

Complaints of rape and the criminal justice system: Fresh evidence on the attrition problem in England and Wales

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Abstract

The UK has one of the lowest conviction rates for rape in Europe. This article presents unique evidence on the factors that influence the attrition of rape allegations in the English criminal justice system. The study is based on a large, representative sample of rape allegations reported to the London Metropolitan Police, the UK's biggest police force. The dataset contains unprecedented detail on the incident, the victim, the suspect and the police investigation. The results lend support to the influence of some rape myths and stereotypes on attrition. These findings suggest that further central factors include the ethnicity of the suspect as well as what police officers and prosecutors perceive as evidence against the truthfulness of the allegation: police records noting a previous false allegation by the victim, inconsistencies in the victim's account of the alleged rape, and evidence or police opinion casting doubt on the allegation.

Keywords

Attrition, criminal justice, policing, rape

Introduction

Most rapes are never reported to the police and, of those reported, only a minority result in a conviction. This persistent finding of empirical studies of criminal justice responses to rape complaints has been termed the 'attrition problem' or 'justice gap' (Brown, 2011).

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Rape is an iconic offence in the measure of women's equality in society. How complaints of rape are treated within the criminal justice system thus not only is important for the victims who seek justice but sends a powerful signal to society at large. With a conviction rate as low as 7 percent (Home Office and Ministry of Justice data, 2013) – one of the lowest in Europe (Lovett and Kelly 2009) – one might argue that in England and Wales rape is effectively 'decriminalized' (Gregory and Lees, 1999: 91). Research has sought to establish not only the extent of the attrition but also the factors that explain it (Brown et al., 2007; Daly and Bouhours, 2010; Grace et al., 1992; Gregory and Lees, 1999; Harris and Grace, 1999; Hester, 2013; HMIC and HMCPSI, 2002, 2007; Jordan, 2004; Kelly, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005; Lea et al., 2003; Lovett et al., 2007; Stern, 2010).

What distinguishes complaints that go to court from those that do not? What makes a rape complaint credible in the eyes of criminal justice agents, and what discredits a complainant? Whereas the body of literature on the impact of particular aspects of the rape complaint on attrition is growing steadily and remains a topic for global dialogue about women's gendered justice, the number of large-scale empirical attrition studies for England and Wales is more limited. Key publications here date back to the 1990s (Grace et al., 1992; Harris and Grace, 1999) and were followed by a number of government-body commissioned reports in the early 2000s (HMIC and HMCPSI, 2002, 2007; Kelly, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005). The most recent and frequently cited (the Stern Report), a government-commissioned report to stipulate new avenues for practice published in 2010, is a review and does not contain fresh empirical evidence (Stern, 2010). The Rape Monitoring Group of the police oversight body – Her Majesty's Inspectorate for the Constabulary (HMIC) – has so far published only basic police recording statistics, and no in-depth analyses of patterns in attrition (HMIC, 2014).

This article provides unique empirical evidence from a large, representative sample of rape complaints made to the UK's largest police force, the Metropolitan Police Service in London (MPS). The dataset contains unprecedented detail on the incident, the victim, the suspect and the police investigation, allowing us to provide an up-to-date picture of the factors that influence attrition. To anticipate the main findings, our results lend partial support to the influence of classic rape myths and stereotypes on attrition. We find that a further central factor in attrition is what police and prosecutors perceive as evidence against the victim's allegation: the police record noting a previous false allegation by the victim, inconsistencies in the victim's recollection of the rape, and evidence or police opinion casting doubt on the allegation. In the sample, none of the allegations with any of these features was prosecuted. Furthermore, we found that a white suspect with no prior police record is likely to avoid a full police investigation, whereas the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) appear more inclined to believe and pursue an allegation that involves a non-white suspect or a suspect with a prior police record.

The existence and importance of male rape notwithstanding, this article focuses on complaints of rape involving female victims only because there are too few male rape complaints in the sample to draw robust conclusions about male victims. The remainder of the article has four parts. We first explain the attrition problem in England and Wales and review the key findings of previous studies, before describing the empirical study and the results. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

The attrition problem

Major attrition studies in England and Wales suggest that only a minority of rapes are reported to the police and, of those that are reported, the majority do not result in a sanction detection,¹ prosecution or conviction. Attrition is highest at the early stages of the police investigation, with victim withdrawal accounting for a large proportion of the attrition (Grace et al., 1992; Harris and Grace, 1999; Hester, 2013; HMIC and HMCPSP, 2002, 2007; Kelly, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005; Lea et al., 2003; Stanko and Williams, 2009; Stern, 2010). Comparable studies outside England and Wales point to similar patterns (Hanly et al., 2009; Jordan, 2004; Lovett and Kelly, 2009). The past 10 years have seen a considerable number of government-body commissioned reviews, inspection reports and statistical bulletins to address the attrition problem (Cabinet Office, 2011; CPS, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012; Feist et al., 2007; HMIC and HMCPSP, 2002, 2007, 2012; IPCC, 2013; Kelly et al., 2005, 2006; Ministry of Justice, 2013; Myhill and Allen, 2002; Stern, 2010; Walby and Allen, 2004). The Metropolitan Police Service and the Director of Public Prosecutions have recently announced another review (MPS, 2014) and published a Rape Action Plan (CPS, 2014).

