

# **The legal processing of rape crimes - associations to victims' acute psychological distress and perceived social support**

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## **Background**

Victims' willingness and ability to participate in the police investigation of rape crimes have been found to be important factors for police processing. However, many victims refuse to sustain charges or ask for the case to be discontinued. Rape is a traumatic event with significant negative consequences for the victim's mental health and social well-being. It is possible that the psychological distress and the amount of perceived support following a rape may influence the victims' participation in the police investigation and therefore whether the police decide to proceed with the cases.

## **Aims**

The present study examined the level of rape victims' psychological distress and perceived social support in relation to police case decision and victims' unwillingness to participate in the investigation.

## **Methods**

Acute psychological distress (i.e. acute stress disorder, depression, anxiety, dissociation, sleep-disturbances, and somatization) and perceived social support were assessed among 64 victims of rape or rape attempt. Information on police case decision (closing the case or continuing the case for prosecution) and victim's unwillingness to participate in the investigation was extracted from the police case-file and combined with the psychological data.

## **Results**

There were no significant associations between victim's acute psychological distress, perceived social support and police case decision. However, victims' unwillingness to participate in the investigation was significantly associated with a higher level of symptoms of anxiety and somatization in the acute phase following the assault. Contrary to expectations, there was no significant association between victims' perceived social support and police case decision. Similarly, there was no significant association between victims' perceived social support and victim willingness to participate in the investigation.

## **Discussion**

The present study indicated that victims' drop-out of the police investigation may be due to high levels of acute psychological distress following the rape. However, previous research has also shown that contact with the legal system including police behavior can re-victimize victims of rape significantly and increase victims' level of psychological distress. Thus, this type of secondary victimization can enhance victim distress and make victims of rape

disengage from the police process. Future studies need to establish whether increased level of acute distress among victims unwilling to proceed with their cases are due to the rape experience in specific or negative experiences with legal staff members.

### Conclusions

The results suggest that victims of rape who disengage with the police investigation process may do so because of a high level of acute psychological distress. This may point to a need for psychological support to victims of rape in the acute phase following the assault.

Furthermore, improving the police investigation and interviews may be important in order to avoid enhancing victim distress following the assault and consequent disengagement in the police investigation.