



SEXUAL OFFENCE VICTIMS

An exploratory study on
considerations regarding contact
with the police and/or assistance
- summary -



REGIOPLAN
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Amsterdam, July 2017
Publication nr. 16098

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SUMMARY

Background to the study

The willingness of victims to report greatly differs per type of offence (Van de Wijer & Bernasco, 2016; Tolsma, 2011). The percentage of sexual offence victims who report the offence is fairly low in the Netherlands; according to De Haas (2012) it is sixteen percent on average. Moreover, there are indications that victims' willingness to report sexual offences decreased in the past years. In 2015, in response to parliamentary questions, the then minister Van der der Steur said it was important to reduce barriers to reporting. A relevant aim, particularly because sexual offence victims relatively often know their perpetrators (De Haas, 2012) and reporting the offence occurs even less often in these cases (Ceelen et al, 2016; Wolitzky-Taylor et al, 2011; Larsen et al, 2015; Allen, 2007; Fisher et al, 2003; Koss, Dinero, Seibel & Cox, 1988). Hardly any studies are available on specific considerations that play a role in victims' decisions whether or not to contact the police and/or seek assistance. The Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Security and Justice commissioned Regioplan to conduct an exploratory study on the factors and considerations that play a role for **adult** sexual offence victims in their decisions whether or not to notify the police after the incident, whether or not to report the offence, and the choice whether or not to seek assistance. Parallel to this study the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children is conducting a monitor on the flow of cases of sexual violence against children in the judicial chain.

The study focused on the following questions:

1. What factors decide whether the victim contacts the police and/or seeks assistance?
2. What are the needs of victims after a sexual offence and whom do they contact and when?
3. Based on what considerations do victims decide whether or not to contact the police and/or assistance?
4. How do they experience the process at the police station after the incident?

Methods

In order to provide the best possible answers to these questions various sources have been consulted in this study. In addition to conducting a brief international **literature study**, anonymised **registrations** of the Dutch National Police and the Blauwe Maan Foundation were analysed. Moreover, a total number of **thirty victims** of sexual offences, all of them women, participated in a telephone **interview**. Twenty-eight of them had contacted assistance and eighteen had contacted the police (8 had only notified the police; 10 had also reported the offence). Most respondents are of Dutch descent, medium or highly educated, and at a young adult age became a victim of a sexual

offence. Nineteen respondents became victims of sexual offences multiple times; thirteen respondents suffered prolonged abuse. Rape is the most prevalent offence respondents fell victim to. In four cases the perpetrator was unknown to the victim. With regard to most respondents, the discussed (and most recent) offence took place five years or longer ago. Finally, by means of **interviews** input was received from fifteen **professionals** working in (first- or second-line) psychosocial assistance, legal assistance, for the vice squad and for the Public Prosecutor.

Limitations of the study

In practice, the two most important sources for the study: interviews with sexual offence victims, and registrations of the organisations, yielded less than intended beforehand. Considerably fewer victims were reached than originally intended (30 instead of 60). Moreover, the victims we interviewed were all women, most of them relatively young, highly educated and of Dutch descent. It turned out that the intended victim registrations of the organisations were only available to a limited extent or their quality was insufficient for the purpose of this study. The initial intention was to make a distinction based on background characteristics between different groups of victims that had or had not contacted the police and assistance. However, neither the interviews with the victims nor the registrations yielded sufficient opportunities to (statistically) compare these groups. Due to the mentioned limitations, the current study should be considered as a first exploratory analysis of possible impediments to reporting or seeking assistance in the case of sexual offences.

Results

Factors in relation to reporting and assistance

From the brief literature study it appears that characteristics of the offence play an important role in victims' considerations whether or not to report the offence and to seek assistance. It thus appears that relatively more victims of rape report the offence as compared to victims of other types of sexual offences. In addition, victims who sustained injuries, experienced extreme anxiety, or were confronted with the use or threat of use of weapons are more likely to report the offence and seek (medical/formal) help. The results emerging from the interviews with victims correspond to these findings.

Various studies show that sexual offence victims are more inclined to report the offence and seek medical/formal help if the perpetrator is unknown to them. According to the professionals interviewed, it is more difficult for victims to report the offence and seek assistance if the perpetrator is an intimate partner. Furthermore, according to the literature female victims and victims who are afraid they have been infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) more often contact the police and (medical) assistance than their opposites. Interviewed professionals confirm the need of victims for a medical examination in order to test whether they have been infected with an STD.

In the literature, victims who were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs during the offence are specifically associated with the choice not to report. Reasons to not seek help vary between victims from ethnic minorities and majorities, and include culture-related impediments to seeking help. In addition, a number of studies argue that victims from ethnic minority groups less often seek help after sexual violence than victims from ethnic majority groups. Other studies do not confirm this observation.

In the literature, having children and symptoms of post-traumatic stress are specifically associated with the choice to seek professional help (psychological and/or medical assistance). This also emerges from the interviews with victims. In addition, from the literature it appears that city-dwellers and older victims (older than 45 years of age) more often report the offence than their opposites.