There have been many efforts to lower attrition, including law reform to address deficiencies uncovered in the earlier reviews. The 2003 Sexual Offences Act (SOA) introduced a new definition of rape and clarified the definition of 'consent to sex'. Better victim care was another step to improve the way victims were treated. Practical measures included the creation of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs, also called 'Havens' in London), where medical and psychological care for victims of rape and sexual assault is the primary focus, the introduction of Specially Trained Officers (STOs, also called SOITs – Sexual Offences Investigative Trained officers) to attend to rape and sexual assault cases, the availability of female police officers to take the statement, the installation of 'rape suites' in police stations to give rape victims more privacy when making the report, Early Evidence Kits (EEKs) to collect valuable forensic evidence, video-recording of victim statements to spare vulnerable victims giving live evidence in court, and new police guidelines on how to handle rape cases (ACPO, CPS and NPIA, 2010). In sum, there clearly have been changes that have sought to improve the conviction of rapists who come to the attention of criminal law.

Although these practical improvements, legal changes, regular inspections, inquiries and research reports are generally welcomed, commentators express doubt as to their effectiveness in reducing attrition (Brown, 2011; Cook, 2011; Jordan, 2011; Kelly et al., 2006). Official data published jointly in 2013 by the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office and the National Office for Statistics show that the attrition problem remains. The proportion of complaints that result in any legal validation – in the form of sanction detections, prosecutions and conviction – has declined noticeably. Whereas 24 percent of complaints resulted in a conviction in 1985, only 12 percent did so in 1995, and conviction rates have remained at around a low 7 percent since 2000 (Home Office and Ministry of Justice data, 2013). Based on official statistics it appears that the series of legal changes, HMIC inspections, guideline revisions and government-commissioned reviews have not been accompanied by a reduction of the attrition problem. Attrition is still high, and getting worse, at every stage of the criminal justice process.

Pathways to attrition

A rape complaint must successfully pass several hurdles to avoid attrition and secure justice in law. The police are the critical gatekeepers of the criminal justice system and the first point of contact with the criminal justice process for women who have been raped and seek formal justice. A dual role thus falls to the police: to investigate the complaint and, since in rape the victim is usually the key witness, to keep the victim engaged in the criminal justice process. It is estimated that only around 6–18 percent of rapes in England and Wales are reported to the police (Brown et al., 2007; Myhill and Allen, 2002; Stern, 2010). Many allegations are withdrawn soon after they have been made (Gregory and Lees, 1996; Harris and Grace, 1999; Hester, 2013; Jordan, 2004; Kelly, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005), despite false allegations being extremely rare (CPS, 2013; see also Kelly, 2010, and Saunders, 2012, for a discussion). The barriers to reporting a rape and reasons to withdraw are numerous. Frequently cited reasons are a lack of trust in the police and criminal justice system, a fear of not being believed and taken seriously, and feeling ‘raped all over again’ by the way the police question both the victim and their account. The tentative trust required to report the rape is quickly lost when police officers communicate disbelief and disrespect or when the victim loses faith in the police to effectively investigate the case, leading victims to withdraw from the process or retract the allegation altogether (Estrich, 1987; Jordan, 2001, 2004; Kelly, 2002; Stanko, 1985; Taylor et al., 2012; Temkin, 1997, 1999).

Victim withdrawal is only one pathway to attrition. A second is the police or prosecution’s decision to drop the case. The police need to treat what is reported to them as a possible criminal incident and investigate it as such. Police might still decide to ‘no-crime’ the complaint after initial investigations if these uncover verifiable information that in fact no crime took place (Home Office, 2014). In 2012/13 the average no-crime rate for rape complaints was 12 percent, six times higher than for other victim-based crimes in England and Wales (HMIC, 2014). Evidence suggests that some police forces may ‘no-crime’ complaints if they suspect the complaint is a false allegation or difficult to prosecute, without having obtained the required verifiable information to this effect (HMIC and HMCPSI, 2007). The next hurdle is a successful police investigation. The police must successfully identify the offender and secure sufficient evidence to refer the case to the CPS for charge, otherwise police close the case with ‘no further action’. A complaint referred to the CPS for charge results in a prosecution only if it passes two tests: an evidential sufficiency test and a public interest test. If the prosecution concludes that there is no realistic prospect of conviction owing to insufficient evidence or that a prosecution is, on balance, not in the public interest, the case is again closed with ‘no further action’. The final hurdle, if the case reaches court, is the jury. In order to secure a conviction, the prosecution must convince the jury beyond reasonable doubt that sexual intercourse took place in the absence of consent or a reasonable belief thereof. We now turn to the question of why police officers and prosecutors decide to take ‘no further action’ and why juries acquit defendants so frequently.

