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February 26th, 2025

How police can regain the trust of sexual violence victims

The way victims of sexual violence are treated by the police leads to the majority of victims withdrawing from the process of prosecution. But police officers can also affirm the dignity and agency of victims by helping them achieve justice, argue Jonathan Jackson, Katrin Hohl and Ben Bradford.

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The UK is in the midst of a crisis in how the police respond to rape and sexual violence. While more victims are coming forward to report these crimes, conviction rates remain alarmingly low. Despite repeated government promises of reform, only 6 per cent of recorded adult rapes in England and Wales result in a charge—and a staggering 61 per cent of victims withdraw from the process altogether.



How officers treat victims can either affirm their dignity and agency or cause further trauma—sometimes amounting to secondary victimisation.



For many, the way they are treated by the police is a key reason for disengaging. When officers fail to respond with fairness, care and professionalism, victims not only suffer further harm—they also

lose trust in the justice system itself. Our study, just published in the **British Journal of Criminology**, sheds new light on how police behaviour during rape and sexual assault investigations shapes victims' well-being, their willingness to cooperate with the justice system, and their trust in the police. Based on the largest national survey of rape and sexual assault victims in the UK to date, we find that how officers treat victims can either affirm their dignity and agency or cause further trauma—sometimes amounting to secondary victimisation.



Justice, for many survivors, is about care, recognition and the restoration of self after trauma.



Justice as recognition

Our paper underlines how reporting to the police is rarely just about securing a conviction for victims of sexual violence. It is a deeply relational experience—one that can either affirm their dignity and connection to society or deepen their sense of isolation and distress.

Justice, for many survivors, is about care, recognition and the restoration of self after trauma. Yet our findings show that police responses often fail to meet these fundamental needs. Many victims described experiences that left them feeling dismissed, scrutinised or retraumatised, including:

- A lack of empathy or care, with officers failing to acknowledge the trauma of rape and sexual assault.
- Delays and poor communication, leaving victims feeling abandoned and unheard.
- Unnecessary scrutiny of credibility, reinforcing victim-blaming narratives.
- Intrusive evidence-gathering practices, such as excessive demands for personal records and digital data.

These experiences carry serious consequences. Three in four victims reported that their mental health deteriorated due to their treatment by police, with some even attempting suicide as a direct result. By contrast, victims who felt heard, believed and supported were significantly less likely to report experiencing these harms. They were also more likely to say that they trust the police and are willing to engage with the criminal justice system in the future.



Unlike traditional models that focus on linear, outcome-based understandings of justice—such as securing a conviction—kaleidoscopic justice highlights that survivors’ perceptions of justice are fluid, evolving and deeply personal.



A better approach to justice for victims

To better understand how survivors of sexual violence experience justice, our study draws on the concept of “kaleidoscopic justice”, developed by **McGlynn and Westmarland**. Unlike traditional models that focus on linear, outcome-based understandings of justice—such as securing a conviction—kaleidoscopic justice highlights that survivors’ perceptions of justice are fluid, evolving and deeply personal. Justice is not defined by a single outcome, but rather by an ongoing process shaped by recognition, voice, dignity, connectedness, accountability and prevention.

From this perspective, a survivor’s experience with the police can profoundly shape their sense of justice and their ability to heal. Many victims are not necessarily seeking punishment, but rather:

- Recognition – Having their experiences validated, being believed, and having the harm they suffered acknowledged.
- Voice – Being able to share their story without being dismissed, doubted, or retraumatised.
- Dignity – Being treated with respect, sensitivity, and humanity throughout the process.
- Consequences – Seeing some form of accountability, whether through a conviction, institutional recognition of wrongdoing, or broader social acknowledgment.
- Prevention – Knowing that justice includes efforts to ensure what happened to them does not happen to others.
- Connectedness – Feeling supported and included in a society that recognises their suffering, rather than being isolated by disbelief or indifference.

Our large-scale study identifies four key dimensions of a fair and restorative process for victims. First, procedural justice (fair treatment, respect, and dignity) is crucial in signalling to survivors that they are valued and believed. Second, care through competence (demonstrating diligence,

safeguarding victims and actively pursuing justice) reinforces trust and provides a sense of security.



When officers signal belief and validation, survivors report greater trust in the justice system and a stronger sense of societal inclusion and connectedness.



Third, sexual violence strips victims of control—and the way police handle investigations can either restore or further erode that sense of autonomy. Clear communication, victim-led decision-making, and an acknowledgment of the harm suffered can help survivors regain a sense of agency and control. Last but not least, victims need to feel affirmed and supported rather than blamed or isolated. When officers signal belief and validation, survivors report greater trust in the justice system and a stronger sense of societal inclusion and connectedness.

Overall, we found that when victims experienced a fair and restorative process, they were more likely to trust the system, feel supported, and even consider reporting a crime in the future. But when police responses were perceived as dismissive, indifferent or harmful, trust was low. Many victims stated that they would never report a crime again. As one survivor put it:

“I can confidently say I will never be contacting the police for help again.”

Rethinking policing for victim-survivors

The [2023 Casey Review](#) exposed systemic misogyny, racism, and abuse within the Metropolitan Police. The findings of [Operation Soteria Bluestone](#)—the major initiative that funded our study—reinforce the idea that victims, particularly those from marginalised communities, do not feel safe engaging with the police.



Many victims who felt supported by police described being able to move forward with their lives, even in cases where a conviction was not secured.



For policing to be effective, victims must trust that seeking justice will not lead to further harm.

Our findings challenge a policing culture that prioritises conviction rates over victim experiences. Many survivors report crimes not just to see perpetrators punished, but to seek validation, safety and recognition. When the police fail to provide this, trust in the entire justice system erodes.

Yet, this loss of trust is not inevitable. Policing that demonstrates care, competence and fairness can have a profoundly positive impact. Many victims who felt supported by police described being able to move forward with their lives, even in cases where a conviction was not secured. This highlights a clear roadmap for rethinking police responses to sexual violence, including:

- Training for officers to embed an understanding of relational justice as a core part of police work –essential not only for victim trust, but also for future crime reporting and victims’ long-term well-being.
- Reforming evidence-gathering practices to prevent unnecessary invasions of victims’ privacy.
- Prioritising victim safeguarding, ensuring better communication, emotional support, and access to specialist services.
- Strengthening police accountability mechanisms to ensure that officers who engage in victim-blaming or dismissive behaviour face consequences.

By rethinking how the police engage with survivors, we can begin to restore trust, dignity and justice for victims of sexual violence.

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