

Sarah Everard: The tipping point to take violence against women and girls seriously?



[Jennifer Brown](#) and [Miranda Horvath](#) discuss some of the organisational failures involved in the rape and murder of Sarah Everard, and explain what is required for meaningful change.

The rape and murder of Sarah Everard was truly awful, deeply traumatic for her in her last hours and desperately sad for her family and friends. It was also the culmination of a number of failures which typify tragedies. There was an organisational failure to undertake a thorough vetting on Wayne Couzens' background, there were lost investigative opportunities when reports of Couzens flashing were not followed up, and there appears to have been a cultural collusion in the sharing of explicit material in a WhatsApp exchange.

Wayne Couzens' occupation presents an affront to our sense of what is right, causing a [moral injury](#): a sense of betrayal through a transgression by someone in authority abusing their power resulting in broken trust and anger which taints the organisation the perpetrator belongs to. The case thus triggered an extensive reaction to a relatively rare event (for instance, analysis by the [Femicide Census](#) of murders of women in the UK shows that 8% were committed by a stranger and 1% were committed by serving or former police officers).

The consciousness of violence against women and girls has nevertheless been raised through online campaigns such as #MeToo in recent years, providing the background noise through which the Sarah Everard case broke because of its particular characteristics in much the same way that the murder of George Floyd surfaced as the cumulative symbol of racial discrimination in the United States. Collective moral injury leaves an enduring emotional imprint, especially when an institution whose reason for existence is trust is implicated.

Whilst murder is relative rare, however, rape is not. In [2020](#), there were 52,220 rapes recorded by police in England and Wales but only 834 (1.6%) resulted in a charge. Figures from the Crown Prosecution Service for 2019-20 show 1,439 suspects were convicted of rape or lesser offences, the lowest level since records began. The Crime Survey of England and Wales estimated that since 2018/20, 121,000 women experienced a rape or attempted rape. Here we have the problem of attrition: the dropping out of cases at every stage in the criminal justice system – reporting, charging, prosecuting and convicting – referred to as the justice gap. This is not a new phenomenon. It was 1982 when Roger Graef's documentary about Thames Valley Police's rape investigation practices shocked the nation and stimulated a national conversation about the police's treatment of rape complainants. Since then, there have been dozens of reviews and reports analysing the problem and making recommendations.

Clearly, there have been some improvements with changes in the law around issues of consent, the appointment of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, introduction of specially trained prosecutors and special measures to protect vulnerable witnesses in court. But mostly, there has been what [Baroness Stern](#) called an implementation gap. Many words have been written or spoken calling for change, and indeed a plethora of policies and strategies formulated, but these have not been inculcated into practice across the whole of the Criminal Justice System.

Issues that are diffuse and intractable, requiring action at multiple levels and co-operation between key players, are particularly prone to implementation failure. Key to [successful implementation](#) is the legitimating of the problem, coherence of problem-solving, and durability of approach. In the case of violence against women and girls, none of these pertain. In terms of legitimacy, such violence can be claimed by virtue of quantum as well as impact. Yet as [Jess Phillips MP](#) observed, the government are refusing to categorise violence against women and girls as 'serious violence' as they do with youth violence or terrorism; approaches to violence against women and girls is beset by an absence of clear goals, or of overarching responsible authority, or of strong incentives to co-operate. There has also been a lack of consistency and commitment over time that transcends individual tragedies.

Calls for women to become more 'street savvy' or to check a police officer's credentials won't effect real reform or move us away from problematising women's behaviours instead of the perpetrators. Neither will it do to simply dismiss this murder as an aberration. Nor indeed requiring the police service to change its culture, whilst necessary, is sufficient. Reform requires a whole system approach: from educating all young people about relationships and sexual consent, challenging widely held myths about rape (blaming victims and exonerating perpetrators), curbing the excesses of social media-generated sexual exploitation, looking again at the limitations of the legal system in supporting victims as their own witnesses through a criminal trial, and addressing moral injury by listening to the voices of complainants who remain invisible and unheard.

How many women must be killed, how many raped and sexually violated, how many reviews, inquiries, recommendations do there have to be before there is real change and serious implementation of a programme of systemic reform? Perhaps Sarah Everard's legacy will be her rape, and murder was the tipping point.

Note: a new edition of the authors' edited book, [Rape Challenges to Contemporary Thinking](#) is soon to be published, addressing many of the issues discussed above.

About the Authors



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