Factors influencing attrition

Temkin and Krahé (2008) argue that the answer to high attrition lies in attitudes and stereotypes of the legal agents. The legal process, they evidence carefully, is not a

normative, data-driven fact-finding exercise. In practice, police officers, prosecutors, judges and jurors rely on 'schematic processing', cognitive heuristics that allow wider attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs to enter judgments and decisions. The greater the extent to which a complaint of rape conforms to ideas of 'real rape', they show, the higher the chances that the case successfully navigates the challenges of the criminal justice system. The less the case – and the complainant herself – conforms to an ideal of femininity and its sexual violation, the lower the chances that she is believed and the case considered a 'real rape'. Munro and Kelly (2009) argue that this problem is compounded by a vicious cycle of attrition. Performance targets and resource constraints limit police officers and prosecutors to advancing only those cases they believe have a realistic chance of securing a conviction. To do so, police officers and prosecutors anticipate jury decision-making in court and the rape myths and 'real rape' stereotypes that might influence it. Guided by this anticipation, police officers are then more likely to advance cases that conform to the 'real rape' stereotype. A self-perpetuating cycle is set in motion that sustains the influence of rape myths and gender stereotypes.

A 'real rape', as Estrich (1987) proposed nearly three decades ago, is a rape perpetrated by a stranger in an outdoors setting, involving the use of force, which is met with resistance by the victim and evidenced in visible injuries. This image of 'real rape' many scholars suggest disables the legal fact-finding in most rape allegations that come to police attention. And because offenders in stranger rapes often remain unidentified, these cases have, contrary to the real rape prediction, a lower overall conviction rate than cases involving a known suspect (Lovett et al., 2007; Munro and Kelly, 2009). The empirical evidence further shows that 'real rapes' are in fact not typical at all: the majority of perpetrators are known to their victims – current or previous intimate partners, followed by acquaintances, friends, co-workers and family members (Feist et al., 2007; Kelly, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005; Stanko and Williams, 2009).

Another feature of the 'real rape' myth is that victims will report the rape to police immediately and, because of the seriousness of the assault, have a clear and detailed memory of the incident. As a result, delayed complaints and complaints with gaps, incoherence and inconsistencies in the victim's recollection of rape are seen as less credible and are more likely to suffer from attrition (Burt, 1980; Gerger et al., 2007; Lees, 2002; Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994; Stanko, 1985; Taylor, 2004). Contrary to this rape myth, the evidence suggests that rape victims will often delay reporting for a variety of reasons (Adler, 1987; Ellison, 2005; Frazier and Borgida, 1992) and that traumatic events such as rape impair rather than enhance memory performance (Tromp et al., 1995). Finally, the credibility of the complainant appears damaged, and the risk of attrition higher as a result, if the victim suffers from a mental health condition (Ellison et al., 2014) or if the complainant voluntarily consumed alcohol prior to the rape (Finch and Munro, 2005, 2007; Lovett and Horvath, 2009).

In summary, a range of factors have been found to be associated with attrition: the victim–perpetrator relationship, a lack of victim resistance and visible injuries, delayed reporting, gaps and inconsistencies in the victim's account of the rape, victim mental health problems and voluntary alcohol consumption prior to the attack. These factors are all bound up in 'real rape' and 'respectable woman' stereotypes, and their influences on attrition are mediated through a vicious cycle of self-perpetuating effects of these stereotypes on police, prosecution and jury decision-making.

Data and methods of analysis

This study aims to provide an updated picture of factors associated with the attrition of rape complaints in England and Wales. At its heart is a police case file review of all rape allegations reported to the MPS during April and May 2012 ($n = 679$). Because all complaints within these two months are included, the only factor introducing potential sampling bias and thus potentially damaging the representativeness of this sample is the selection of the months April and May. This selection of months could introduce sampling bias if the pattern of complaints made within these two months differed systematically from those reported during the rest of the year. The evidence suggests some seasonality in the volume of recorded rapes, with peaks in summer and troughs in winter; however, April and May are 'average' months (Hird and Ruparel, 2007). The risk of sampling bias thus appears small, rendering the sample representative of all rape complaints reported to this police force within that year. A comparison with other police forces in England and Wales further suggests that the MPS has average levels of no-criming and sanction detections in sexual offences (HMIC, 2014), indicating that our data provide a good representation of the nationwide picture.

