of one another (Creswell, 2003, p. 3-8). From the research observed it is clear there is no definite and established distinction between the terms. Thus, they will be used interchangeably throughout this section and will be defined below. Constructivist/ interpretivist ontology rejects the positivist notion that there is a single reality that exists independent of our senses. Instead, it suggests that reality is constructed through human interactions thus, reality is multiple and relative (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The ontological belief of interpretivism is that there is no direct access to the real world and no single external reality (Lincoln and Guba, 2006). It further argues that individuals create meaning of the world through their interactions with one another and the environment (Flick, 2018, p.36). Interpretivists argue that truth and reality are created, not discovered (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). Therefore, the

epistemological view of interpretivism is that knowledge, scientific knowledge, is constructed by scientists and not discovered from the world. Knowledge is based on the abstract descriptions of meanings, formed of human experiences. Thus, knowledge is a human product that is socially constructed (Carson et al., 2001, p.5) and perceived, as opposed to the positivist view that knowledge is objectively determined (Hirschman, 1985, Berger and Luckman, 1967, p.3).

Interpretivist research avoids rigid structural frameworks like that commonly found in positivist research, instead, a more flexible approach is preferred (Carson et al., 2001). This allows research to be more receptive to capturing meanings in human interaction (Black, 2006). Interpretivist philosophy requires social phenomena to be understood through the eyes of participants rather than the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007, p.21; Given, 2008). This emphasises the understanding of interpretations of individuals about the social phenomena they interact with (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). Interpretivist researchers suggest that the researcher and reality are inseparable. Therefore, the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs and biases will affect the study conducted and subsequently the findings uncovered. Thus, as a researcher plays a role within the research, they can never be fully removed from the research and subsequently research is never fully objective. It argues where there are different well-argued interpretations, one interpretation is not "correct". Instead, the existence of multiple "knowledges" is accepted. The goal of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour and phenomena. For an interpretivist researcher, it is important to understand that motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000). Despite the aim of interpretivist research often centred around a subjective understanding of social phenomena, the subjectivity that the paradigm bases itself upon can be its own limitation.

A further limitation of the interpretivist paradigm is that the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of complex phenomena in context, rather than making generalisations of results to other people in different contexts, leads to gaps in verifying the validity of its research outcomes using scientific methods (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This criticism of lacking in reliability comes from the subjective nature of the interpretivist paradigm. Similar criticism of interpretivism is its ontological view which is very subjective based (Mack, 2010). For this reason, research outcomes are undoubtedly affected by the researcher's own interpretations, belief system and biases. While this is a criticism of the paradigm, it is one that is accepted as part of the interpretivist philosophical view. The argument is made by interpretivists that the researcher and research are inseparable and thus, no research can truly be objective.

While interpretivism has its criticisms, shown through both the ontological and epistemological perspectives, the researcher found interpretivism to be a more fitting paradigm when looking to understand complex social phenomena. The issue of victim-survivor rape withdrawal is a complex, even Kaleidoscopic (see literature review), issue requiring a holistic understanding. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm; with its epistemological focus around that of capturing meanings in human interaction through the eyes of the individuals about the social phenomena they interact with, would be most effective in understanding said phenomena. As stated in the literature review, recent studies into victim-survivor withdrawal fail to speak to victims about their experiences. Instead, studies such as Baird (2019) analysed data sets from an Essex Rape and Sexual Abuse Partnership. Whilst the current study does not address this gap, it provides a holistic picture of professionals' views who are directly involved with victim-survivors.

In conclusion, it is important to understand the complex relationship between ontology and epistemology and their impact on research design. Through exploring these philosophical

perspectives, it is evident that the choice of research design is deeply intertwined with one's ontological and epistemological stance (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Taking into account this understanding, a qualitative research design method has been chosen as the most appropriate for this study. This decision is supported by the belief that qualitative research offers a comprehensive exploration of complex phenomena, focusing on subjective experiences, multiple perspectives, and contextual understanding (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). It is the researcher's belief that by utilising a qualitative approach, the research can capture the depth of human experiences, providing valuable insights that would have been challenging to obtain through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative research design allows for an in-depth understanding of the subjective aspects of reality, providing a platform for exploring diverse perspectives and uncovering underlying meanings and interpretations (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This methodological choice aligns with an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the significance of understanding individuals' lived experiences and their construction of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Moreover, a qualitative research design enables the exploration of contextual factors, enabling the researcher to consider social, cultural, and historical dimensions that could shape participants' experiences and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam, 2009). This aligns with the aim of this study, which sought to gain a deep understanding of the complex issue of professional's perspective on female rape victim-survivor withdrawal. Furthermore, qualitative research design emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and acknowledges the influence of the researcher's subjectivity on the research process and outcomes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam, 2009). By being aware of their own biases and preconceptions, researchers can actively engage in critical self-reflection, contributing trustworthiness of the research (Creswell, 2014). This self-awareness and reflexivity were vital aspects of this study, as they allowed the researcher to navigate the complex phenomena and minimize potential biases in interpreting the findings (Merriam, 2009).

The choice of the qualitative research design method for this thesis was informed by the deep understanding of the interplay between ontology, epistemology, and research design. This methodological decision aligns with the belief that qualitative research enables a comprehensive exploration of complex phenomena, embracing subjective experiences, multiple perspectives, and contextual understanding. By employing qualitative methods, this research has been able to capture the depth and richness of human experiences, providing valuable insights that would have been challenging to obtain through quantitative approaches alone.

Research Design

Qualitative methods provide an opportunity to explore why victim-survivors withdraw without having set pre-conceptions (Malterud, 2001). Qualitative research is holistic, inductive, and naturalistic (Patton, 1980). Thus, research is primarily explorative. It is used to develop reasons, opinions, and motivations of issues. It broadens our understanding of topics and provides insights into a particular area. It is understood that reasons for withdrawal are often complex and interrelated; thus, a qualitative research approach is the most effective at understanding this complex phenomenon. Qualitative research is supported by the constructivist philosophy which portrays the world where reality is socially created by the participants in social settings (Glesne, 2014). Qualitative research enables the interpretation of how participants construct the world around them in social settings, through dealing with multiple ideas and realities that are complex (Business Bliss Consultants, 2018). This style of research provides participants the space and ability to discuss their perceptions of their experiences relating to victim-survivor withdrawal.

Although quantitative research has its benefits, it was not the best fit for the focus of this study because the goal was to understand the experiences of rape victim-survivors (Business Bliss Consultants, 2018). Quantitative research often focuses on the use of hypotheses to be tested during research. Often, quantitative research uses large sample sizes in order to make generalisations. Research is highly structured, and the focus is to produce studies that are high in validity and can be repeated (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.18-21). Thus, it is deterministic, with research sometimes focusing on identifying causal relationships (Brannen, 2017). This would not be the best method to approach this study's aims. It would be too simplistic to reduce the complex reasons behind reasons for withdrawal. A quantitative study focused on numbers and variables would be void of emotions and back stories which would not provide space for this group to share their experiences (Business Bliss Consultants, 2018).

More specifically, a phenomenological study design was used for this study as the aim was to understand the subjective experiences of why rape victim-survivors withdraw, through the lens of the professionals directly working with them. Phenomenology is best understood as a style of philosophising that seeks to describe phenomena in whatever manner it appears to the person experiencing the situation. It is the study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Moran, 2002, p.1-6). It is essential for scholars to learn from the experiences of others as this is considered the foundational premise of research (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019). Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that facilitates learning from the subjective experiences of individuals and involves the detailed study of a subject. A holistic understanding of the experiences of several individuals can offer new insights into a particular lived phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007).

A case study was also considered as a possible methodology for this study but was found not to be the best fit for achieving the study's aims. Case studies focus on issues explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). Case studies are explored in depth, over time and using a wide array of sources of information to provide case-based themes (Business Bliss Consultants, 2018; Creswell et al., 2007; Padgett, 2008). Phenomenology was chosen over a case study because the focus was the lived experience of a number of different professionals, in order to provide a holistic understanding of one phenomenon. Furthermore, the use of a case study requires an in-depth investigation into events and participants. This would not have been the most appropriate method to use when participants would have had to either present personal information of victim-survivors or would have been followed during a case unfolding. It was important that the research was conducted in a way that made participants feel most at ease. Therefore, a phenomenological design was deemed more suitable.

An ethnographic approach to research would normally provide very rich qualitative data, with many researchers arguing participant observation is the most favoured research method (Gobo, 2008, p.2-15). Ethnography is primarily the observation of participants in their real-life environment. This is a qualitative method popularised by anthropology but used in many other social science research environments (Hill, 1993). Ethnography with its focus on the observation of participants would not have worked in this instance. While the observation of participants has its benefits, the ethics of observing professionals directly dealing with victim-survivors at all stages, ensuring that the withdrawal stage is captured, could raise ethical issues. Further, it would not be feasible in the timeline of an MSc project. Furthermore, this study focuses on perception and interpretation, aiming to understand the reasons behind why victim-survivors withdraw.

Despite the need to utilise a phenomenological design, employing qualitative methods, in general, does have its limitations. Qualitative methods will provide an in-depth approach to the research area, enabling the phenomena to be understood holistically. However, the use of such methods is often criticized as biased, small-scale, anecdotal, and/or lacking rigor (Anderson, 2010). With research being conducted using a small sample size, the results, therefore, lack generalisability. Thus, qualitative methods generate large amounts of in-depth information about a small number of settings. Furthermore, one of the biggest critiques of qualitative data is its openness to interpretation and lack of reproducibility. Research is personal to the researcher and research will undoubtedly suffer bias. Due to differing beliefs and experiences held by researchers, there is no guarantee that a different researcher would not come to radically different conclusions when analysing qualitative data (Mays and Pope, 1995). However, small sample sizes allow for a greater in-depth exploration of a given phenomenon. Thus, although the data collected cannot be generalised, a greater understanding of the topic is necessary to facilitate improvements in these areas, in line with the current research. Transparency of research methods is key in improving the legitimacy of such research, which the research aimed to do throughout the following sections.

Participants

The study utilised a purposive sampling method. This was crucial in the ability to select participants who were professionals directly involved with victim-survivors of rape during their criminal justice journey, as the aim of the study was to learn from their experiences. The study looked to focus on ISVAs, Intermediaries, Counsellors and SOIT Officers. These professionals were selected based on what was available as well as providing a good cross-section of where victim-survivors might interact with professionals during and outside of the CJS. Other methods of sampling would not have been able to facilitate the recruitment of relevant and eligible participants to the study (Lavrakas, 2008).

The focus of the study was on adult rape and not child rape, thus professionals were limited to those dealing with victim-survivors who were 18 years old or above at the time of the offence. If participants dealt with both child and adult victim-survivors, they were asked to focus on the experiences they have had with adult victims only. Furthermore, the study wanted to be able to give a contemporary outlook on the current withdrawal phenomena therefore, professionals had to be currently working with rape victim-survivors. The reasoning in relation to why these professionals were chosen is as follows: the aim of the study was to capture a holistic view of withdrawal and to best answer the three research questions (1) What do professionals that deal with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim-survivor choosing to withdraw? Hence, it was important to include those directly involved with victim-survivors through different channels. Focusing on specially trained officers only, for example, would not have achieved the aim.

