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**Has anything changed?
Results of a
comparative study
(1977–2010) on
opinions on rape**

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Background

In 1977 a poll of opinions on rape was commissioned by the *Daily Mail*, partly in response to a rape case which was widely reported in the press at the time because of a particularly lenient sentence.¹ The poll asked respondents about which offence types they saw as most serious, whether they thought these offences had increased, whether they personally knew someone who had been raped, whether they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about rape victims and offenders, what factors they thought should be and actually were taken into consideration when considering punishment for those found guilty of rape, and how women should react if they were raped. The results of this poll were reported in the *Daily Mail* on 1 July 1977.

In 2009, we were appointed as a team of academics to conduct a rapid evidence assessment to inform the Government's Stern Review on rape (Brown et al., 2010). One of the questions we were asked was whether there was any evidence of attitudinal changes to rape over time. This was difficult to answer with the available evidence, since surveys asked different questions and used different populations. Therefore, in February 2010 the 1977 survey was re-run and a comparative analysis conducted. This report provides an overview of the key findings.

¹ Thomas Holdsworth, an 18-year-old guardsman, had his three-year custodial sentence for rape and assault reduced on appeal to a six-month suspended sentence. The appeal court judges explained the reduced sentence in terms of his otherwise good behaviour and army career. They suggested that the girl would not have been as severely injured if she had instead 'submitted' to the rape and that Holdsworth was simply a 'man who, on the night in question, allowed his enthusiasm to overcome his normal good behaviour'. (Judgment delivered by Mr Justice Wren, quoted in *Daily Mail* editorial, 23 June 1977.)

Research methods

We attempted to collect the 2010 data in as close a replication of the 1977 study as possible. However, there are some important differences, and the main ones are summarised below. Where these methodological issues mean that we are unsure about a finding, we either highlight this in interpretation or report on the 2010 survey without comparison with the 1977 data.

- The 1977 survey was conducted as a face-to-face survey and the 2010 as an internet survey. This is the most important methodological difference. One of the main differences between face-to-face and online surveys is the use of the 'don't know' and 'middle range' options in scales (Duffy et al., 2005). We attempt to address this by examining the use of 'middle range' and 'don't know' categories between the two datasets (and sometimes excluding these responses).
- The 1977 survey used a few outdated terms, which were re-worded in 2010 while keeping as close to the original terms as possible (e.g. 'birching' was replaced with 'corporal punishment').
- The 1977 and 2010 samples did not differ significantly in terms of gender, but did differ in terms of both age range and social class. In terms of age, there were fewer respondents aged 65 or older in the 1977 sample than in the 2010 sample (14% compared with 22%). This may be because of an ageing population generally and/or because older people have more time to participate in online surveys. In terms of social class, there were more respondents in the upper middle and fewer in the lower middle social class. This may be due to increased affluence and/or because these groups have more access to the internet, as suggested by Duffy et al. (2005).
- The 1977 sample size was smaller than the 2010 sample size (1,044 compared with 2,057).
- Both surveys were done shortly after press coverage about a rape case that had received a high degree of public interest (the Holdsworth case in 1977 (see note 1 on the previous page) and the Independent Police Complaints Commission report on the Worboys 'Black cab rapist' case in 2010).
- Since male rape was introduced as a criminal offence in 1994, we included an additional question about what 'male respondents' would do if faced with rape (equivalent to the question that was only asked of females in 1977). In 2010 an additional piece of text was entered at the end of the survey detailing where respondents could access help and support if they had been raped.

Key findings

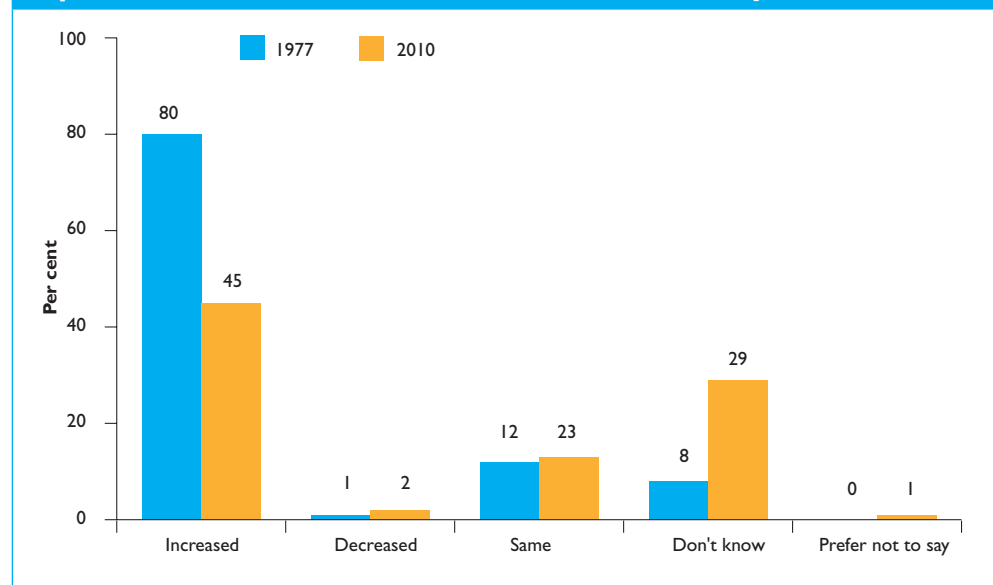
Rape continues to be seen as the most serious crime after murder.