A quantitative dataset was generated through in-depth reading and coding of the police case files of each rape complaint in the sample and then analysed using the statistical software package Stata. A total of 42 allegations involving a male victim and 50 cases in which the sex of the victim was not recorded were excluded, leaving 587 cases for analyses.

The analysis distinguishes between the two attrition pathways outlined above. The first is a victim decision to withdraw; the second, in cases not terminated by victim withdrawal, is a police or CPS decision to discontinue the case. With regard to the latter pathway we consider the three attrition points described above: (a) police decision to 'no-crime' the case instead of further investigating it as a crime, (b) a police decision to close the case with 'no further action' instead of referring the case to the CPS for charge, and (c) a CPS decision to take no further action instead of prosecuting in court. The dependent variables in the analyses are a series of dummy variables measuring the case outcomes at these attrition points. Attrition through the first pathway is measured by the variable 'victim withdrawal', coded 1 = 'victim withdrew' and 0 = 'victim did not withdraw'. In cases not withdrawn by the victim (the second attrition pathway), the first point variable is a police decision to 'no-crime', coded 1 = 'case no-crimed' and 0 = 'case remains recorded/investigated as crime'; the second point variable is 'police no further action', coded 1 = 'no further action' and 0 = 'referral to CPS for charge'; and the final attrition point is 'CPS decision', coded 1 = 'no further action' and 0 = 'CPS charge/prosecution'.

All explanatory variables used in the analyses are binary and were coded as 1 if the particular characteristic was present and coded as 0 if it was absent. Table 1 shows all explanatory variables with basic descriptive statistics.

We use a series of simple logistic regression models, that is, one (binary) dependent and one explanatory variable at a time, to identify factors with a statistically significant effect on the odds of attrition at each of these attrition points. The results are displayed in Figure 1, with the respective explanatory variable in the rows (for example, 'victim

Table 1. Key characteristics of the cases in the sample.

	Percentage		Percentage
<i>Incident characteristics</i>		<i>Victim characteristics</i>	
Assault happened outdoors/public place	24	Aged under 13 at time of incident	8
Victim believes they have been drugged	5	Aged under 16 at time of incident	25
Victim had voluntarily consumed alcohol	29	Ethnicity non-white	46
Victim physically resisted assault	35	Mental health problems	23
Victim sustained visible injuries	25	Learning difficulties	4
Perpetrator had a weapon	5	Alcohol abuse problems	6
<i>Evidence</i>		Drug abuse problems	5
Inconsistent victim account	11	Prior police record	22
Corroborating evidence	22	Previous rape report by victim	16
Evidence casts doubt	5	Previous false allegation (sexual assault or rape)	4
Early Evidence Kit used to collect forensic evidence	33	<i>Victim-suspect relationship</i>	
<i>Reporting</i>		Complete stranger	8
Delayed report (>24 hours)	69	Known for less than 24 hours	21
Report outside forensic window (>7 days)	44	Colleague, friend or acquaintance	35
Historical report (>1 year)	30	Family member	8
Victim appeared drunk/drugged when reporting	12	Previous or current intimate partner	29
Victim appeared unclear about meaning of 'consent'	9	History of consensual sex with suspect	27
<i>Police investigation</i>		<i>Suspect characteristics</i>	
Investigated by Child Protection Unit	9	Ethnicity non-white	70
Victim attended a Haven	28	Prior police record	41
Capacity/staffing issues noted	15	Known for sexual offending	16
Video-recorded victim witness statement	32	<i>Investigation milestones</i>	
Cooperation/communication problems with victim	40	Suspect identified	70
Police note doubt about credibility in case file	21	Suspect arrested	47

Note: Sample size $n = 587$.

resisted assault') and the exponentiated regression coefficient (that is, the odds ratio) of its effect on each dependent variable indicated by the placement of the respective dependent variable symbol on that row. For ease of presentation, non-significant variables are