The composition of professionals was three ISVAs, three counsellors, three intermediaries and three SOITs. An ISVA is crucial in providing specialist practical and emotional support to victim-survivors of sexual abuse since they were introduced in 2005 (HOME Office, 2017). They are independent, meaning they are there solely to provide support to a victim-survivor and not push them to support a CJS outcome. However, due to the practical nature of their multi-agency support, their role is expected to lessen victim-survivors reluctance to engage with the CJS (Robinson, 2009). A victim can seek the support of an ISVA regardless of whether they have reported it to the police or not (Home Office, 2017). A victim-survivor can refer themselves to the ISVA service at any point after the offence with some victims referring themselves for historical offences. Thus, ISVAs can be connected with a victim-survivor at any point before, during and after a CJS outcome. ISVAs tend to work closely with police forces who often refer victim-survivors to ISVAs after a sexual offence crime has been reported to

them. ISVAs can point victim-survivors to other charities, support groups as well as counsellors to support them. ISVAs can also liaise with the police to provide victim-survivors with case updates, in the event that the victim-survivor has reported to the police. This first group of participants is one that most victim-survivors will have contact with, even those victim-survivors that have not always reported to the police. The ISVAs in this study had worked for between 18 months to 6 years. It takes 6 months to qualify for the role and all ISVAs receive a certificate to show they have received specialist training.

The second group of participants were Counsellors. Counsellors primarily work confidentially with their clients. Counsellors are there to listen and support victim-survivors without judgement. The role of a counsellor is to provide a way for victim-survivors to live with their trauma, using various strategies they provide victim-survivors with the tools to cope in dealing with what they have experienced (NHS, 2020). While a victim-survivor is free to access counselling at any time, the counsellors used in this study only offered their services to victim-survivors who are not presently involved in the CJS. This is because there were concerns regarding being called to court to testify. The organisation that these counsellors worked for were conscious of the strain and responsibility that can be put upon a counsellor who may have to go to court. Thus, generally, the organisation would work solely with victim-survivors who had already seen a CJS outcome. Counsellors can be crucial in ensuring victim-survivors have the tools they need to move on with their lives after such traumatic events. Counsellors are unbiased, their purpose is to ensure they are listening to the victim and offering practical and emotional support. The counsellors all worked with an organisation that would typically hold around eight sessions for a victim-survivor although accepted that sometimes this can be extended to include more sessions. Each counsellor would have a caseload of around ten to twelve victim-survivors at any one time. The counsellors in this study had worked in the role for between six

to seven years. The training to become a counsellor requires 100 hours of placement practice as part of a diploma with a recognised organisation to become qualified.

Intermediaries were the third group of participants in this study. The witness intermediary scheme was first piloted in 2004, brought about by the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 and rolled out as a national service in 2008. The intermediary role was brought about as a special measure under the YJCEA with the aim to assist vulnerable victim-survivors and witnesses in giving evidence. Intermediaries are self-employed communication specialists with the aim of assisting the victim-survivors in achieving best evidence (MOJ, 2020b). They assist the victim survivor in understanding questions put to them as well as the responses given (Cooper, 2011; Cooper and Mattison 2019). Intermediaries can assist the police when they wish to interview victim-survivors about the offence that occurred, they are also primarily used within courts when a victim-survivor undergoes cross-examination. Intermediaries are neutral and impartial, their responsibility is for the proper functioning of the judicial system (Cooper, 2016). Therefore, an intermediary can only be accessed by someone that is going through the CJS. Thus, as not all victim-survivors report to the police and will be considered vulnerable and therefore entitled to this special measure, not all victim-survivors will have experience with an intermediary. All the intermediaries involved in this study were based in London and the South-East of England. The intermediaries in this study had worked in the role for between five to ten years, all of which had previous speech and language backgrounds previously. Unlike other participants, intermediaries all had previous experiences within their field, as therapists and working with vulnerable people. This group of participants had the most combined experience both in their intermediary roles and previously in their field than any other group of participants that took part in this study. The intermediaries in this study all covered London and the South East of England in their roles.

SOITs comprised the final group of participants interviewed as part of this study. SOITs were introduced in the early 1990s in response to growing concern about the treatment of victim-survivors of rape at the hands of police forces (McMillan, 2014). Often a SOIT police officer is the first responder when a victim-survivor reports a rape. They are usually the first to respond to investigate the crime and interview the victim-survivor. They will act as the main point of contact for the victim-survivor within the police force. They will update the victim-survivor with the progress of the case and support right from reporting through to going to court. It is the duty of a SOIT officer to support a victim regardless of whether they wish to pursue a CJS outcome or not. They have also been referred to as Sexual Offence Liaison Officers (SOLOs) and Specially Trained Officers (STOs) (College of Policing, 2021). SOITs and ISVAs often work alongside one another leading to a more collaborative multi-agency approach that better supports victim-survivors through the CJS process. Only victim-survivors that have reported to the police will have contact with a SOIT. SOITs included in this study were all from one South East England police force. The SOITs interviewed as part of this study had all worked for around 3 years. They had all had previous experience working with victim-survivors in various capacities before deciding to become a SOIT officer.

Recruitment of all professionals was achieved through an identified person within each organisation, who asked the professionals if they wanted to take part in the study. That identified person would then forward the professionals' contact details to the researcher. The researcher would then reach out to the interested participants and forward the consent form and participant information sheet for the study. Once the eligible participant had read and understood the forms the researcher would then arrange a convenient time for them to conduct the interview. Participants were all female and aged between 31 and 83 years old with an average age of 54. All participants worked and lived in London or the South-East of England. Other variables were not collected as the aim of this study was not to explore differences based on demographic characteristics.

There are clear limitations to the study as a result of both the size and geographic locations of the participants. As described above, twelve participants took part in this study in total. This was agreed upon as being an achievable number for obtaining and interviewing considering the time constraints of the study. Furthermore, the participants interviewed, all worked within the South-East, thus data obtained cannot be generalised to the rest of the UK. However, the aim of the study was to gain an in-depth insight into this phenomenon which a small sample size can provide. Furthermore, when deciding 'how many' interviews are enough, there is no common consensus, and it depends on what the study is aiming to achieve. However, academics advise graduate students to sample between 5 and 60, with 30 being the mean; and others suggest that a good sample is 20 for an M.A. thesis (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Dworkin, 2012). However, for phenomenological studies participant sizes are expected to be smaller with six being the minimum and 10 being a good number to ensure adequate data without saturation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 1998). It is important to understand there is no magic number when it comes to 'how many' participants are enough. Instead, considering the aim of the study was to provide a contemporary depth of knowledge around why rape victim-survivors withdraw, the sample size is sufficient for the aims, especially due to the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to analyse the data, as will be explained later.

Recruitment

Recruitment of all participants was done through an identified person within each organisation. The researcher provided each organisation with eligibility criteria. The use of a senior professional within each organisation to ask professionals whether they wish to take part may have made the participants feel as though they could not say no. However, the researcher made it clear to the identified person within each organisation that it is not compulsory for participants to take part and that no one will be made aware of whether they took part in the study or not. Eligible participants must be approached and asked if they would like to participate and provided with a participant information sheet, but at

no time must they feel like they must or that they cannot refuse (Lavrakas, 2008). The right to refuse to take part and to be free from coercion is good practice and ensures this study is ethical (Bull and Lindegger, 2011).

Procedure

Interviews were conducted via a telephone call. This was deemed to be the easiest way to contact participants and given the Covid-19 pandemic, was the only way research could continue in accordance with Government and University research guidelines. To ensure all participants were comfortable they were given the choice to have their interview conducted via video call or telephone, all preferred a telephone call. Interviews lasted for a minimum of 30 minutes however, due to the semi-structured nature and the basis around free recall, most lasted longer. 30 minutes was established as the minimum time, based on research which suggested appropriate detail could only be achieved after at least such time (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

As discussed above regarding recruitment, a point of contact within each organisation asked eligible participants whether they would be willing to take part in the study. Then with the eligible participants' consent, their email address was passed onto the researcher. The researcher contacted eligible participants via email to send and receive completed consent forms and arrange a convenient time for participants to be interviewed. As discussed earlier, participants could choose whether to be interviewed via telephone or video which would last between 30 and 60 minutes. The longest interview lasted 56:49 and the shortest interview lasted 28:13 with the average length at 41:43. The researcher decided to give participants the choice of deciding how they were interviewed to give them some control and make them feel more comfortable. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded of their rights to withdraw at any stage, to refuse to answer any question and to request a transcript of the interview upon completion. As stated previously, the interviews were semi-

structured to allow for participant-free recall. However, to refrain from digressing too much from the topic being discussed, the researcher utilised some previously prepared questions. At the end of the interview, the researcher used a winding down method to ensure the interview did not end abruptly. Participants were debriefed about the study verbally at the end. Support in the form of support organisations' contact details was offered if the participant so wished.

Ethics

Several ethical considerations had to be evaluated to ensure that the research was worthwhile, and that value of the study would outweigh the risk of harm to participants (Economic and Social Research Council, 2015; CCCU, 2015; Appendix 4). No individuals were interviewed who would be unable to give consent due to their mental capacity or other circumstances (YJCEA, 1999). It was the researcher's focus to ensure that all participants would feel as comfortable as possible during the interview. When organisations made initial contact with the eligible participants they were told about the study and asked if they would like further information, in the form of a participant information sheet. Extra care was taken to ensure that all information on the information sheet and consent form is truly understood by the participants and that their rights were clear to them. It was also important that the researcher emphasised to participants that they do not have to take part because their superior asked them to, they must want to take part freely themselves. When participants were asked if they were interested in taking part, they could then choose to contact the researcher themselves or have the relevant organisation pass the participants' details to the researcher to initiate contact. It was important to make potential participants aware that the interview conducted would not be about specific individuals or cases, this is not a part of the discussions and will also be made clear.

The legal basis for data collection and processing under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was in the public interest. However, it was important to the research that all participants also

provided informed consent. Participants were informed of the purposes of the study via an information sheet (Appendix 2) in writing prior to this but were reminded again at the start of their interview. Participants were informed of key issues surrounding 1) the aims of the study 2) procedure 3) their rights (including anonymity, confidentiality, and right to withdraw). Participants had the opportunity to ask questions prior to gaining their informed consent to ensure they were making a decision in their own best interests. Participants were also asked to consent to the interview being recorded and the procedure surrounding the recording. Participants were reminded that the audio recording would be anonymised into a transcription as soon as practicable. The audio recording was subsequently deleted immediately after transcribing to ensure anonymity. To ensure that participants felt comfortable the researcher allocated time at the start of the interview for light conversation before discussing the topic. This also gave the researcher time to notify the participants of their rights to withdraw at any stage (Edwards, 2005), that the participant can take a break at any stage and that they may refuse to answer uncomfortable questions. Participants were reminded they could request a copy of their transcribed interview once it had been completed. It was also ensured that the researcher spent time with the participants after the study to ensure they have the opportunity to debrief and support organisation contact details were readily available if necessary.