Respondents were asked to nominate what they considered to be the most serious from a list of 15 crimes. In 1977 the three most frequently mentioned were murder, rape and cruelty to children, and in 2010 this was still the case. A difference was found in relation to attempted rape – in 2010, respondents were more than four times more likely to nominate attempted rape as one of the most serious crimes than in 1977 (27% compared with 6%).

Fewer people now think rape has increased over recent years.

In 1977, nearly twice as many people thought rape had increased compared with 2010 (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: Over the past few years, do you think the number of rapes committed has increased, decreased or stayed the same?



Lenient courts/sentencing were the factors most often given as the reason for those who thought rape had increased. In the 2010 data we were able to look at the reasons why respondents thought rape had increased or decreased. The top reasons given for why respondents thought it had increased were:

- Lenient courts/sentencing (18%)
- Increase in police reports (17%)
- Media reporting – regularly hear about it (15%)
- Alcohol use (15%)

- Drug use (6%)
- Immigrants/foreign visitors (4%)
- More access to sex on TV/pornographic films (3%)
- Poor society/social structure (3%)
- Date rape drugs (3%)
- Girls wearing skimpy clothes (3%)
- Poor attitudes of men towards women (3%)
- Less respect (3%)

There was positive change over time for some opinions. In 1977, 34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that if a woman gets raped it is usually her own fault. In 2010 this was just 15%. In 1977 over one in four respondents (42%) thought that the prior sexual experience of the woman should be taken into account when considering punishment of those found guilty of rape. In 2010 this was just 19%.

The opinion that rape law is unfair to victims and that the charge of rape is difficult to prove remained strongly held. In 2010 respondents were less likely to agree or strongly agree that the law on rape is unfair to the victim; however, this was a very small shift and the opinion remained widely held (78% in 1977 compared with 70% in 2010). Similarly, in both surveys most agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult to prove in a court of law that a rape took place (78% in 1977 and 74% in 2010). Therefore, although things do not appear to have worsened, neither has there been any widespread shift in opinions here.

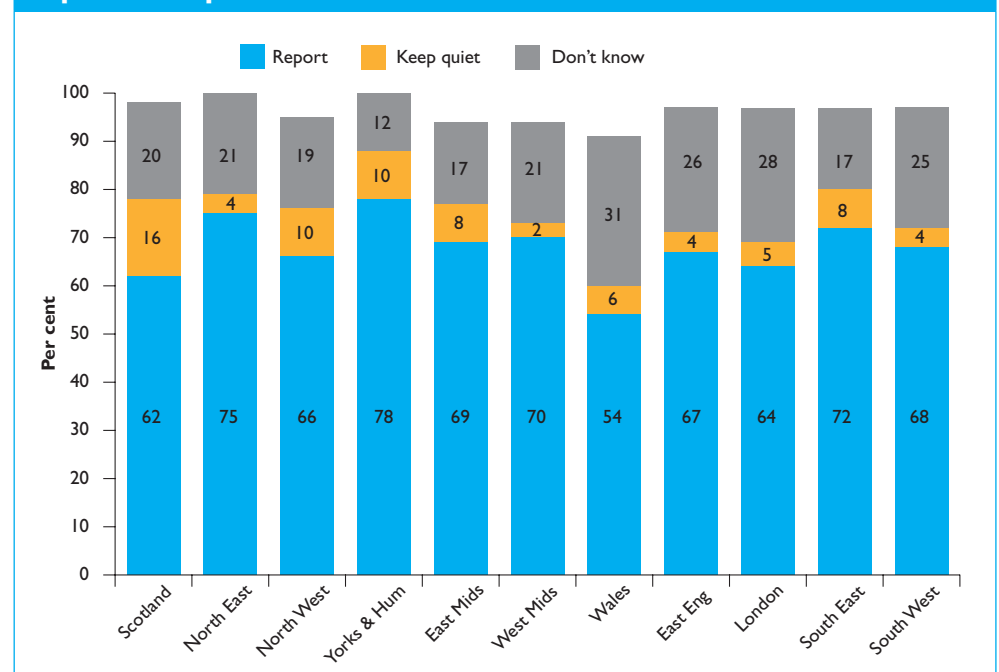
The vast majority agreed that many rapes were not reported to the police, but nevertheless said that they personally would report rape if it happened to them. On the one hand, respondents across both surveys agreed or strongly agreed that many rapes are never reported to the police (89% in 1977, 93% in 2010). On the other hand, when asked to consider how they personally might react if raped, most said that they themselves would report it to the police. In 2010, 60% of men² said they would report rape to the police compared with 68% of women.³ In 2010 women were less likely than they were in 1977 to say they would report it to the police (68% compared with 79%).