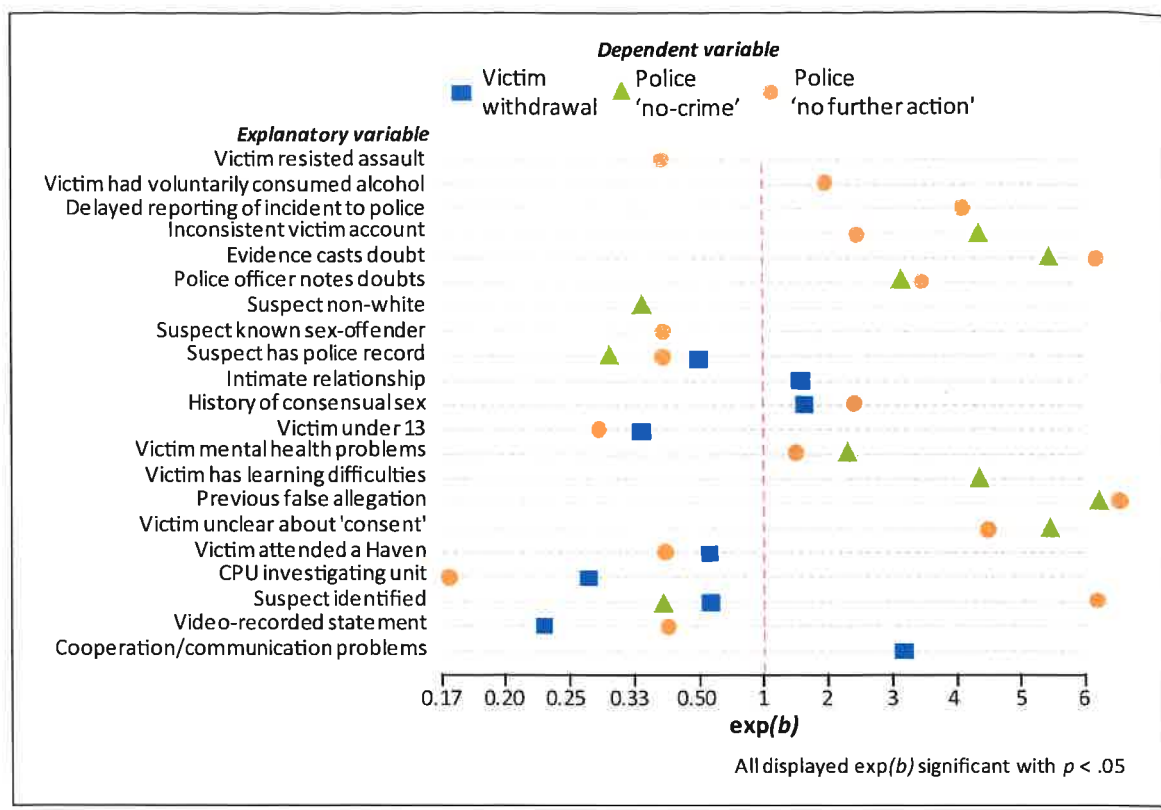


Figure 1. Simple logistic regression analyses predicting attrition points.

omitted from the graph, although they are discussed in the text. To give an example of the interpretation of Figure 1 that follows in the Results section, if the victim had voluntarily consumed alcohol at the time of the incident (yes = 1) the odds of a police 'no further action' decision (rather than a police 'charge' decision) are doubled ($\text{exp}(b) = 2.1$) as compared with a case in which the victim had not voluntarily consumed alcohol (no = 0). The variable had no statistically significant effect on victim withdrawal or police no-criming decisions.

Simple logistic regression was chosen over more complex multivariate options owing to the relatively small sub-sample sizes and the distributional attributes of many variables in the dataset. We have, however, tested all regression models with control variables and interaction effects. In the small number of instances where controlling for a second variable or including an interaction effect did have a statistically significant effect and where, upon carefully inspecting standard errors, estimates and sub-sample sizes, a conclusion was reached that this result is reliable, we do report this in the text.

Finally, at the time of data collection the CPS had decided upon 70 cases only. Instead of regression we thus use a simple comparison of the percentage of cases that resulted in a CPS 'charge' with the percentage of cases that resulted in a CPS 'no further action' decision conditional on the respective 'explanatory' variable. Z-tests are used to assess the statistical significance of any observed differences; for ease of presentation, only statistically significant results ($p < .05$) are displayed in Table 3 at the end of the Results section.

Table 2. Case outcomes in the 2012 MPS sample (percentages).

	Outcome all complaints	Outcome non-withdrawn complaints	Attrition non-withdrawn complaints	Victim withdrawal ^a
Police 'no-crime'	7	11	19	13
Police investigation ongoing	35	22	–	67
Police 'no further action'	40	39	67	49
CPS referral total	19	29	–	19
– Awaiting CPS decision	4	6	–	15
– CPS 'no further action'	6	8	14	32
– CPS charged	9	15	–	12
Total	100	100	100	48
N ^b	583	272	272	311

^aRow percentages.

^bOutcome information missing in 4 out of 587 cases.

Table 3. Statistically significant factors in CPS decision-making.

Percentages	Total sample	CPS decision		
		Charge	'No further action' (NFA)	Difference (Charge–NFA)
Inconsistent victim account	11	0	12	12
Victim mental health problems	23	9	32	23
Victim non-white	46	56	40	–16
Suspect non-white	70	80	61	–19
Suspect known sex or domestic violence offender	16	36	16	–20
Police officer notes doubt	21	7	32	25
N	587	45	25	70

Note: Only statistically significant results ($p < .05$) are displayed. Victim withdrawal cases are excluded.