Analysis of Data

Qualitative data can often be challenging to interpret and analyse in comparison to its quantitative counterpart (Robson and McCartan, 2016). As discussed above, data were transcribed verbatim for all the interviews. This was done by the researcher himself, and although time-consuming, repeatedly listening to the data enabled the researcher to identify recurring responses from different participants. To try and save time typing the researcher played the audio recording into the Microsoft Office dictate button. This is done locally and therefore, does not require any data or information to be passed to another company or online. The researcher oversaw the dictation via the Microsoft Office

software to ensure its accuracy and could make amendments where necessary. After the transcriptions were completed, they were once again listened through from start to finish to confirm accuracy; participants that requested their transcriptions had them sent to them before the audio recording was deleted to ensure anonymity. Transcriptions were numbered to ensure participants could not be identified. Numbers 1-3 were ISVAs, 4-6 were Counsellors, 7-9 were Intermediaries and 10-12 were SOITs. After transcriptions were completed, analysis was conducted without the use of any software. Whilst the use of software such as NVivo is becoming a popular option, considering the number of interviews and researcher's preference, analysis was done within Microsoft Word documents themselves through annotations, comments, and similar.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the main tool used by the researcher to break down the large amounts of data produced by the semi-structured interviews into more manageable chunks. IPA is a qualitative participant-oriented research method that produces rich qualitative data. It is an analysis strategy becoming increasingly popular and widely used within qualitative research, particularly within phenomenological research designs (Smith 2006). IPA was first proposed by Jordan Smith (Smith, 1996) and has two primary aims: to look in detail at how someone makes sense of life experience and to give a detailed interpretation of the account to understand the experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2008). IPA allows participants to share their lived experiences in their own words without distortion, the main objective is to explore in depth the experiences that participants have faced (Alase, 2017). Due to the detailed and in-depth nature of IPA research, sample sizes are often not very large, with three to ten participants being the typical sample size (Clarke, 2010 pp56-57; Noon, 2018). Large sample sizes would mean an oversaturation of data and would not provide the detail that IPA requires. Though a relatively new concept IPA is proven as a useful tool when looking at understanding topics which are complex and ambiguous (Smith and Osborne, 2015).

The researcher was already familiarised with the data due to personally transcribing the interviews. All transcriptions were done in Microsoft Word and the analysis was broken down in each of the transcriptions using annotations within the document. During the course of transcribing parts of the transcriptions were flagged as areas of importance to come back to later. When coming back through the response's sentences and words of particular importance were labelled with a code to identify them as areas of potential interest with each code used relating to a particular response. However, the researcher noted that often it was also about what was not said that may underpin reasons for victim-survivor withdrawal -this will be discussed later in the findings. IPA is a method of analysis that acknowledges the researcher's role and therefore allows for more interpretive analysis as opposed to descriptive. After transcription, the interviews were printed and manually coded. Each transcript was meticulously read multiple times to grasp the nuances of the participants' experiences. Significant statements and phrases were highlighted and categorized into initial codes, which captured the essential aspects of the professionals' perspectives. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, reflecting the underlying patterns and meanings within the data. Certain themes then started to emerge which were given a number, this enabled the researcher to later compare across participants the themes that emerged. IPA allows for the amalgamation of useful techniques; it was important to the researcher to use an analysis that was ideographically centred. This meant that particular care can be given to the analysis of each case, offering detailed and nuanced analysis, valuing each case on its own merits before moving to the general cross-case analysis for convergence and divergence between cases (Tuffour, 2017). This was chosen as the most effective tool in analysing different individual experiences and the common themes shared by participants within the phenomena of professionals' perceptions of rape victim/survivor withdrawal.

Researcher Reflections

The researcher is an academic researcher; therefore, they are an outsider-outsider. They share no common experience with any of the participants or the phenomena which are being researched. The research itself underwent quite a number of changes, adapting to gatekeeping issues as well as the coronavirus outbreak in 2020 which kickstarted the challenges and changes this research went through. As a result of a national lockdown in March 2020, face-to-face interviews were no longer permissible. Therefore, the research was adapted to telephone interviews as this was the most General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant as decided by the university. Thus, all participants in this study were interviewed over the phone. The introduction of the new restrictions in March 2020 brought about further challenges with participant recruitment, organisations that had previously shown support and interest in taking part in the study decided they no longer had resources they could allocate. This meant that for some time, with the university's ethical approval, recruitment of participants was attempted through social media, this also included posting in a number of rape support groups. It was the aim of this research to include the voice of the victim-survivors however, due to time constraints, gatekeeping issues and lack of responses this was not available. Future academic research would benefit from having in-depth qualitative analysis from the victim-survivors perspective. A survey was created to make taking part in the study easier for this demographic of participants however no responses were received. After some easing of restrictions organisations that work with victim-survivors started responding again and showing interest in taking part. Eventually, participants started contacting back to take part in the study through the organisations that they worked for. All organisations that we reached out to were based in London or the South East of England.

If this study were to be conducted again it would be extremely beneficial to also include the voice of the victim-survivor. However, due to the time constraints on the MSc as well as difficulties with

participant recruitment as a result of a global pandemic, this was not feasible. Victim-survivors of rape, particularly those that have withdrawn from the CJS are incredibly difficult to seek out, though their input would be insightful. It was also my intention to include Victim Support in this study, however, due to gatekeeping and access issues, this was not available. Despite the various obstacles this research faced, 12 participants from 4 organisations that work with victim-survivors were recruited and interviewed. Their experiences with female victim-survivors of rape were analysed to contribute to understanding why victim-survivors withdraw from a professional perspective and to further understand what can be done to combat victim-survivor withdrawal.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This study set out to gain a deeper understanding of the professionals' perspective on female rape victim-survivor withdrawal. This is a complex and often interrelated issue that affects tens of thousands of women every year. Often a victim-survivor will come into contact with various professionals as they traverse their way through the CJS, and each will have their own role and aims. For some professionals, their main focus will be to assist the victim in dealing with the incident, for others, the focus will be on ensuring their case is progressed through the CJS, for many their role will be to support the victim in both of these matters and many more. Thus, it is crucial that a study looking to understand the phenomenon of female rape-victim withdrawal speaks to a breadth of professionals that deal with these victim-survivors in various capacities, the views, and professional experiences of which will be discussed below. As stated in the methodology section, 12 participants from four different organisations were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique. IPA was used to analyse the interviews in this study, this was deemed the most appropriate in achieving the study's aims and allows the researcher to analyse not just what was said but to interpret from participants' responses too. IPA would give the researcher the tools to analyse in depth the responses the

participants gave and also what was not said during the interview. This method of analysis also allowed the researcher to identify themes across the participant responses and compare them between the different organisations. This findings section will initially discuss the overarching themes prevalent across all professional types before then looking more directly at the themes shared by the professionals within the same role. One main theme found was the apprehension of the victim-survivor. This will be split down into two sub-themes consisting of perceptions of the victim-survivor, through what has been said to the professionals, and also, the perceptions of the professionals themselves. The other themes found were the lengthy criminal justice process, loss of control, just not strong enough, the media and finally, won't support an investigation. This will then lead to agency-specific themes, issues the groups of professionals in the same organisation shared but were not voiced by other agencies. Each theme will be identified and explained before quotes are provided to show where these themes were suggested by the participants. Each theme will then be discussed and summarised before moving on to the next theme. It is important to note that the themes, although discussed separately are not mutually exclusive. There will be some overlap as they all impact one another. It must be noted that questions 1-5 from the interview questions were not used within the analysis as the aim of the study was to find common themes amongst professionals on their perceptions of why victim-survivors withdraw. Questions 1-5 would provide specific information on the professionals' background and demographic, something that was not being explored as part of this study.

Theme one: Apprehension of victim-survivor

Factors that influence a victim-survivors choice to withdraw can be separated into two main categories, systemic factors, and individual factors. Whilst there was a clear consensus from all professionals interviewed that multiple factors were at play when influencing a victim-survivors likelihood to withdraw, factors that had not yet happened were of the biggest concern and influence

leading to withdrawal. Participant 1 described victim-survivors as feeling 'spooked' when considering the process of continuing through the CJS. Therefore, withdrawal was most likely to happen not as a result of a poor experience with a practitioner or something unsatisfactory that happened but rather due to an apprehension of something yet to come or happen such as the CJS process, or other external reasons for instance the effect it would have on their life and that of friends and family. Thus, if the victim-survivor had an apprehension of what was yet to come, this would be a much greater driving factor and determinant of withdrawal than a bad experience of something that had already happened. This suggests that while the ongoing updating of policy and practice can help in promoting case progression it will not necessarily influence the withdrawal rate of victim-survivors of rape. It is far more important in this case that the victim is supported by professionals specially trained to deal with rape victim-survivors, professionals that can assist the victim-survivor with managing these apprehensions and assisting them in overcoming them and thus continuing with the case rather than opting to withdraw. While this apprehension of future events was a theme suggested by all professionals, they all had differing opinions on why this may be, with professionals in the same role mostly suggesting the same reason but differing slightly from the rest of the professionals in other roles. The apprehension that victim-survivors face can be for several different reasons and will be discussed in the next paragraph below.

Subtheme: Professionals View Systemic or Individual

The theme of apprehension leading to victim-survivor withdrawal was suggested by all participants that took part however, depending on their role they gave different reasons for this with those in the same role suggesting similar reasons. When asked what they believed to be the main reason behind victim survivor withdrawal participants 1 to 3 suggested it was due to the lengthy criminal justice process.

'The time frame, absolutely. How long it takes from report if the case were to go to court it, it's just too long. Absolutely too long. And I think that realisation like I've just touched on before. This is going to be hanging over them for this time because two years ago some cases that have been going on for five or six years. And obviously victims can't be. They can't kind of process it properly because they know that the back of their mind, they're still prepping themselves to go to court. So, as much as they can kind of put into the back of their mind. It's just constantly prevented them from moving forward all the while they're still in this process' (Participant 1).

This view seems to state the lengthy process is more of a systemic issue. The process is too long and therefore prevents a person from moving on with their lives. The victim-survivor has prepared herself for the possibility of going to court and is unable to move past the event until some form of resolution is met. Participants 4 to 6 suggested that the CJS leaves victims feeling they have or will lose control stating that,

'the loss of control, that whole acting against their will. I think at times, maybe, they can feel the process, becomes, it kind of takes over if you like. Maybe I'm not expressing this very well, but it kind of affirms their lack of control. So, they've reported something and then there's a whole set of consequences and actions that might flow from that but maybe they didn't fully anticipate or understand.' (Participant 5).

Again, the idea that the process itself takes over suggests a systemic issue in the way processes leave victim-survivors feeling they must withdraw. Taking away control from a victim-survivor that feels as though the offence has already been done this, will only lead to further feelings of re-victimisation and dissatisfaction with the criminal justice process. However, participants 7 through 9 were slightly less consistent in their response to the main question regarding withdrawal with participants 7 and 8 choosing to state that individual factors are more likely to affect withdrawal. Factors such as anxiety,

mental health and other personal issues. However, participant 9's response fell more in line with the ISVAs (participants 1 through 3) and stated,

'I mean there is gonna be individual factors of course and systemic factors are the thing that's coming up a lot with the people I work with is timetabling, it seems to be the main thing that's coming up, cases being put off and difficulties with getting dates and the incredibly long wait between ABE and cases. That would be the main systemic problem' (Participant 9).