² 12% said they would keep quiet, 26% said it would depend or they did not know and 2% preferred not to answer.

³ 7% said they would keep quiet, 21% said they did not know or it would depend and 3% preferred not to answer (total percentage does not equal 100 due to rounding).

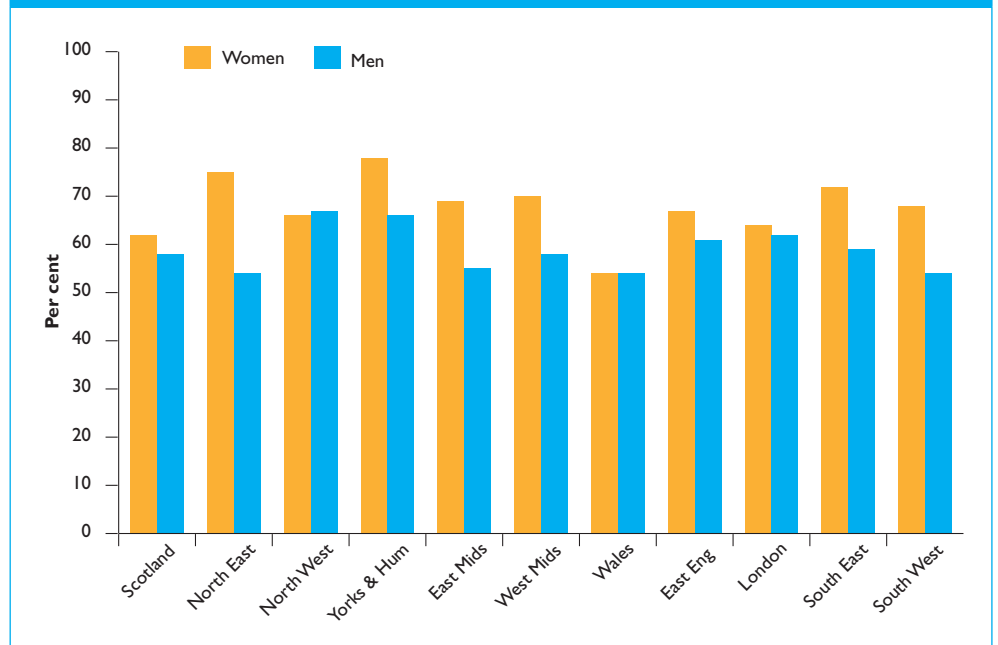
There was some regional variation in relation to reporting. In the 2010 data we were able to look at which region the respondent was from (see Graph 2). Those from Scotland were the most likely to say they would keep quiet if they were raped. Those from Wales were most likely to say they didn't know.

