

# **Norwegian police-reported rapes against adult females: Changes in characteristics in two time periods**

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## **Background**

Increasing numbers of rapes have been reported to Norwegian police during the last 20 years. In contrast, the proportion of police-reported rapes charged in court has decreased.

Prior rape studies have reported that cases with victims reporting unemployment, mental health problems and alcohol intake have lower rates of charge filing/conviction, and that cases describing use of moderate/severe violence has higher rates. Documented moderate/severe extragenital injuries and trace evidence analyses have also been associated with increased charge filing rate. However, it is unknown whether this has changed over time.

## **Aims**

The aims of this study were to compare victim and assault characteristics, and medico-legal findings, in police-reported rapes between two time periods, to explore whether certain patterns could explain the decreased charge filing rate.

## **Methods**

We performed a retrospective, descriptive study of police-reported cases of rape and attempted rape of women aged  $\geq 16$  years in the Sør-Trøndelag Police District, Norway. Police data were merged with SAC information from St. Olavs University Hospital, Trondheim, Norway, and stratified into two time periods: period 1 (1997 – 2003), and period 2 (2003 – 2010). Groups were compared by means of Chi square analyses. Statistical significance was set as  $p < 0.05$ .

## **Results**

A total of 324 cases were identified: 101 from period 1 and 223 from period 2. The charge-filing rate decreased from 18% to 10% between the two periods.

From period 1 to period 2 the proportion of assailants being reported as casual contacts and of non-Western origin increased ( $p=0.004$  and  $0.052$  resp.), while mean assailant age decreased (from 32 to 29 years) ( $p=0.031$ ).

Similarly, from period 1 to period 2 a higher proportion of the victims had psychosocial vulnerability ( $p < 0.001$ ) and had ingested more than 5 units of alcohol before the assault ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Although the reported interval from assault to examination was unchanged between the two periods, the prevalence of extragenital and anogenital injuries increased (from 54% to 64%,  $p=0.10$ , and from 15% to 28%  $p=0.018$ , resp.). Even if there was an increase from 38% to 49% in the police's decision to analyze the victim's swabs/clothes ( $p=0.092$ ), the prevalence of positive findings of spermatozoa and DNA match between victim and suspect was unchanged. A toxicological test was increasingly collected from the victim (11% vs. 52% ( $p<0.001$ ), but prevalence of positive tests (ca.70%) among those tested was unchanged.

### Discussion

Despite the increased level of medico-legal evidence, like injury documentation and trace evidence analyses, more than half of the police-reported rape cases were dismissed because of insufficient evidence. It is possible that other factors, like increased victim psychosocial vulnerability and high victim intake of alcohol could influence the charge filing rates in rape cases.

### Conclusions

Other evidential factors than medico-legal findings seem to influence the investigation and the legal process. This might partly be explained by the nature of many rape cases being difficult to prove. Even in an affluent country like Norway, the investigation of rape is probably hampered by factors other than medical evidence.