Furthermore, Participant 9 continues to suggest individual factors also influence whether a victim-survivor withdraws,

'in terms of individual issues, I think, I think that can relate to other issues of social disadvantage and lack of appropriate provisions generally within sort of systems outside of the criminal justice system. For example, housing, having unstable housing, and having to move out of area, the pressures that can put on people, on women, maybe another offence, having been somebody experiencing and other external pressures on victims that leads to just feeling that they can't continue, and they need to come out.' (Participant 9).

The view that it is a combination of both systemic and individual factors is one shared by all professionals interviewed however, some place more bearing on one factor type than the other.

Further to this, participants 10 to 12 suggested reasons for withdrawal were predominantly down to individual factors such as victim-survivors not wanting to report in the first place or not being strong enough to support a case. Participant 12 suggests individual factors but makes this link to the lengthy CJS process, which is suggested as the root,

'For different people so often someone will say, early on, I don't, I don't have the strength, the mental strength to go through a long, protracted process. I've got too much going on, my

mental health isn't, isn't good for this, I can't, I can't take all of this on, it's too much, that's often the reason.' (Participant 12).

This demonstrates that there is a clear divide between participants perceiving the issues leading to withdrawal as systemic or individual. Also shown in these responses was consistency in that often professionals in the same role will perceive issues to be systemic or individual in line with their colleagues however, this is not always the case for instance with participant 9 differing in their view compared to their colleagues.

Summary

From these responses, participants 1 to 6 suggest more of a systemic issue regarding leaving victims feeling a certain way about the CJS or processes. Whereas participants 7 to 12, with the exception of participant 9, suggested individual factors to be a more prevalent reason influencing why a victim may choose to withdraw. This shows almost a 50/50 split in participants suggesting the main reason to be either systemic or individualistic, with most still suggesting that the issue is complex and a mix of both. Looking more closely at this, the ISVAs role is to provide support and guidance for victim-survivors, often referring them to other agencies for vital services. Counsellors are independent and work outside of the CJS. They aim to assist the victim-survivor with coming to terms with what happened and providing therapy. Both roles thus focus more on the individual. The two groups of participants stated systemic issues were the main reason for withdrawal. On the other hand, SOITs deal with victims from within the CJS, interacting with them as part of a police investigation with the aim of bringing the case to court and securing a conviction. Intermediaries are independent and focus on achieving best evidence with vulnerable victims. These two categories of professionals stated that it is more likely that individual factors will be a better determiner of whether a victim-survivor is likely to withdraw. While most participants do go on to suggest that other factors are influential and thus it is not down to just one, participants were asked 'What do you believe to be the main factor leading to

rape victim-survivor withdrawal' (Appendix 3), the first point they state therefore arguably being the most prevalent to them.

Theme two: Lengthy Criminal Justice Process

One of the most commonly stated reasons for victim-survivor withdrawal discussed by professionals was the length of time it takes for cases to progress through the criminal justice system. Although participants cited the lengthy criminal justice as a reason for withdrawal, some participants suggested this to be a systemic issue, while others went on to say that instead, it was an individual one, this, therefore, links to the previous theme concerning the apprehension of the victim-survivor and therefore one of the main apprehensions was that of a criminal justice process that can take years. Furthermore, it can be seen from the evidence below, that while the process being lengthy was the main concern there were differing opinions on not only how this affects the victim-survivor, but also on what makes the process so long. Participant 1 stated that some cases 'have been going on for five or six years. Professionals, particularly ISVAs were very detailed in their responses when discussing their experience of victim-survivors struggling with how long a case could potentially go on for.

According to the professionals interviewed, length of time was a factor in a majority of their cases as a reason for withdrawal. However, again the professionals differed in their view of why this was. One participant, for instance, suggested the long criminal justice process prevented victim-survivors from being able to move on with their lives,

'It's just constantly prevented them from moving forward all the while they're still in this process and a lot of time within the process there's lots of kind of sort of limbo periods where you know it might be sent to the CPS and they're just waiting, waiting and they just don't know what way the case is going to go and what the outcome is but, absolutely without a doubt, it's

how long these investigations, take to proceed the entirety through the criminal justice system.’(Participant 1).

Participant 2 agreed with their colleague suggesting that,

*‘I think, it can become apparent things aren’t happening very quickly at times. And then they can start to drift and start to wonder if that’s really the route they want to go down. These I just want to, often you hear them say I just want to put it behind me forget about it.’
(Participant 2).*

Both of these views would suggest that the process being too long is a systemic one, this is shown by the way they both state the lengthy process as the issue before suggesting it almost leaves the victim-survivor with no choice but to withdraw if they want to move on with their life.

However, Participant 3 built on this view slightly and suggested the victim-survivors withdraw due to the length of time as their expectations are not properly managed,

‘I’d say it’s probably not being explained properly because I have a lot of clients coming to me and saying, the case is still ongoing, the police aren’t telling me much, it’s ongoing and then you find yourself having to get onto the police and it’s like getting blood out of a stone sometimes. So yeah, if they manage their expectations I think and explained why the delay, maybe they’re gonna be honest and say look, we’ve had some extra jobs come in. We’ve had to put it to the side for now, but we are working on it. So just, yeah, maybe being clear and managing expectations.’ (Participant 3).

This would suggest as stated by the participant that with the correct support and management of expectations when it comes to the length of time, victim-survivors may feel less inclined to withdraw. Managing expectations should not be the duty of one agency or role but a shared responsibility of all organisations dealing with victim-survivors of rape. However, what becomes clear is that sometimes

managing expectations can go too far in that victim-survivors are instead being put off by professionals. For instance, suggesting it could take years for their case to get to court. While this is true and lays out the foundations for managing a victim-survivor's expectations it is important to follow this up with how they will be supported through this process. Thus, not leaving the victim-survivor feeling as though the systemic issue of how long it takes to progress is one they have to deal with alone or without support.

The length of time it takes was not considered a factor by just the ISVA participants, as stated above Participant 9 (an intermediary) also suggested this as the main reason they believed victim-survivors withdraw. They stated,

'I mean there is gonna be individual factors of course and systemic factors are the thing that's coming up a lot with the people I work with is timetabling, it seems to be the main thing that's coming up cases being put off and difficulties with getting dates and the incredibly long wait between ABE and cases. That would be the main systemic problem' (Participant 9).

This once again suggests that perhaps with further support and managing expectations victim-survivors may feel less inclined to decide to withdraw. An important part to note here is the link between the systemic factor affecting an individual one. The length of time it takes was suggested as the main reason to influence withdrawal as stated by participants 1 to 3 and participant 9, however, after stating this systemic factor they all subsequently went on to say how these impact individualistic ones. While the systemic issue itself may have influenced the victim-survivor to withdraw it thus could have been the effect that the length of time had on individual factors such as feeling 'spooked' (Participant 1) or powerlessness that subsequently led to withdrawal.

As stated above, participants 1 through 3 and participant 9 suggest that the lengthy criminal justice process is the main reason for withdrawal. They suggest that this systemic factor affects individual factors such as mental health, and the feeling of wanting to move on and that is why victim-survivors withdraw. Participant 12, on the other hand, states

'For different people so often someone will say, early on, I don't, I don't have the strength, the mental strength to go through a long, protracted process. I've got too much going on, my mental health isn't, isn't good for this, I can't, I can't take all of this on, it's too much that's often the reason.' (Participant 12).

This participant worded their response differently, stating the individual factor before the systemic one perhaps suggesting that the mental health of the victim-survivor was the main reason for withdrawal and that this was exacerbated by the lengthy process. This shows a shared view from participants 1 through 3, participants 9 and 12, that the time it takes for a case to progress through the CJS is a main determiner as to where a victim-survivor will withdraw. However, participants 1 through 3 and participant 9 in their responses suggest that by addressing the lengthy process itself this will alleviate the concerns/ fears a victim survivor may have and thus reduce potentially prevent withdrawal. Whereas participant 12 almost suggests that the individual factors are more important to address and that the lengthy process only acts as a catalyst for the concerns already held by a victim-survivor, contrary to the opinions of that which is held by the participants stated above. This potentially highlights that systemic and individual factors working in tandem with one another have the greatest influence on victim-survivor withdrawal rates. This also shows that a systemic issue can exacerbate individual factors and vice-versa. However, we cannot infer cause and effect from the opinions of the professionals regarding the length of time and concerns held by a victim-survivor.

Summary

It is clear from previous research as well as the expressed view of participants in this study that the length of time it takes from a victim-survivor reporting a rape, to getting the case to court is a

considerable factor that can lead to victim-survivor withdrawal (George and Ferguson, 2021). The majority of participants in this study viewed this long time period as a problem stemming from systemic issues within our CJS. It was also noted that often this systemic issue plays on individual issues which leads victim-survivors to feel as though they must withdraw. However, some participants expressed the view that while the length CJS process is a reason for withdrawal, this could be combatted by better managing the expectations of victim-survivors and reminding them of the support that is available to them throughout the process. This theme, often held as a subject issue, can play on individual factors like a feeling of loss of control. This was a common individual factor noted by participants and will be discussed below.

Theme 3: Loss of Control

A common view held by the participants of this study was that the victim-survivors perceived a loss of control after reporting an offence. As a litany of previous research has suggested, control is an important aspect of sexual offences (Greathouse et al., 2015). After an offence of a sexual nature, victim-survivors feel like control has been taken from them, thus it is important for them to feel they have control after the offence. This was a prevalent theme which underpinned a lot of professionals' views on the criminal justice process as a whole and links both to the two previous themes mentioned, particularly that of apprehension and also to the themes which will be discussed later. Loss of control is primarily viewed as an individual factor, but this is heavily reliant on the existence of systemic factors, commonly that of various criminal justice processes.

Professionals interviewed showed great concern at the fact the criminal justice process often exacerbates this feeling of loss of control that victim-survivors have. After reporting participant 6 suggests that

'I think one of the biggest potential factors is, I think the sense of, once someone, once the victim is in the criminal justice system, kind of, they feel that they might not be in control of the situation anymore, because it tends to go at quite a fast pace. Once the police get involved, from making a statement, or making, getting video evidence to the kind of forensic investigation, a SARC unit. This kind of sort of rolls on. And I think someone is still very traumatised in those early sort of days, weeks or months, even, because trauma takes a long time to come out and they might be experiencing a whole range of emotions, because it's kind of almost going to be more public at some point, and I think a lot of victims, really prefer to kind of. They don't want to kind of step into that process because they feel once they've stepped into it they've got no control over it and it's just going to kind of run its course.'
(Participant 6).

This response shows the link between not feeling in control as a result of the length of time the process takes and also as a result of various criminal justice processes that take place. For instance, as mentioned about the taking of statements and gathering evidence. Giving statements was a particular issue that other professionals voiced as a point of contention for some victim-survivors they have dealt with. Often a victim-survivor is asked to go over their version of events multiple times by agencies they come into contact with throughout the process. One participant voiced this by stating,

'thinking about the victim, because they tell their story so many times and actually that's another one that I didn't mention, they feel that they keep repeating the story but it's a story based on somebody specifically having a job to do, to gather evidence to bring about a prosecution, to investigate, all those different aspects' (Participant 5).