Victims' needs immediately after the sexual offence

According to the interviews with victims, their needs immediately after the offence vary: some of them want to be alone, others, on the contrary, want to have people around them. Most victims are eager to tell their story and need to be believed. Furthermore, they need safety and rest. The interviewed professionals also notice that many victims need safety and acknowledgement. In addition, they indicate more practical needs of victims, such as a shower and clean clothing after the offence and being familiarised with existing assistance services.

Considerations whether or not to contact the police and assistance

According to the interviews with victims, the need for information on reporting the offence forms a first consideration to contact the police. Both victims and professionals argue that the need for retribution is an important reason to actively report the offence (in particular when the perpetrator is unknown to the victim). Furthermore, by means of reporting, victims want to stop the perpetrator from making more victims. In case the perpetrator is known to the victim, the reason to report the offence is to stop the (prolonged) sexual violence. Other reasons to report the offence are to recover the damage from the perpetrator (interviews professionals) and to be able to continue the coping process (interviews victims). In conclusion, both the literature and the interviews with victims and professionals indicate that encouragement from the victim's environment increases their willingness to report.

The interviews with victims and professionals show that the assessment of the feasibility of the case (evidence) is an important factor in victims' decisions not to report (lack of evidence or witnesses and a denying perpetrator thus form an impediment). In connection with this, professionals argue that the criminal proceedings (from reporting the offence until a possible hearing and verdict) often entail a large burden for victims, while there is no guarantee that proceedings will lead to prosecution and punishment. Even when reporting the offence does lead to punishment, some victims regard the burden of the

criminal proceedings as too high in relation to the severity of the penalty. Another reason why victims do not report is that the content of the informative conversation leads to different insight as a result of which victims decide not to report. Furthermore, fear of negative consequences of reporting (reaction of family and friends, not being believed, the perpetrator's revenge), shame, feelings of guilt and a lack of trust in the police and/or insufficient knowledge of the procedure to be followed form impediments to reporting the offence (based on interviews with victims, interviews with professionals and literature).

One of the main reasons for victims to seek (psychological) help is that at a certain point, they experience the sexual offence as too burdensome. The reason that victims seek legal assistance is because they want advice about the steps that can be taken and/or what may be in store for them in the criminal proceedings. Feelings of shame or fear (of the perpetrator's revenge or of not being believed) and the tendency to avoid memories of the incident(s) because they might lead to more psychological pain, may form impediments to seeking assistance.

Experiences of victims in their contact with the police

In general, the sexual offences the respondents talked about in the interviews happened a long time ago. Although it is unknown when respondents had contact with the police concerning the sexual offence, this probably did not happen recently. However, in the past two years various developments have occurred in the work processes of the vice squad, also concerning areas with regard to which the interviewed victims (and professionals) came up with improvement points.

The interviews with victims show that their appreciation of the contact they had with the police varies. Victims who are positive mainly appreciate the empathy that was shown and the human contact, which made them feel taken seriously and heard. Victims who negatively experienced the contact, on the contrary, did not feel taken seriously and say they felt the police did not believe them. There appears to be tension between the perspective of the vice squad and the perspective of sexual offence victims. The police need a factual and detailed description of the incident(s) with a view to the evidential value of the case. For victims, it can be hard to reconstruct or remember the details of the incident or the chronological order of events. In addition, acknowledgement is often one of their main needs. Because of the information the vice investigator needs and repeatedly questions, victims may get the impression that they are not being believed. In this way, their contact with the police may lead to a negative experience for the victims. On the other hand, some victims indicate that the decision to contact the police resulted in a more positive self-image; they are proud of the fact that they stood up for themselves. The appreciation of the police contact is also linked to the results achieved (punishment of the perpetrator).

From the interviews with the victims and a number of legal professionals (lawyer and public prosecutors) it appears that it may take a long time after

reporting the offence before the case is taken up. Furthermore, there are only few (periodical) moments of contact with the victim to provide them with feedback on developments in the case. Meanwhile, victims have a strong need to be updated regularly (by a fixed contact person) during the police investigation (and also the public prosecutor's investigation), even if it takes a long time before new developments occur.

In conclusion

This exploratory study shows that considerations and impediments occur at different levels that influence each other. For instance, considerations of victims are connected to their personal situation (such as experiencing severe symptoms, having children, expectations with respect to the result of police contact or assistance), characteristics of the offence (such as type of offence and relation with the perpetrator), the victims' direct social environment (such as receiving or not receiving social support and advice), their cultural background and the society at large (by means of perceptions of victimisation). Aspects that lead to victims proceeding to report the offence and/or calling in assistance seem to be particularly applicable in cases where the perpetrator is unknown to the victim. In cases where the perpetrator is known to the victim, seeking help and reporting the offence is even harder for victims. Precisely these victims that know their perpetrators are in the majority when sexual offence victims are concerned, according to, for instance, De Haas (2012). Due to these complexities, it is important as a society to support victims of sexual offences in the process of reporting or seeking assistance.

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