

A qualitative study of a dedicated sexual assault investigation unit

Lauren van Staden and Jane Lawrence

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.

Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	4
Sexual offences investigation trained officers	7
Integrated independent sexual violence adviser	10
Investigative team	12
Crown Prosecution Service	16
Limitations of the research	19
Conclusion	20
Recommendations	22

Keywords

Sexual assault
Dedicated unit
Police
Rape
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CPS
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Investigation

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The report offers a number of recommendations, two of which consider the way future dedicated units might be organised.

- **The need for specialist training;** the specialist knowledge and understanding that was acquired by the team was largely internally generated through learning-on-the-job, drawing on the case-based experience of the dedicated CPS lawyer and observing the actions of others. No specialist training was provided on rape investigation for officers who were newly appointed to the Unit. Future dedicated units should provide specialist sexual assault investigation training (and where possible, mentoring) for newly appointed officers.
- **Repeating a pilot dedicated unit with emphasis on increasing the number of cases that proceed to charge;** for any future pilots, decision makers (involved in both the investigative process and the

decision to charge) should be encouraged to pay particularly close attention to cases initially proposed for 'no further action'. Opportunities to strengthen the evidential base for these cases should be fully explored to maximise the number of cases that proceed to charge.

- **Improving understanding of the existing evidence base on specialist units;** there does not appear to be any systematic attempts to review the social research evidence base around dedicated units (including those specialising in the investigation of rape offences). In particular the link between setting up dedicated units and improving case outcomes has not been clearly established. It is recommended that a systematic review of the existing evidence base on the use of dedicated units in the investigation of sexual assault and its impact on case outcomes/ victim care measures should be undertaken.

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Background

- 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 who worked solely on sexual assault cases referred to the Unit 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 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.

Aims and methods

A team of three Home Office researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews on a face-to-face basis with 13 members of the Unit. These were transcribed and entered into a thematic matrix designed for the study. Systematic analysis was conducted both within and between individual cases. The research aimed to understand perceptions of:

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

Results

Sexual offences investigation trained officers

- The creation of a dedicated SOIT post within the Unit was perceived to have made three important changes to the delivery of victim care: quicker deployment of a SOIT after reporting an offence; more time for post-incident liaison; and, the consistent provision of one SOIT officer per victim.
- The SOIT officer became more broadly involved in sexual assault investigations (once the SOIT duties had been delivered).
- Although some SOITs were initially doubtful about the personal benefits of the new dedicated role, they ultimately viewed it positively. Not only did a dedicated SOIT officer provide a better platform for delivering victim care but also the role provided personal development opportunities.

Independent sexual violence advisers

- For the duration of the Unit the ISVA was relocated from the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) to the police station and co-located with the police staff.
- The core role undertaken by the ISVA was not perceived to have changed as a result of the Unit; focus remained centred on a combination of advocacy and emotional support for the victim.
- There were three main perceived benefits identified through co-location. First, it vastly improved police knowledge of the general role that ISVAs perform. Secondly, it brought the ISVA knowledge (and their perspective) on victims more readily into police consciousness. And finally, it was seen as improving the two-way flow of information between the police and victims.

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- Initially, the ISVA was not universally welcomed into the Unit although, over the life of the pilot, most police officers identified perceived benefits of co-location and the inclusion of the ISVA in the Unit. Some, however, remained sceptical as to whether this should become business as usual.

Investigative team

- There were some perceived benefits for particular aspects of the quality/nature of investigations (but officers were quick to emphasise that investigations prior to the set up of the Unit had always been conducted 'thoroughly').
- Perceived benefits could be grouped under six main headings: consistency of the lead investigator as cases progressed; knowledge of individual cases being shared more readily among team members; compressed time scales in the execution of time-sensitive investigative actions; reduced the risk of not collecting evidence; the development of specialist investigative skills within the Unit membership; and clear separation of investigative role from victim liaison.
- A dedicated Unit encouraged a team-based approach to investigations, which contributed to the development of a strong team ethos.
- The Unit was thought to have contributed to the development of good working relationships both within and between ranks.
- Some officers perceived that increased experience in being involved in particular types of cases encouraged the development of specialist skills and increased confidence; both personally and in other team members' ability to undertake the tasks assigned to them.

Crown Prosecution Service lawyer

- Improved relationships with the CPS were perceived to be one of the most significant changes that occurred as a result of the Unit.
- A dedicated CPS lawyer resulted in increased contact and an improved relationship between the police and CPS. It was also perceived as resulting in a more consistent evidential threshold.
- The Unit facilitated increased CPS involvement in the progression of cases, including in the direction of investigations and the development of strategies.
- Continuous CPS contact allowed for decisions on cases to be made at an earlier point in the investigative process.

Conclusion

All of those interviewed viewed the Unit and its achievements positively. A majority described the existence of a dedicated sexual assault unit as an 'obvious' addition to the Operational Command Unit.² It was observed that 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.

Many of the findings of the research support previous studies within the area. A Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) report on Operation Sapphire Units concluded that: SOITs felt more supported in their work; officers valued the benefits of a team approach; and dedicated teams ensured investigator continuity.

These findings were replicated in the perceptions of those involved in the pilot. The results also mirror findings from research conducted on dedicated units more generally, specifically: improvement in the co-ordination of investigations; increased liaison between the police and external agencies; and sharing of complementary skills.

Most of the changes summarised above could be described as being broadly positive. However, it is worth reflecting on some changes that might be interpreted as either equivocal or, in some cases, negative:

- The provision of a single named individual throughout a victim's engagement with the process was thought, by some, to have increased the risk of a victim becoming dependent on specific members of the Unit (particularly the allocated SOIT and ISVA). However, this was largely counter-balanced by the recognition that this approach could have benefits for the victim, particularly the ability to develop a stronger rapport from more consistent liaison.
- The Unit was perceived to have provided a structure under which investigators were able to lessen their direct involvement in victim care, by feeling confident that contact was being mediated through the SOIT and ISVA. The obvious risk arising from this is that investigators may become disengaged from victims.
- Finally, in spite of the general perceived benefits of a dedicated unit, few of those working in the Unit felt that it had contributed to improved criminal justice system (CJS) outcomes (a view that appeared

² 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.

to reflect the findings of statistical monitoring conducted by the force)³. This is mirrored by the research literature on dedicated units more generally, in which findings demonstrate improvements in investigative processes and victim care rather than in the number of cases that proceed to charge. (Klein 2008, Friday *et al.*, 2006)

It can be argued that improving case outcomes was not the main aim of the creation of the Unit. Indeed, the primary

³ Internal force evaluation (completed June 2009)

aim identified by the police was an improvement in the service provided to victims, while the CPS's main focus was on the provision of early investigative advice. Nevertheless, an irony remains. The increase in capacity and resources, which were key consequences of the creation of the Unit, allowed much more thorough rape investigations to take place. However, despite this, the perception was that this had not resulted in the more rigorous investigation of the subset of cases proposed for 'no further action' (i.e. cases that had less chance of success in court) in order to strengthen the evidential base for prosecution.