Though the participant understood that often a victim-survivor is required to go over their story several times to ensure nothing is missed and to also bring up to speed various professionals that may be dealing with the case. They noted that this does raise concerns regarding the victim-survivors state of mind, in that they are having to repeat one of the most traumatic experiences that have ever

happened. Thus, they also regarded this as a reason that could contribute to the victim-survivors feeling of loss of control.

This is further discussed by participant 5 who stated,

'From first of all, rape victims being traumatised, the loss of control, that whole acting against their will. I think at times, maybe, they can feel the process, becomes, it kind of takes over if you like. Maybe I'm not expressing this very well, but it kind of affirms their lack of control. So, they've reported something and then there's a whole set of consequences and actions that might flow from that but maybe they didn't fully anticipate or understand' (Participant 5).

This feeling of not being in control is something victim-survivors experience during a sexual offence and therefore can be very traumatic for them to go through a process that still leaves them with a sense of no control.

'we want to try and get the control back to that victim, because obviously what happened to them the control, the decision was taken away from them' (Participant 1).

Thus, participants have stated this as a problem that requires solving if we are to see a potential reduction in withdrawal rates as well as higher victim-survivor satisfaction.

Charities and police forces that deal with victim-survivors and particularly those of sexual offences often stress the importance of a victim-led approach. Putting the power back into the victim's hands after such an offence is fundamental to their sense of well-being and a general feeling of being able to move past the event. Despite this one participant showed concern that perhaps this isn't always implemented and that

'They don't want to kind of step into that process because they feel once they've stepped into it they've got no control over it and it's just going to kind of run its course. And they're not. Sometimes I think that, that their needs and their concerns are, perhaps not heard, or even addressed.' (Participant 6).

This was a view shared by another participant in the same role as a counsellor who said,

'I mean, the government's repeatedly said they want to put victims at the heart of the criminal justice but they aren't really, in all honesty.' (Participant 4).

This is particularly concerning when a victim-led approach is hailed by practitioners as best practice when dealing with victim-survivors of this nature (Victims Strategy, 2018). This suggested that whilst a victim-led approach is considered best practice and is adopted by many agencies and charities, it is clear that the correct implementation of this approach is often lacking in the experiences of these professionals. Of particular note, participant 6 stated later on in their interview that,

'I think the earlier you can get to victims, the better, to kind of, talk to them about their rights and their needs and what are their worries and to address those really early on before the worry becomes, you know, the point at which they decide they can't continue' (Participant 6).

This stresses the need to manage a victim-survivor's concerns early on. The criminal justice process can be daunting and lengthy but by managing concerns and expectations early and putting the victim in control of their recovery, this could allow a victim-survivor to better understand what will follow and they can be reminded of the support in place for them throughout their journey through the CJS. Thus, increasing the likelihood of them continuing to support a CJS resolution.

The loss of control some victim-survivors experience during the CJS process can be as a result of many reasons. One example discussed above is the length of time these cases take to progress through the

CJS. The process is out of the victim-survivors control but this feeling of loss of control participants 1 through 3 often cited can be exacerbated by the failure to keep victim-survivors updated.

'Their expectations are probably not managed by the police enough, so then, if it's going on and they're not receiving updates from the police. Yeah. That's the major reason why a lot of them drop out.' (Participant 3).

The failure of organisations, particularly the police, to keep victim-survivors up to date is a concern shared by all ISVA participants who consider this a contributing factor in withdrawal rates. The police, being in that they control the investigation of the case, arguably has the most to do with updating the victim-survivor. While the participant stated that the police are not giving regular updates it is clear that this is not the sole responsibility of police officers and thus, the point could be made that ISVAs and the police should work in better conjunction with one another to provide better and more frequent updates for the victim-survivor. Views concerning how ISVAs feel their partnership with the police works will be discussed later in the ISVA specific themes. However, despite being of great concern to the ISVA participants, no other participants mentioned failure to keep victim-survivors up to date as a reason for withdrawal. While this issue was only raised by ISVA participants it directly links to a victim-survivors feeling of loss of control thus, it was more appropriate for it to be discussed here and not later on in the ISVA themes section. ISVAs are in contact with victim-survivors right from when they report to the police and therefore, arguably when victim-survivors are most frequently looking for updates. Whereas counsellors and intermediaries deal with victim survivors much later on in the process mostly a year or more after when victim-survivors would not be looking for updates as frequently and thus this would less likely be a concern raised to them.

Summary

Participants from across the different organisations had expressed their concern regarding a general feeling of loss of control on behalf of the victim-survivors. As shown above, there are various reasons

why a victim-survivor may feel they have lost control, the lengthy criminal justice procedure is one such reason and was discussed in the previous chapter. However, other systemic processes such as giving statements multiple times and lack of frequent updates to name a few. Furthermore, a concerning commonality from discussions with participants is their view that a victim-led approach is not being properly implemented or followed. Some expressed concern that the approach almost isn't compatible with the systemic issues within the CJS needing to be addressed before a fully effective victim-led approach can be implemented.

Theme 4: Fear and Mental Wellbeing

Individual factors, as discussed in the previous chapter, are stated by half of the participants as being the main reason behind victim withdrawal. Many participants expressed concern that often the trauma and decline in mental well-being were a reason victim-survivors choose to withdraw. Victim-survivors saw the criminal justice proceedings as hindering their recovery and thus chose to withdraw in an attempt to improve their mental well-being. This is incredibly problematic as no individual should have to choose between securing a criminal conviction against their offender or improving their mental well-being but far too many participants suggested this is a reality of our CJS as it stands. This will be discussed further in this chapter along with a minority view of participants that suggested victim-survivors just were not strong enough to go through the CJS.

Another theme seen throughout the interviews was that of the victim-survivors personal capacity and strength to see a case through. This was a more prevalent experience of participants who were SOITs and intermediaries but was also discussed by counsellors too.

'I work with vulnerable witnesses, so they've got a whole load of other things going on at the same time, sometimes that's mental health difficulties, going on. Sometimes they, their anxiety is taking over and they don't want to continue with the process.' (Participant 8),

These individual factors that influence a victim-survivors decision to withdraw were also shared by participant 12 who starts by saying,

'people have their own personal reasons, they're not in a good place or it's not worth it... Lots of people are not looking for prosecution and they never have any intention of going through court. People want, in quotes, the police to know' (Participant 12).

This is something that previous research has suggested to be the case. Often victim-survivors have no intention of a police outcome, much less a prosecution instead they just wish to report it. This cannot be shrugged off as just something that happens without being understood. Some studies have suggested that victim-survivors report because it is the 'right thing to do' but then not see it through to court. This could potentially be due to preconceived ideas held by some victim-survivors that the CJS process will be arduous therefore, they only wish to report and then withdraw. However, there is little evidence to suggest exactly why this is and would be a valuable area of further research.

As shown above, in the previous section, half of the participants stated that individual factors were the leading contributor to withdrawal rates of victim-survivors of rape. However, those specific factors have differed from participant to participant. The most common theme found was that of mental health/well-being, this was a common theme amongst almost all participants in the study. Both participants 8 and 9 suggested mental health as one of the first individual factors leading to withdrawal

'things like mental health break down, just don't want to carry on. Just feels it's things like, it's all too much, ... there's a general impression that people can't undertake proper therapy or that this seems to be concerned around them engaging in therapy work, I have heard people

say that they just don't feel like they can, they can't hold the trauma of the allegations or whatever, whatever they're saying has happened for any longer without having the therapeutic support... So they just basically say, they say I can't cope, my mental health is suffering. I have to make a choice and I choose to look after myself and go and get the therapy and forget the case.' (Participant 9).

They do follow this up with the suggestion that this links in with timetabling and length of time, this was discussed in the previous chapter. The counsellor participants raised particular concerns at this regarding the point at which victim-survivors can be offered counselling. With the organisation that these counsellors were working for it is the case that victim-survivors are unable to seek counselling until after their case has been finalised within the CJS. However, this is not always the case for victim-survivors seeking counselling, they may find an organisation that will work with them whilst they undergo a CJS outcome. Participant 4 also stated that they thought it would be hugely beneficial to better support these victim-survivors by being able to offer them counselling during the CJS process,

'Yes I think it would be hugely beneficial to be able to, to speak to them, to be able to speak to somebody, but not if it becomes part of the investigation so that, that therapy would be for the client, not for the criminal justice system so there would be no sharing of information, or anything so I think that victims should be allowed to have support because especially at the moment. It's so long, from start to finish, the process and they're waiting and waiting to get help.' (Participant 4).

This is a view echoed by her colleague participant 6. However, she also went on to state that,

'accusations can be made to suggest that they've planted the seed of what someone has said, they have coached them, that they've in some way influenced what they then go on to say at court' (Participant 6).

This was mentioned in the previous quote too. It is evident that counsellors wish to be able to provide therapeutic support to victim-survivors during the criminal justice proceeding but are very conscious that they may be called to court for questioning This in itself isn't a problem but there is a clear sense of worry as to what this would mean for the court case with participant 4 stating,

'I suppose, someone, somewhere, somebody has to trust that therapists want to help the people involved, they have absolutely no agenda in, in trying to skew evidence or kind of plant ideas that didn't happen in client's minds. That's just mistrust of the therapists, I think.'
(Participant 4).

This point regarding counsellors being unable to provide therapeutic support to victim-survivors will be discussed in more detail later in the counsellors' section. However, being able to offer therapeutic support to victims is a clear way to improve the mental well-being of participants, potentially leaving them more comfortable with continuing within the CJS.

Feelings of not being strong enough to proceed were discussed by the ISVA participants but not in the same context. For instance, participant 1 stated some victims may have a sense of fear, especially those that may have suffered other forms of abuse at the hands of the offender,

it's that fear as well, particularly for victims of domestic abuse. It's about, you know, I have clients say to me, but what if we go to court but he got found not guilty what then? You know, what could he potentially do could his family do to me, you know, he will then know everything that I have reported to police and then what for me.' (Participant 1).

This was an opinion shared by their colleague participant 2 who suggested some victim-survivors may fear reprisals if the offender is known to the victim,

'They may be thinking about the wider impact on say children and if you've got children with the perpetrator or the parents of that perpetrator. There's a fear of reprisals so you know not feeling safe.' (Participant 2),

which cases have shown to be the majority of circumstances. In these particular cases where the offender is known to the perpetrator and a victim fears reprisal at the hands of the offender, a multiagency approach would seem the most necessary in order to protect the victim. Agencies and charities working together to provide the victim with suitable alternative accommodation, a means of getting away from their victim and feeling protected are paramount to ensuring they stay within the CJS. Participants have also expressed their professional opinion that a multi-agency approach is most effective at providing protection, support and assistance to those most vulnerable,

'Because of MARAC, ... I have quite a lot of connections within, lots of different services. And I generally have a positive view of working with other agencies. Yeah, so I would say our working relationship is quite good. I know that other people don't feel like that sometimes but I, I would say that I promote multi-agency working.' (Participant 11).