Results

Table 2 provides basic descriptive statistics of the complaint outcomes. Victim withdrawal accounts for 48 percent of attrition in the sample. Victim withdrawal is highest during the police investigation stage and becomes less likely the further the case progresses: during the police investigation stage 67 percent of allegations were withdrawn by the victim, compared with only 12 percent of those allegations awaiting trial. Of the cases not terminated by victim withdrawal, a police decision to no-crime accounts for 11 percent of case outcomes and 19 percent of attrition, a police decision to take no further action accounts for 39 percent of case outcomes and 67 percent of attrition, and a CPS decision to take no further action accounts for 8 percent of case outcomes and 14 percent

of attrition. At the time of data collection (approximately six months after the recording of the allegation), only 9 percent of cases had not suffered attrition and were awaiting trial, the police investigation was still ongoing in 22 percent of non-withdrawn cases, and a CPS decision was outstanding in 6 percent of non-withdrawn cases.

Turning to the factors that help explain attrition, Figure 1 shows the variables with statistically significant effects on the odds of victim withdrawal, as well as on police no-criming and police 'no further action' decisions in cases that have not been dropped owing to victim withdrawal.

The victim decision to withdraw

Victim withdrawal accounts for almost half of the attrition in the sample. The central factor in victim withdrawal is the police–victim relationship. The odds of victim withdrawal increase by 308 percent if the victim ceases cooperation with police and becomes difficult to contact. Withdrawing cooperation is thus an early warning sign and precursor to withdrawing the allegation altogether. Haven – specialist referral centres for victims of rape and sexual assault – attendance halves the odds of withdrawal: victims who attended a Haven have 44 percent lower odds of withdrawal than victims who did not attend a Haven. Multivariate logistic regression analyses (not displayed in Figure 1) shows that Haven attendance also has an indirect positive effect: victims who attended Havens have 4.5 times higher odds of having their statement video-recorded, which in turn significantly reduces the odds of withdrawal, even after controlling for Haven attendance. However, Haven attendance does not significantly reduce the odds of attrition for victims with mental health problems.

Furthermore, police success in identifying the suspect reduced the odds of withdrawal by 42 percent, and cases investigated by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) have nearly 72 percent lower odds of suffering attrition through victim withdrawal than cases investigated by Sapphire teams (sexual assault investigation units) or standard local police. Part of this effect is mediated through the victim–CPU relationship: the odds of problems of cooperation and communication are reduced by 64 percent if the CPU investigates. Multivariate regression analysis (results not displayed in Figure 1) shows that the lower attrition rate in cases investigated by the CPU is not explained by differences in the profile of cases allocated to the CPU or by the fact that virtually all of their cases involve victims under the age of 13. The effect of victim age ceases to be significant once we control for the investigating unit.

Withdrawal is also less likely when the suspect is a 'credible criminal/unrespectable man': having a prior police record halves the odds of withdrawal. Whether a suspect is a known sex offender has no statistically significant effect on withdrawal. This finding indicates that the status of 'criminal' acquired through a prior police record is the deciding factor, not the prior record of sexual violence. Interestingly, the availability of supporting evidence or of evidence that casts doubt on the victim's account and police officers noting doubts in the case file do not appear to have a statistically significant effect on a victim's decision to withdraw (however, the latter is highly predictive of police-driven attrition, discussed later in this section).

Turning to the role of victim and incident characteristics in explaining withdrawal, the key factor is the victim's relationship to the suspect. A current or previous intimate partnership with the suspect or previous consensual sex with the suspect (outside a relationship) nearly doubles the odds of withdrawal. Victims with other vulnerabilities, such as having a mental health problem or learning difficulty, being young but not underage, or having an alcohol or drug addiction, are no more or less likely to withdraw their allegations than women without any of these vulnerabilities. Higher odds of attrition for women with vulnerabilities are explained by police and court decisions, not by victim withdrawal.

The police decision to 'no-crime'

No-criming accounts for 11 percent of all case outcomes and 19 percent of the attrition in non-withdrawn cases. Two factors are highly likely to lead to no-criming: the police record noting a previous false allegation by the victim increases the odds of no-criming by 786 percent, and evidence casting doubt on the current allegation increases the odds of no-criming by 585 percent. Controlling for the effect of evidence casting doubt, a police officer noting doubt over the truthfulness of the allegation further increases the odds of no-criming by 240 percent. Providing an inconsistent account of the incident is associated with a 443 percent increase in the odds of no-criming. If the victim is deemed to show 'a lack of understanding of consent' the odds of no-criming increase by 540 percent. Victim mental health issues are associated with 2.3 times higher odds of attrition, and victims with learning difficulties are 4.4 times more likely to have their case no-crime.

