

A qualitative study of a dedicated sexual assault investigation unit

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Key implications

A dedicated rape investigation unit was set up as a pilot project in a police force in the south of England, supported by funding from the Home Office. The Unit included dedicated police and non-police staff and comprised:

- sexual offences investigation trained officers (SOITs);
- an independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA);
- an investigative team; and
- a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) lawyer, who attended the Unit one day a week.

The Unit was responsible for the processing and investigation of all sexual assault cases reported to the station (previously these cases had been processed through the Criminal Investigations Department), the charging decisions of cases and victim care. The aim of the pilot was to establish whether or not a dedicated unit improved the service provided to victims of sexual assault. It began in September 2008 and continued for a period of six months.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual face-to-face basis with members of the Unit. The aim of the research was to understand perceptions of:

- how the Unit worked in practice;
- what impact the changes were thought to have had; and
- any lessons for the future.

All of those interviewed believed the Unit had been a positive development. A majority described the existence of a dedicated sexual assault unit as an 'obvious' addition to the Operational Command Unit¹. Other units were dedicated to dealing with specific offences (for example, burglary); this made the absence of a dedicated rape investigation unit appear a strange omission. Perceived benefits of the Unit focused predominantly on the improved quality of investigations and enhanced victim care. Many perceived these improvements to have been facilitated by the creation of dedicated and co-located posts, which allowed for a faster and more focused service. However, despite the perceived benefits of a dedicated team, few of those working in the Unit felt that the team had contributed to improved case outcomes.

¹ An Operational Command Unit is a subdivision of a police force area. It has responsibility for a specific area of a region (sometimes a town or part of a town) and is based in a police station within this locality.

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Keywords

Sexual assault
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Police
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