Furthermore, participant 6 also suggests victim-survivors have a sense of fear not just surrounding the offender as the ISVAs suggest, but also around the process itself,

'It could be fear. If it's a kind of stranger rape, for example, there's a real sense of fear. You know, that they may have to give evidence in a trial, although there are all these special measures available now. I think the fact that someone has got to go to court and the case may be, has got to go in front of a jury.' (Participant 6).

However, in both of these instances, it is clear that steps can be taken to mitigate this sense of fear and ensure that victim-survivors feel more secure. This in turn will leave them feeling more confident about continuing within the CJS.

Summary

To alleviate feelings of fear of reprisals the police have several safeguarding tools in place to protect victims including special measures which can be used in court for a victim-survivor giving evidence. The use of screens and pre-recorded statements are becoming more and more commonplace in our 21st-century court system. The use of special measures and the attitudes towards them in protecting victims will be discussed in more detail later on in the intermediary's section. There are several measures that can be utilised by various agencies to ensure that victim-survivors feel more comfortable proceeding with their case. As shown by the participants the fear a victim-survivor can have will arise for a number of reasons, fear of reprisals from the offender and fear of the CJS itself. It is clear from the evidence provided by participants that despite changes to the CJS to better support victims, particularly vulnerable victims, these individuals still feel ostracised from the system. While it could be said that the CJS still has more to do to support these individuals, it would seem perceptions of the CJS, through the eyes of these individuals, have changed little despite policy changes and the implementation of special measures such as intermediaries.

Theme 5: The Media

Another minor theme that was brought up by some participants was the role that the media can play in influencing withdrawal rates. Participants 1, 4 and 7 all mentioned the effect this can have on a victim-survivor in various aspects. The media also has great influence over the way individuals, particularly victim-survivors perceive the CJS and their processes. For instance, there have been many news articles in the media regarding the process of a victim-survivor's phone being taken away for large periods of time, this is likely to have a negative impact on victim-survivors wishing to report, as will be discussed below. The media would seem to have a vast amount of influence regarding reporting rates. The Me-too movement and the large media publicity behind it have been credited with the

surge in reporting of historic allegations of rape (Deal et al., 2020). The role the media has and can play over victim-survivors of rape in the eyes of professionals will be discussed below.

For instance, participant 1 suggested that,

'I have a lot of victims now who are coming forward. That might have, they're kind of middle aged maybe in the 50s or 60s and they're reporting incidents that sort of when they were a child I think obviously nowadays. You know the media and sort of celebrity figures who have been perpetrators of sexual violence and kind of how that has been dealt with that you can do feel more confident to come forward.' (Participant 1)

Therefore, stating that the way victim-survivors of sexual offences are dealt with and portrayed in the media directly links to an increase in reporting as victim-survivors feel more confident in the way they will be treated and dealt with and seemingly making a note to the 'me too' movement. They also go on to state that while the media can have a positive impact on reporting it can also have the adverse effect,

'If they've got any worries or concerns but it's kind of talking that through and kind of break that down, that actually are they just things, you know, that they've seen on the TV or paper or seen on social media, and actually explain to them, whether they've got that slightly wrong or whatever' (Participant 1)

suggesting that quite often victim-survivors have a distorted view of the CJS and processes as a result of media influence.

This negative media influence was a view shared by participant 4 who went on to state,

'There's a big question which obviously links in with what's currently in the media anyway.

Around societal expectations of how women should behave' (Participant 4)

this is a long-standing issue that practitioners, academics and policymakers have tried and are still attempting to solve. Great strides have been made in improving the media's portrayal of rape victim-survivors but participant 4 suggests that they are still treated with an air of scepticism. As discussed above, the media can be a driving force behind influencing the way victim-survivors feel they will be perceived by society and the CJS when they report. Thus, can be an influencing factor behind the likelihood of withdrawal as well as reporting.

There are still strong societal ideas about what a victim-survivor should look and behave like

'Sometimes there are very preconceived ideas I mean, you know about rape, about reactions, about how somebody should behave in a situation. So, you know, there's a general discussion in the media and, and so on, about, you know, victim blaming and all this sort of thing that goes on. That is bad enough, but then, you know, and something that we should you know strive to overcome, but also how that how that interacts with learning difficulties, because you've got people who maybe socially aren't as adept at communicating, don't understand situations. (Participant 7),

these misconceived ideas negatively and directly impact on victim withdrawal as discussed by participants 1, 4 and 7. Participant 7 highlights the issues that often the media and jurors like to see victims as their stereotypical view of what a victim should look like.

Summary

It is clear from the evidence that despite efforts to combat rape myths and issues around victim blaming, these practices are still felt by victim-survivors and professionals that deal with these victim-

survivors daily. These participants all came from different professional backgrounds, an ISVA, a counsellor and an intermediary. Thus, showing how widespread the impact of these views is still felt. The media has always played a role in how victim-survivors perceive the CJS. Recent movements such as the 'me too' movement have shown what a positive impact the media can have on victim-survivor reporting rates. However, this cannot be attributable to just media influence and will be down to a number of reasons. The media has a large influence on how victim-survivors perceive the CJS and therefore how likely they are to report it. Victim-survivors will already have preconceived notions of processes and issues within the CJS that often inform how likely they are to report or if they do report, whether they withdraw immediately after. This links with the theme in the next chapter regarding victim-survivors 'just wanting the police to know' (Participant 10).

This leads to the next section which will discuss in detail smaller themes that were identified specifically within agencies.

SOIT Specific Theme: Won't support an investigation

These following themes are primarily role specific and therefore being discussed separately but within the same context as these major themes previously discussed. A theme that arose from the SOITs, participants 10 through 12 but was not shared by the other professionals was the view that victim-survivors report but do not want to support an investigation. This links in directly with the previous chapter on the media through the individual factors mentioned by the SOITs as reasons why victim-survivors withdraw due to not wishing to support an investigation, it also links with the other themes identified as will be discussed. The individual factors identified here by SOITs relate to other individual factors found by other professionals however, they were attributed to different themes. For instance, one reason a SOIT participant stated that a victim-survivor didn't want to support an investigation, this was then followed up with that they hadn't had their expectations managed properly, this directly links with the previous theme of the lengthy criminal justice process. However, the SOITs here did not

attribute not wishing to proceed with a lengthy process instead they just suggest this is just what victim-survivors want to do and that they do not want a criminal justice outcome for other reasons that are individual not as a result of systemic issues (Participant 10).

One SOIT stated that as mentioned above,

'Many people that I've seen. They come see me or I go to see them and they're not after a prosecution. That's not what they want and so it might look like figures-wise people have pulled out. A lot of the people are not looking for prosecution and they never have any intention of going through a court case. People want, in quotes, the police to know. They want the police to know, they want to have spoken to the police and say, this happened to me, this wasn't okay.' (Participant 12).

This view states that victim-survivors, therefore, have the intention to withdraw even before they report to the police. That they only report as they want 'the police to know' (Participant 12) and thus, as soon as the report is made, they withdraw immediately. The reason for this point is suggested by their colleague who states,

'And like I say, the reasons are quite vary but one of the things that really strikes me is that we get a lot of reports police aren't necessarily saying I want, I want to report this. You know, so you might, for instance, we get a lot of third-party reports, you've got people living in hostels or people with mental health workers, or whatever, and they've made a disclosure, so they never had any intention of reporting it in the first place but that does get recorded as a rape. And then we will get in touch with them, and we will talk to them about, about, you know actually reporting it officially. And very often in those cases they're like no I never wanted to talk to the police about this, I don't want to now I don't want to dredge it up from the past, or whatever their reasons' (Participant 11).

This would suggest that other organisations are reporting on behalf of the victim-survivor and potentially against their wishes if the victim-survivor subsequently immediately withdraws and refuses to support an investigation. However, the view here of the participants is almost as though nothing can be done about it. Both suggest that victim-survivors from the outset have their mind made up that they do not wish to support an investigation and therefore there is nothing they can do to change this. This theme of victim-survivors not wishing to support an investigation was not brought up by other professionals and is most notable as the other professionals do not have such a direct link with the investigation that SOITs do.

Participant 10 shared the view that often victim-survivors report with no intention of supporting an investigation.

'They then quite often will be I don't want to do this; I don't want to support an investigation. And that could be because it wasn't explained to them properly at a time, and all our fear, and because it's then, it was reported something it's easy to just go along with it rather than say, actually no, I just wanted to. Quite often people just wanted you to know or don't want you to do anything about it' (Participant 10).

However, they followed up with 'And that could be because it wasn't explained to them properly at a time' (Participant 10) suggesting that this is an issue that could potentially be countered by working closely with the victim-survivor. Unlike their colleagues, participant 10 is more optimistic that something can be done to change the mindset of the victim-survivor. Whereas participants 11 and 12 tend to suggest that a victim-survivor often has made their mind up that they don't want to support an investigation, and nothing can be done to change this. As mentioned previously, participant 10 seems to suggest that through better managing a victim-survivor's expectations and supporting them, this issue could be mostly overcome thus, reducing withdrawal as a result. This could also potentially be better managed by introducing ISVAs to victim-survivors from the outset. Participant 10 raises a

further opinion that often a victim-survivor can be swept off of their feet by the investigative process 'A lot of the time people just want to report it so it's on file... because I don't want it to happen to anyone else' (Participant 10).

It is clear from these accounts that particularly the SOIT participants feel as though many victim-survivors do not wish to engage with the CJS process and often they report with the intention of immediately withdrawing. While this view was one shared by these participants, they had differing views on why this was and what could be done to improve this area. Participant 10 suggested that by simply managing expectations better and providing support to the victim-survivor this can help alleviate some concerns and potentially convince the victim-survivor to continue through the CJS process. Having an ISVA introduced to the victim-survivor as early as possible ensures they have a support network and someone to talk to about their concerns from the earliest stages of the investigation. It was clear from some of these quotes that often SOITs can feel as though their hands are tied when met with a victim-survivor who does not seem to wish to assist an investigation. This evidently can leave some SOITs feeling demoralised and as though there is nothing, they can do to prevent withdrawal.

ISVA Specific Themes

This chapter will focus on the ISVA role, and what participants 1 through 3 suggested could be implemented to reduce withdrawal rates and ensure higher victim-survivor satisfaction. One common factor found across all of the ISVA participants was that of caseload. Particularly participants 2 and 3 suggested caseloads were too high to be able to offer their best quality of service. With participant 2 stating

'Caseloads if they were a little bit less then I feel we could give our clients more we could be out seeing them more and speaking more, researching about what's out there that we could signpost them on to, do further training. When you have more time there's always, there's always things. You could fill that with.' (Participant 2)

The small team of ISVAs have suggested they are struggling with the level of demand they are receiving. They also felt as though more people were coming forward to access their service, which was increasing demand,

'Yeah, it's definitely increased since we've had our online portal, where clients can just go on to our website and apply online. It's easier than having an application sent out and then maybe not getting it back or forgetting to post it or something like that, there's always similar barriers in the way. I've noticed the self-referral rate has increased.' (Participant 3).

Making these services easier to access for victim-survivors of rape will only increase victim-survivor satisfaction and increase the likelihood of them staying within the CJS. As suggested by participant 3 it can also assist to increase the number of self-referrals they receive. ISVAs provide quality care and support to particularly vulnerable victim-survivors, and they should be supported further as the demand for their service increases.

