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Rape charges down by 23% in year despite rise in police reports

More than a fifth of rape cases referred to prosecutors are being 'administratively finalised' instead of charged

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Campaigners call drop 'deeply concerning' (Getty)

The number of people being charged with **rape** has fallen by almost a quarter, despite a rise in attacks being reported to police.

New figures released by the **Crown Prosecution Service** (CPS) show a 23 per cent drop in the number of rape suspects prosecuted in 2017-18 from the year before.

But in the same period, the number of rapes recorded by police increased by 31 per cent to almost 54,000 offences across England and Wales.

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Under half of the cases referred to prosecutors by police (47 per cent) were taken forward, down from 55 per cent the year before, and police passed almost 10 per cent less suspects on.



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The CPS only proceeds where it finds "sufficient evidence to provide a realistic

prospect of conviction" and the benchmark has provoked controversy in rape cases, which may hinge on conflicting accounts given by victims and attackers.

More than a fifth of rape referrals were "administratively finalised" by the CPS, up from 12 per cent in the year before, meaning they were closed without action against the suspects.

The move is taken when police ask for advice but do not submit a full file for a charging decision, or when prosecutors request more information or evidence but officers do not supply it by their deadline.

The number of rape convictions fell by 12 per cent from 2,991 to 2,635, but the conviction rate rose slightly from 57.6 per cent to 58.3 per cent because of the smaller number of prosecutions.

Sarah Champion, the Labour MP for Rotherham and co-chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sexual Violence, said the figures suggested **stretched police forces** were facing "resourcing problems for collating evidence to meet

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charging criteria”.



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“It is an absolute scandal that there’s been such a dramatic decrease in the number of prosecutions for rape cases,” she added. “The statistics clearly demonstrate the cuts have taken their toll and the government can no longer effectively prevent or prosecute violence against women and girls.

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“It is vital that when women and girls come forward to report a crime they have full confidence in the system. It is the least they deserve, but the statistics released today bring that into question.”

The statistics were published days after

the CPS denied allegations that it was taking “weak rape cases out of the system” to improve conviction rates.

It said pre-charge case management panels has been introduced in the most challenging cases, and training was being given on prosecuting sexual offences involving vulnerable witnesses and young people.

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Of the rape-linked prosecutions in 2017-18, 44 per cent of attacks were against children and 53 per cent of complainants were under the age of 24.

The figures were released in the CPS's annual Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) report, which said more than 100,000 linked prosecutions were brought in the year – a fifth of its total caseload.

While domestic abuse-related referrals from police remained steady at almost 111,000, the number of both prosecutions and convictions fell, although the conviction rate hit a record high of 76.4 per cent.

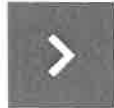
Almost 1,000 offences of controlling or coercive behaviour were also charged in the year as the use of new laws increases.

Across all VAWG crimes, referrals from police dropped by 0.7 per cent, the number of completed prosecutions reduced by 5.9 per cent and the number of convictions by 4.9 per cent.

The CPS said its caseload for all crimes had plummeted by 10 per cent in the year and pointed to increases of stalking and modern slavery cases.

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Alison Saunders, the outgoing Director of Public Prosecutions, said the cases were “among the most complex we deal with”.

“Over the past decade, the CPS and the police have undertaken extensive work to address the particular challenges involved,” she added. “This includes training our specialist prosecutors to understand victim vulnerabilities and the impact of rape, as well as consent, myths and stereotypes, and the difficulties of

cases involving young people.

“Our priority is to continue to work with the police, to bring strong cases and respond to challenges such as the substantial increase in digital evidence that is now a common feature of these cases. As ever, prosecutors must make their decisions after testing whether the evidence provides a realistic prospect of conviction, and that it is in the public interest.”

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Researchers suggested jury bias and societal attitudes may be playing a part in acquittals after separate figures showed that **young men were less likely to be convicted of rape than older defendants.**

MPs and campaigners have also raised fears that **"prejudicial and irrelevant" evidence about claimants, including their sexual history,** is being used by defence lawyers to undermine cases in court.

There is fierce debate about how much digital evidence from rape claimants' phones should be passed to lawyers by police, and the balance between what is deemed relevant and the protection of privacy.

A series of rape trials collapsed at the end of last year over newly recovered evidence but lawyers say problems with disclosure are common to all crimes, calling on police and the CPS to reform how information is shared.

Sarah Green, co-director of the End Violence Against Women Coalition, said the reasons behind the “collapse in rape justice” must be investigated.

“We need to remember that behind these figures lie real lives, and decisions to seek justice for one of the most serious crimes on the book, one which does enormous harm to individuals and those around them,” she added.

“We now need the justice secretary and the attorney general to commission an independent review of exactly what changed in CPS policy and practice over the last 18 months and how we can improve outcomes for victims of rape.”

Katie Ghose, the chief executive of Women’s Aid, said the fall in prosecutions for both rape and domestic abuse was “deeply concerning” and needed urgent action.

“With the police publicly prioritising domestic abuse more than ever, we have seen a record number of survivors build up the confidence to report their abuser,”

she added.

“It is clear that survivors want to access justice and to be protected from further abuse. However, the referral rates for domestic abuse cases are far too low; the police and CPS must continue to address why cases are not being effectively referred for charging decisions.”

Ms Ghose called for the CPS to improve domestic abuse training, following a damning report showing that **private probation companies were leaving women at children at risk** from offenders released from prison.

She added: “We need a criminal justice system that both keeps victims safe and holds abusers to account, only then can survivors be safe in the knowledge that the criminal justice system is doing everything it can to protect them.”

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