Graph 2: Regional variation in women's likelihood to report rape to the police



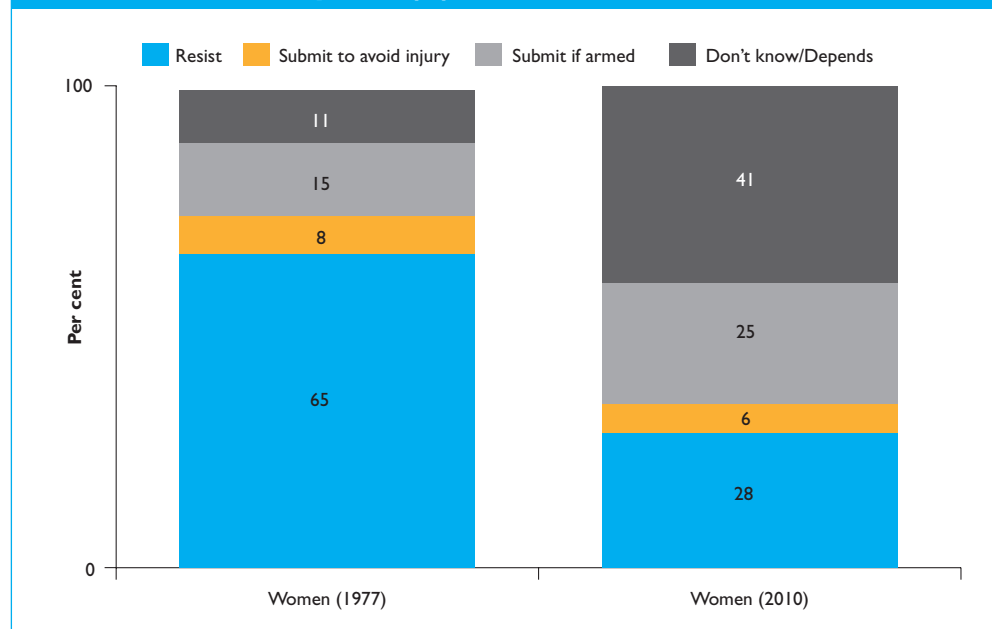
Women were more likely than men to say they would report rape to the police in all areas except the North West and Wales, where the proportions were similar (see Graph 3).

Graph 3: Regional and gender variation in likelihood to report rape to the police



Women are now far less likely to say they would put up resistance to rape and far more likely to say they do not know how they would respond, or to say it would depend on the circumstances. This may reflect greater understanding of the variety of contexts in which rape takes place, especially the likelihood that ‘the victim’ may know the rapist (see Graph 4).

Graph 4: If a man attempted to rape you, do you think you would be most likely to – (%)



Men and women predicted different reactions if faced with rape in 2010. More men said they would resist than women and more women said they would submit if the perpetrator was armed, that it would depend on the circumstances, or that they did not know how they would react (see Graph 5).

Graph 5: If a man attempted to rape you, do you think you would be most likely to – (%)



Nearly a third of women personally know someone who has been raped. In 1977 about one in seven respondents (15%) knew someone who had been raped (11% of men and 18% of women). There was no statistically significant difference between people of different social class or age in terms of knowing anyone who had been raped. In 2010 nearly one in four respondents (24%) personally knew someone who had been raped (nearly one in five men (19%) and one in three women (31%)). This may suggest an increase in rape and/or it may suggest that people are now more open about disclosing rape to friends and family. This is in line with previous research that has found that disclosure to a confidant(e) (e.g. a friend, relative or neighbour) is more likely than reporting it to the police (Povey et al., 2009).

There is now less importance placed on individual factors relating to the victim or perpetrator in terms of rape sentencing.

Respondents were asked to consider 11 factors in terms of whether or not they should be taken into account when considering sentencing for convicted rapists (1977–2010):

- Whether violence was used (93%–89%)
- Offender's previous record of sex offences (93%–87%)
- Violence was threatened (90%–83%)
- The long-term effect of the rape on the victim (84%–84%)
- Whether the man felt he was encouraged by the woman (70%–51%)
- Age of the victim (63%–50%)
- Whether the rape was attempted or completed (49%–45%)
- The prior sexual experience of the woman (42%–19%)
- The long-term effect of the punishment on the offender (33%–21%)
- Job and family circumstances of the man (33%–11%)
- Age of the man (30%–15%)

Where there looks to be change, this is in a positive direction, which may have some links with legal and policy changes over this period. Respondents were less likely to think that whether the man felt he was encouraged by the woman should be taken into consideration (which might suggest public support for the change to 'honest belief' in the 2003 Sexual Offences Act) or the prior sexual experience of the woman (which might suggest public support for the change to sexual history evidence in the 1999 Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act). Other circumstances relating to the rape (job and family circumstances of the man, the long-term effect of the punishment on the offender and the age of the victim) were also less likely to be listed as things that should be taken into account (which might suggest more consideration of the victim than the perpetrator than in the past).

Conclusions


This research has shown that opinions on rape remain negative in some ways (e.g. that the law is unfair on rape victims and that many people would not report rape to the police or were unsure). However, in other ways the findings were optimistic (e.g. that rape is a serious crime, and less support for the opinions that if a woman gets raped it is usually her fault and that the prior sexual experience of the woman should be taken into consideration when punishing those found guilty of rape).

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