Another point raised by ISVA participants was that communication with the police could be improved. They suggested this would streamline the process for the victim-survivor and ensure that no information is missed out that could prove beneficial for the other to know. For instance, as explained by one participant key developments in the case are not always liaised with the victim-survivors' ISVA. Therefore, if a case has taken a significant development in which the victim-survivor may require support, the ISVA is not privy to this,

'I think the police need to work better with us. So, for example, if there's a case that has been no further actioned by the police. Sometimes they won't tell us or forget to tell us and then we will, we will miss that. And the next time we call that client for example, it could be four weeks down the line, we've not spoken to our client. And then when we next call say are how things. Do you need an update from the police and they said no, it's been filed. So, I think that could help that could be improved. Definitely.' (Participant 3).

Information sharing between the police and the victim-survivors support network, in this case in the form of ISVAs, would seem crucial in the support and satisfaction of a victim-survivor's journey through the CJS. It is this liaising between ISVAs and the police that some participants feel is lacking and requires improvement for ISVAs to better do their jobs of supporting victim-survivors. The evidence here suggests that some police officers are not utilising the ISVA service and the role of support that they provide to individuals to their advantage as often as they could. One ISVA participant that took part even suggested that often liaising with police is lacking, a reason they suggested was as the police do not appreciate their role.

'You do get a good few officers that'll notify you oh by the way we're gonna tell the victim that it's not going to be going any further and some of them do give you the heads up so I'm not gonna say all of them but a lot of the time they don't ... I think the police need to appreciate our role maybe a little bit more.' (Participant 3).

It is incredibly important that ISVAs and the police service work as closely together as possible, this will only help both organisations in the long term. Providing victim-survivors with a professional support service that is well-informed as to what's going on with their case will only improve the satisfaction a victim-survivor feels about not only that support service but the police too. Subsequently, higher rates of support and satisfaction will only increase the likelihood of the victim-survivor continuing to assist the police with the investigation. With regards to sharing of information,

Participant 2 also noted when police and CPS work together at an earlier stage this helps speed up the process,

'Sometimes investigations get a little bit stuck so the CPS are also given advice around where the police might need help in those cases as well. So that they you know, can give the client an outcome.' (Participant 2).

They also suggested that getting an outcome to the victim-survivor as soon as possible was also something victim-survivors appreciated, normally regardless of what the outcome was.

The role of the ISVA is riddled with challenges and obstacles. Much like most things in this area it is also a role that requires development and support in order to reach its full potential. It is, however, one of the single most effective tools for supporting vulnerable victims and providing them with vital support, particularly in the early stages of an investigation when victim-survivors are most susceptible to withdraw. The accounts given by these participants were often well-informed, professional and always focused around supporting a victim-survivor. It is clear that the ISVAs were concerned primarily with the number of cases they were seeing being referred by police but also the increase in self-referrals via their website portal. It is encouraging that so many rape victim-survivors are accessing this service, ISVAs were concerned that due to demand they were not able to offer the usual high standard of service to victim-survivors. Another primary concern held by ISVA participants was that of cooperation between ISVAs and the police. Improvements can be made in this area resulting in increased information sharing between these two roles. This will then enable both agencies to provide a more professional service that is aware of what the other is doing, this is key to providing the victim-survivor with meaningful and informed updates.

Counsellor Specific Themes

This section will focus on the interviews of counsellors, participants 4 to 6, and the issues in which they brought up with regard to their role and improvements they suggest could be implemented to reduce the withdrawal rates of rape victim-survivors in their experience. The main concern held by the counsellors was that victim-survivors could not access their services until after a criminal justice resolution,

'A survivor of a crime can't see a counsellor for therapeutic help on the incident itself until after there's been a resolution to a police investigation, or if it goes to the CPS and they're going to take it to court until after the court case. And then if a defendant appeals, then they have to wait if they're going to have to present evidence again, they have to wait. So that's really difficult when you're speaking to somebody who wants help but they're not allowed to have it.' (Participant 4).

Whilst participants understood why this was the case, this was still a point of frustration for two of the three counsellors. Participant 6 further stated that,

'The counsellor could well be called to give evidence at the trial, because they could be challenged to say that they were coaxing the witness, they were potentially impacting on their evidence'. (Participant 6)

This creates a problem for the victim-survivor as in some instances they are then forced to choose between seeking counselling for the event that happened or seeking a criminal justice resolution. This should not have to be a choice victim-survivors of rape have to make.

'I think it's; I think it's in place to protect the defendant, my understanding is that accusations, sort of, of coaching or kind of planting false information if you like, can occur through therapy. But as a therapist. I would absolutely refute that that happens. So, I do understand the legal

reasons why, but still it seems draconian especially since the defendant can receive counselling.' (Participant 4).

Participant 4 then went on to state she believed that this showed an innate distrust of the courts of psychologists,

'I mean, I suppose, someone, somewhere, somebody has to trust that therapists want to help the people involved, they have absolutely no agenda in, in trying to skew evidence or kind of plant ideas that didn't happen in client's minds. That's just mistrust of the therapists, I think.' (Participant 4).

It is clear that there is an annoyance on behalf of counsellors that they are unable to offer their service to victim-survivors who have a case ongoing within the CJS.

It is important to clarify here that victim-survivors are entitled to seek counselling during the criminal justice process. However, if they do so the courts may ask to cross-examine the counsellor and may ask for the therapist's notes to be submitted as evidence. It is this process, which has meant that the institution to which the counsellors in this study are attributed to, has led this charity to refuse to offer therapy to those who have a case going through the CJS, except in particular circumstances. This charity is one of the largest in Kent providing therapy to victim-survivors of rape and therefore it is unfortunate that therapy cannot be offered to victim-survivors who have an ongoing case. Counsellors spoken to as part of this study came across as extremely dedicated to helping their clients deal with trauma and showed a keen interest in their wellbeing. This service is one that essential to the mental health and well-being of participants and therefore, it would be beneficial to victim-survivors to see this offered to all victim-survivors, not just those who have an ongoing criminal justice case.

Intermediary Specific Themes

This section focuses on the themes raised specifically by the intermediary participants, participants 7 through 9. There were several concerns raised here by these participants which relate to both systemic and individual factors. Intermediaries themselves were brought in to help combat systemic issues within the court process relating to vulnerable and intimidated witnesses. A theme found among intermediaries was that of wanting to be included in the process at an earlier stage. One participant felt that this would greatly assist police forces in achieving best evidence and also provide the vulnerable victim-survivor with a better understanding of court processes and the support they are entitled to.

'And it is a concern because, obviously, a witness with, with maybe learning difficulties, or communication difficulties, has had to make a decision without the support of an intermediary at quite an important stage, and I have often wondered whether we should be involved as an earlier stage, when those decisions about whether to proceed or not, are being made. Because I'm not privy, if, if I mean, if for example I've got an appointment booked and then I hear from the police officer that they don't want to go ahead. I have no way of knowing why not, I have no input. Having said that, it's actually not my role to try and persuade somebody that they should go ahead. But I would like, I would feel happier knowing that I had at least been part of the process of describing what happens, and knowing that they are making that decision being fully aware of what's involved.' (Participant 7)

While participant 7 did note that persuading someone to not withdraw, they understood that it was a shared responsibility of professionals to fully explain the process to victim-survivors. To ensure they are fully informed of the process and ensure the support they are entitled to is being utilised. It is clear the advantages to both the police and victim-survivors of having intermediaries involved earlier on in the criminal justice process.

However, one potentially concerning point made by an intermediary is that they work on behalf of the court,

'I would be there to ensure effective communication, you know that the witness, understood, and was understood by anybody being spoken to, but I'm not part of a team, so even though I appear and meet the witness first of all with the police, I'm not part of the prosecution. I'm not part of the defence, my duty is to the court.' (Participant 7).

Registered intermediaries are independent therefore their duty is not to any organisation. They work as self-employed communication specialists; their duty is to assist vulnerable witnesses and complainants to give evidence. Intermediaries were brought in in response to a systemic issue of vulnerable victim-survivors of crime often not being able to have their voices heard within the CJS due to requiring extra assistance to effectively give evidence.

The role of an intermediary is one brought about to solve a systemic issue within the criminal justice system. For decades particularly vulnerable victims were unable to get their voices heard within the criminal justice system as they did not have the support required to be able to effectively communicate with law enforcement and the courts. With the dedicated role of an intermediary great strides have been made in bridging this gap. The intermediaries that took part in this study were very passionate and experienced when talking about their work. They also seemed very aware of the improvements needed to be made in their area and wanted to work more closely with the police to be involved early on in the investigative stage with regard to when the vulnerable victim-survivor is interviewed.

Findings Conclusion

There is a clear understanding from the professionals interviewed that whilst lots has been done to improve the way the CJS deals with victim-survivors of rape, there is still far left to go. The themes found could be split into either systemic issues or individual ones. Participants were split 50/50 as to what they believed was the main reason behind withdrawal. Systemic issues were most cited by the ISVA and counsellor participants, participants 1 through 6, as those most likely to determine whether a victim-survivor would withdraw. Whereas the intermediary and SOIT participants were most likely to cite individual factors as the main reason for withdrawal. While in these cases a main reason was given, almost all participants noted that it is not one reason that leads to withdrawal but a culmination of various factors both systemic and individual. These themes were discussed throughout this section and were split into the apprehension of the victim-survivor, this was split down into two sub-themes consisting of perceptions of the victim-survivor through what has been said to the professionals and also, the perceptions of the professionals themselves. The other themes discussed in this section were the lengthy criminal justice process, loss of control, just not strong enough, the media and finally won't support an investigation. Lots of these issues were felt and voiced across the many professional types however, some themes were agency specific, and these were discussed later in the section. It is clear that the CJS still has a long way to go in making victim-survivors feel comfortable not just in reporting but in traversing through the CJS and securing a conviction. Often professionals voiced the opinion that victim-survivors still feel as though the system works against them, that they are having to choose between their own mental well-being or securing a criminal justice outcome. While many professionals voiced optimism at what could be changed and implemented see improvement in this area. It is clear from the response of some professionals that it is all too easy to be overcome by the challenges to be faced. Almost as though the systemic issues are so ingrained it is easier to get used to them than try and change them for the better.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has offered an in-depth exploration of the professional perspectives on the phenomenon of female rape victim-survivor withdrawal from the criminal justice process. This study looked to answer the following research questions (1) What do professionals that work with victim-survivors believe to be the main reason they withdraw? (2) What other contributing factors do the professionals think also affect the likelihood of a withdrawal? (3) What do professionals believe can be done to mitigate the likelihood of a victim survivor choosing to withdraw? Through the lens of various professionals—including Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), Sexual Offences Investigative Techniques (SOITs) officers, and intermediaries—the research aimed to answer key questions regarding why victim-survivors withdraw, the contributing factors that influence this decision, and potential strategies to mitigate these outcomes. While much research has focused on the broader issue of attrition in sexual violence cases, there remains a notable gap in understanding the nuanced reasons why victim-survivors disengage after initially reporting the crime. This study sought to address that gap by focusing on the unique insights offered by professionals who work directly with victim-survivors and see, firsthand, the emotional, psychological, and systemic challenges they face.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the complexity and multifaceted nature of withdrawal. The professionals interviewed emphasized that victim-survivor withdrawal is never the result of a singular factor. Instead, it is a confluence of various pressures—systemic, emotional, psychological, and social—that combine to make continued engagement with the criminal justice system (CJS) feel untenable for many victim-survivors. A common thread across the interviews was the concern over the lengthy and drawn-out nature of the criminal justice process. ISVAs, in particular, expressed frustration with the extended timelines, noting

that many victim-survivors lose their emotional resilience during the prolonged wait for court proceedings. These professionals pointed out that the lengthy process, which can stretch over several years, places undue pressure on victim-survivors, many of whom find it difficult to remain emotionally and mentally engaged when justice feels so distant.