Police appear more hesitant in no-criming an allegation against a suspect with a prior police record (70 percent reduction in the odds of no-criming). The ethnicity of the suspect matters, too. Non-white suspects have 70 percent lower odds of no-criming, regardless the ethnicity of the victim. Including an interaction effect between suspect and victim ethnicity in the analysis shows that, compared with a non-white suspect, a white suspect has twice the odds of no-criming if his victim is white and 11 times higher odds if the victim is non-white (results not displayed). This finding suggests that white suspects are significantly and substantially more likely to avoid further investigation than non-white suspects, in particular if their victim is non-white.

The police decision to take 'no further action'

A police decision to take no further action rather than to refer the case to the CPS for prosecution accounts for 67 percent of attrition in non-withdrawn cases and is thus the biggest attrition point on the criminal justice agent decision pathway to attrition. The availability of evidence and incident characteristics that lend the allegation credibility, alongside a suspect who is a 'credible criminal' and a complainant who is a 'credible victim', are key here. Independent evidence is the most important factor: availability of evidence casting doubt on the victim's account multiplies the odds of a 'no further action' decision by 10. Conversely, evidence supporting the victim's account reduces the odds of attrition at this stage by 72 percent (however, not statistically significant).

Inconsistencies in the victim's account increase the odds of a police 'no further action' decision by 295 percent. The odds of attrition at this stage are halved if the victim physically resisted the assault, but increase by 470 percent if the victim delayed reporting of the rape. A suspect who is a credible criminal further helps the case: a prior police record reduces the odds of attrition by 70 percent, regardless of the type of the offence. Who the victim is matters, too. All complaints by a victim with a previous false allegation that have not been no-crimed resulted in police 'no further action' in the sample; history of consensual sex (2.2), victim mental health problems (1.5) and voluntary alcohol consumption prior to the assault (2.1) all significantly increase the odds of attrition through a 'no further action' decision. Victim support in the form of Haven attendance and a video-recorded statement each decreases the odd by nearly 60 percent. Child sex abuse cases – victims under 13 – are nearly 4 times less likely to suffer attrition at this stage.

The CPS decision to not prosecute

A CPS decision not to prosecute accounts for 14 percent of the attrition of non-withdrawn cases. In the sample, none of the cases with an inconsistent victim account of the rape resulted in a charge (see Table 3). A charge was also substantially less likely if the victim had a mental health problem or if police officers noted doubts in the case file. Whether or not the suspect is a 'credible criminal' appears to be decisive: a CPS charge is significantly more likely if the victim and suspect are non-white (most offences are intra-racial, accounting for the higher percentage of non-white victims) and if the suspect was a known sex offender.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the article is to provide an up-to-date picture of the factors that influence the attrition of rape allegations today, using a representative sample of rape complaints made to the UK's largest police force. There are few research opportunities with unfettered access to police case files and the findings presented here are a window to knowledge about police processing of sexual violence.

The extent of attrition in our sample mirrors official statistics (Home Office and Ministry of Justice, 2013): 7 percent of allegations were police no-crimed, 40 percent ended with a police decision to take 'no further action', and, of the remaining allegations, 30 percent dropped out through a CPS decision to take no further action rather than prosecute in court. At the time of data collection, 15 percent of non-withdrawn cases were awaiting trial. Similar to previous studies (Harris and Grace, 1999; Kelly et al., 2005; Lea et al., 2003), we found that victim withdrawal accounts for almost half of the attrition, with most victims withdrawing early in the process, and withdrawal becoming less likely once the case was referred to the CPS for charge. The analyses presented here identified some correlates of victim withdrawal, chiefly the relationship between the victim and the police officers on the case.

Case file reviews such the study presented here, however, can tell the story only as portrayed by police officers in the police case file. Interviews with victims themselves are required to understand their experience of the police process and their reasons for

withdrawing from the process or retracting a truthful allegation altogether, such as pressure or threats from the perpetrator, family or some other party (see, for example, Jordan, 2001; Taylor et al., 2012; Temkin, 1997). In particular, if the victim felt pressured by police to withdraw or was even threatened to be charged with making a false allegation (see Jordan, 2001), this is unlikely to feature in the police record. Furthermore, although a case file review enables the study of associations between the police file noting a previous false allegation and the outcome of the present allegation, it does not allow conclusions as to whether an allegation was indeed false. In our sample, in 22 out of 587 cases police noted a previous false allegation by the victim, a considerably higher proportion than the 35 out of 16,041 reported allegations in which a complainant was prosecuted for making a false allegation of rape in 2011/12 (CPS, 2013; Home Office and Ministry of Justice, 2013).