This concern was echoed by other professionals, such as SOITs and intermediaries, who acknowledged that the adversarial nature of the criminal justice system can be particularly difficult for victim-survivors to navigate. The rigorous cross-examinations, invasive questioning, and the general burden of proving one's trauma in a courtroom setting often exacerbate the psychological toll on victim-survivors. Professionals highlighted that for many individuals, the emotional cost of pursuing a legal outcome outweighs the potential benefits, leading them to withdraw in order to preserve their mental well-being. The adversarial system, designed to test the credibility of all parties, can make the pursuit of justice feel like an additional trauma, further distancing victim-survivors from the support they need during such a vulnerable time.

The issue of mental health and well-being emerged as one of the most prominent factors contributing to victim-survivor withdrawal. More than half of the professionals, particularly intermediaries and SOITs, identified mental health challenges as a key reason for disengagement. The emotional trauma of rape, compounded by the stress of the criminal justice process, often results in psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for many victim-survivors. Professionals agreed that these mental health issues are central to understanding withdrawal, as they make it increasingly difficult for victim-survivors to continue with the legal process, which is often perceived as re-traumatizing.

An additional systemic challenge identified by the professionals was the invasive nature of some of the investigative procedures. The confiscation of mobile phones, for example, was seen as an unacceptable invasion of privacy by many victim-survivors, further eroding their trust in the criminal justice system. Several professionals noted that this particular practice often feels like a secondary victimization, with victim-survivors feeling as though they are the ones under scrutiny rather than their perpetrators. These findings indicate that the procedural demands of the criminal justice system often clash with the emotional needs and boundaries of victim-survivors, making the system itself a significant barrier to engagement.

Despite these challenges, the professionals interviewed expressed a cautious optimism about the potential for systemic improvements. Many felt that while victim-survivor withdrawal is a complex issue, it is not insurmountable. Several concrete recommendations emerged from the interviews, centred on improving communication and support for victim-survivors throughout the process. One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions was the need for better management of victim-survivor expectations from the outset. Professionals noted that many victim-survivors enter the criminal justice process with an incomplete or idealized understanding of what to expect, often believing that justice will be swift or that the system will work in their favour without complication. When faced with the realities of long delays, intrusive procedures, and adversarial cross-examinations, many victim-survivors feel disillusioned and overwhelmed, leading to disengagement. Clearer, more compassionate communication from the outset could help mitigate these feelings by preparing victim-survivors for the challenges ahead and helping them develop realistic expectations.

Another key recommendation centred on the need to decouple therapy from the legal process. Currently, many victim-survivors feel forced to choose between accessing therapy

and pursuing a criminal justice outcome, as engaging in therapy can sometimes be perceived as compromising the legal case. This binary choice places an unfair burden on victim-survivors, who are left to prioritize their mental health over their pursuit of justice. Several professionals suggested that allowing victim-survivors to access therapy without this concern would provide them with much-needed emotional support, making it more likely that they could remain engaged with the criminal justice process.

The role of intermediaries and ISVAs was also highlighted as crucial to improving victim-survivor retention. Professionals advocated for the earlier involvement of intermediaries in the criminal justice process, suggesting that their support could be invaluable from the very first stages of reporting. By providing emotional support, practical guidance, and acting as a liaison between victim-survivors and law enforcement, intermediaries could help alleviate some of the pressures placed on victim-survivors, thus reducing the likelihood of withdrawal. ISVAs, too, were seen as playing a critical role in providing ongoing support throughout the process, ensuring that victim-survivors have access to the specialist care they need to navigate the legal and emotional complexities of their case.

This study has contributed valuable insights into the challenges faced by professionals and victim-survivors alike, but it also underscores the need for further research. While the professional perspective offers a critical lens through which to understand withdrawal, future studies would benefit greatly from incorporating the voices of victim-survivors themselves. Their lived experiences, coupled with the insights of professionals, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that lead to disengagement and could help inform more effective interventions moving forward.

In conclusion, the professionals interviewed as part of this research are acutely aware of the systemic and individual challenges that contribute to rape victim-survivor withdrawal. While they recognize the immense difficulties inherent in the criminal justice process, they are also committed to finding solutions that will improve the experiences of victim-survivors. By addressing systemic barriers, improving mental health support, enhancing communication, and ensuring that victim-survivors have access to both emotional and legal resources throughout the process, there is hope that fewer victim-survivors will feel compelled to withdraw from seeking justice. Ultimately, creating a more compassionate, efficient, and supportive system will not only benefit victim-survivors but also strengthen public trust in the criminal justice system itself, ensuring that it fulfils its mandate to serve and protect those most in need of its support.

Appendix

1. Consent Form



CONSENT FORM (P)

Title of Project: Investigating Rape Attrition: Perspectives of victims/survivors and professionals

Name of Researcher: Cameron Doyle

Contact details:

Address: Gf15, Glebe House
Canterbury
CT11QU

Email: c.doyle458@canterbury.ac.uk

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researchers will be kept strictly confidential
4. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and an anonymised transcript of recording will be made.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.
6. I understand that disclosure of gross misconduct will need to be reported.



Name of Participant:	Date:	Signature:
Researcher: Cameron Doyle	Date:	Signature:

2. Participant Information Sheet



Investigating Rape Attrition: Perspectives of victims/survivors and police officers **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (P)**

A research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Cameron Doyle who is a postgraduate student supervised by Dr Katarina Mozova and Dr Martin O'Neill.

Background

This study aims to better understand what professionals perceive to be the reasons behind victim withdrawal after reporting a rape to police. By talking with both professionals and victim/survivors to gain their perspective on the issue. The study then aims to establish 'what works' when preventing withdrawals and how best to support victims. It is important that victims are at the heart of investigations and their best interests are supported. Through better understanding of why individuals choose to withdraw practices can be put in place to better support them and prevent withdrawal rates, bridging the often spoken about 'justice gap' that those in a similar position experience.

What will you be required to do?

Participants in this study will be required to spend approximately 30 minutes with the researcher, talking about their interactions with rape victim/survivors and why they believe victims of rape withdraw from police investigations. Participants will be able to leave the study at any point and will not have to discuss anything they do not want to.

To participate in this research, you must:

- Be a professional having personally dealt with victim/survivors of rape and serious sexual assault

Procedures

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be contacted by the lead researcher (Cameron) and asked about a convenient time/date and location where the study will happen. You will then be asked to spend approximately 30 minutes with the researcher. This will be audio recorded however, the audio recording will be deleted once an anonymised transcription has been made. You are entitled to a copy of the transcription.

Feedback

No immediate feedback will be provided; however, participants can ask for feedback in form of the report which will be created at the end of the study.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

On the legal basis of consent all data and personal information will be stored securely within CCCU premises in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's own data protection policies. No unrelated or unnecessary personal data will be collected or stored. The following categories of personal data will be processed: age, gender, personal opinions. Personal data will be used to describe the sample in the final write up and to analyse opinions. However, from the final write up, it will not be possible to link data back to specific participants. Data can only be accessed

by the lead researcher and his supervisory team and examiners. Data will not be transferred outside EEA.

After completion of the study, all data will be made anonymous (i.e. all personal information associated with the data will be removed) and held for a period of five years.

Whilst all opinions presented will be completely confidential, if you disclose a criminal offence or it is deemed that you pose a threat to self and others, such information has to be disclosed. Any disclosure of gross misconduct will have to be reported. Please, do not discuss specific details of any cases.

Dissemination of results

Results of the study will be disseminated by a MA thesis that will be published in the CCCU library. A report on the findings and recommendations for improvements to be made will also be written for organisations that take part.

Deciding whether to participate

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to (i) withdraw consent at any time without having to give a reason, (ii) request to see all your personal data held in association with this project, (iii) request that the processing of your personal data is restricted, (iv) request that your personal data is erased and no longer used for processing.

Process for withdrawing consent

You are free to withdraw consent at any time without having to give a reason. To do this simply send an email to the principle researcher. The email for which can be found below.

Any questions?

Please contact Cameron Doyle at c.doyle458@canterbury.ac.uk.

School of Law, Criminal Justice and Policing.

Supervisors:

Dr Katarina Mozova at katarina.mozova@canterbury.ac.uk.

Dr Martin O'Neill at martin.oneill@canterbury.ac.uk.

3. Interview Guide

Questionnaire (PO)

Background Questions:

1. Age, gender, ethnicity
2. What area of the country do you cover?
3. What is your role?
4. How do you first get in contact with a survivor?
5. For how many years did you specialise working with victim/survivors of rape and serious sexual assault?
6. In your own words, how do you understand your role?
 - a. What works well and what doesn't

Withdrawal Questions:

1. Now we're getting to questions surrounding withdrawal specifically. We're going to start quite wide and see where that takes us. What do you believe to be the main factor leading to rape victim withdrawal?
2. Do you believe there to be any other considerable contributing factors? If so, what?
 - a. Systemic factors (so how things are set up from an organisation and legislative perspective) and individual (you as an individual or survivors as individuals).
 - b. Can you recall a case, without giving any specifics, where you can illustrate these factors?
3. In your role, how do you feel you can address these factors?
4. What, if anything, do you believe, can be done more widely, beyond your role or in conjunction with your role, to reduce withdrawal?
5. What, if anything, could other organisations do to reduce withdrawal – specifically, we are interested in understanding what other organisations you are aware of which are involved AND how you all work together.
 - a. Try to think of the whole journey a survivor goes through and the different possible points of withdrawal
6. Is there anything else you wish to add? In an ideal world, what should be done to address survivor withdrawal.

Ethics ETH1920-0175: Mr Cameron Doyle : Decision

Sent on 21 Apr 2020 by Dennis Nigbur

[Download as PDF...](#)

Mr Cameron Doyle

School of Law, Criminal Justice and Policing

Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences

21st April 2020

Dear Cameron

Confirmation of ethics approval: Research victims' withdrawals from rape cases they have reported to police. I would also like to research police perceptions of why victims withdraw.

Your ethics application complies fully with the requirements for ethical and governance review, as set out in this University's Research Ethics and Governance Procedures, and has been approved.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility to follow, as appropriate, the policies and procedures set out in the [Research Governance Framework](#) and any relevant academic or professional guidelines.

Any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the study over its course will require an amendment application, and may require a new application for ethics approval.

It is a condition of approval that you **must** inform ethics@canterbury.ac.uk once your research has completed.

Wishing you every success with your research.

On behalf of

Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences Ethics Panel

dennis.nigbur@canterbury.ac.uk

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