The results of the present study lend support to some, but not all, classical 'real rape' myths. Whether or not the assault happened outdoors had no significant effect on the outcome of the case. And, although victims were less likely to withdraw and more likely to secure a CPS referral if the suspect was a complete stranger rather than an intimate partner, this is explained by the latter being a disadvantage rather than the former being of particular advantage. Stranger rape cases were in fact more likely to suffer from attrition than most cases (except intimate partner cases), simply because the offender could often not be identified. Visible victim injuries did not feature as a statistically significant factor in attrition; however, whether or not the victim physically resisted the attack or delayed reporting of the rape to police did. It is critical to note that vulnerable victims are no more likely to withdraw their allegations, with the exception of vulnerability stemming from an intimate relationship with the perpetrator. Victim vulnerabilities such as mental health problems and learning difficulties suffer higher attrition through police and CPS decisions to no-crime or take no further action.

Other rape myths and gender expectations played a role, too. As far as police decisions are concerned (but not the victim decision to withdraw), the intractable 'respectable woman' image is significant: voluntary alcohol consumption prior to the rape, a history of consensual sex with the perpetrator, mental health problems and learning difficulties, and a woman's 'misunderstanding' of the meaning of consent explain police decisions to discontinue a case. Whether the suspect is a credible criminal with a prior police record rather than a law-abiding 'respectable' white man mattered at all stages because white suspects were significantly more likely to escape further investigation and police appeared more hesitant to dismiss a case if the suspect had a prior police record. Whether this observed disproportionality in outcomes for non-white suspects is indicative of racial discrimination cannot be determined based on the present data (see Reiner, 2010; Waddington et al., 2004). Although to our knowledge there exists no dedicated research on the subject of racial discrimination of rape suspects, the wider literature has consistently evidenced racial discrimination of non-white, in particular black, suspects in stop-and-search situations (Bowling and Phillips, 2007; Delsol and Shiner, 2006), poorer treatment of non-white citizens during police encounters (Skogan, 2005), as well as disproportionately higher arrest, charge and incarceration rates for non-white offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Further research is urgently needed to establish whether the disproportionality found in this study is the result of racial discrimination of non-white

rape suspects by police (see hooks, 1981, and LaFree, 1980, on racial discrimination of rape victims) and to confront the issue within policy and practice.

We further found evidence that some of the measures introduced to support victims reduced attrition: victims who attended a Haven for support and who had their witness statement video-recorded to spare them giving live evidence-in-chief were significantly less likely to withdraw and more likely to see their case referred to the CPS for charge. However, Haven attendance did not significantly reduce attrition through withdrawal for victims with mental health issues, suggesting that victims with mental health issues pose a special challenge to the criminal justice system (see Ellison et al., 2014, for a fuller discussion).

Our findings suggest that one of the most influential factors is the perceived credibility of the allegation in light of the evidence as seen through the eyes of the investigating police officer and prosecutor. Only 2 percent of complaints in which police officers noted doubt about the allegation resulted in a CPS charge. None of cases in which there was independent evidence casting doubt on the allegation, the police record noted a prior false rape allegation by the victim or there were inconsistencies in the victim's account of the rape resulted in a CPS charge. In contrast, independent evidence supporting the allegation did not guard the allegation against attrition to a statistically significant extent, revealing a stark asymmetry between the non-significant impact of supporting evidence and the large, statistically significant effect of evidence that casts doubt on the allegation. In rape complaints, the victim's account of the rape is often the only and almost always the key evidence. It is thus unsurprising that inconsistencies within it weigh so heavily, albeit psychological research on memory suggests that inconsistencies are a normal feature of human memory and a poor measure of the truthfulness of an allegation (see Hohl and Conway, under review, for a fuller discussion). Further research is required in particular on the use of victim memory as evidence, and more generally on how police officers construct and evaluate in situ evidence in rape complaints and its impact on attrition.

Police forces in the UK are receiving more complaints of rape than ever before. In the wake of England's most notorious sexual predator, Jimmy Savile, and other high-profile sexual abuse scandals, victims who hitherto told no one now come forward and seek formal justice for historic and recent rapes. Our findings suggest that few of these victims are likely to see their perpetrator in court. The recently announced CPS 'Rape Action Plan' acknowledges the continued existence of the attrition problem and the need for action, highlighting in particular the need to address the influence of rape myths (CPS, 2014). Our findings suggest that although some, but not all, classic rape myths can be linked to attrition, there are further factors to consider. First, case outcomes are disproportional in respect to the ethnicity of the suspect. Further research is required to establish what drives this disproportionality in the investigation and prosecution of rape complaints. Second, our results point to the pivotal role of police officers' and prosecutors' understanding of what constitutes evidence and the evaluation of such evidence in the context of decisions to drop a rape case before it reaches court. Although much more research is required, it is important to find ways of translating into practice what we already know about the fragility of rape allegations in the criminal justice process. These and other consistent empirical findings must be incorporated into policies aimed at bettering justice, especially for victims of rape.

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Note

1. A sanction detection is a recorded, solved crime.

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