

Briefing note

Research on public perceptions on sexual violence in Ireland

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

Introduction

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre has published new research which reveals a significant level of concern and a high prevalence of Sexual Violence in Ireland.

It sheds light on public attitudes towards and personal experiences of sexual violence in Ireland.

In commissioning the research Dublin Rape Crisis Centre sought to raise awareness of sexual violence in Ireland and public attitudes towards it. It was carried out by Ipsos B&A in February on a nationally representative sample of 1042 people.

Ultimately, the objective is to encourage survivors to access the supports available, report crimes and destigmatise disclosures of sexual violence in Ireland.

This note sets out the key findings from the research and a number of resulting recommendations. This research has been funded via Community Foundation Ireland.

Key findings:

The research shows that people in Ireland believe sexual violence is extremely common and are very concerned about it, with younger women in particular not feeling safe in Ireland and a belief that they are personally at risk. Eighty-five per cent of men feel safe, compared to 48% of women. A large cohort of the population – almost 30% – say they have experienced sexual violence, and half say they know someone who has.

The research shows people are beginning to reject incorrect and harmful ‘rape myths,’ such as beliefs that assaults are perpetrated by a stranger in an alleyway rather than by someone known to the victim in someone’s home. However it also shows that many people retain such damaging victim-blaming views. 1 in 5 people say there are ‘a lot’ of false rape claims, more than 1 in 10 say that rape and sexual violence is exaggerated by media, and 1 in 6 people in Ireland say that someone who is raped while under the influence of alcohol or drugs is partly responsible for that happening to them.

This tallies with other findings showing that people who have experienced sexual violence are not reporting to Gardai and not disclosing to others, citing fear of not being believed and public stigma. And this bears out what Dublin Rape Crisis Centre hears from survivors – they will not share their story because they think they will not be believed. And many of them stay silent, and they don’t seek support, justice or healing. Most perpetrators face no consequence for the harm they have inflicted. Attitudes to sexual violence play a key role in this process. It is time to break that cycle.

Public Perceptions of Sexual Violence

- **Prevalence:** Over 6 in 10 people believe sexual violence is common for women, while only one third hold the same belief regarding men. In reality, sexual violence is common amongst both men and women. The CSO has found that 1 in 2 women and 1 in 4 men will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.
- **Public Concern:** When asked to rank their level of concern about sexual violence, 2 in 5 reported extremely or high levels of concern. This figure is closer to half amongst women, with those on either end of the age spectrum most likely to be concerned.

On average, the level of concern amongst respondents was almost 8 out of 10, indicating a high level of public concern about sexual violence in Ireland.

- **Safety Perception:** Fewer than 2 in 10 people feel absolutely safe from the risk of sexual violence, highlighting a significant public fear. There is a strong gender dimension here with most men feeling safe (8.5 out of 10) compared to less than half of women (4.7 out of 10).
- **Perpetrators:** 7 in 10 respondents believe perpetrators of sexual violence are more likely to be known to the survivor. This is true – the CSO Sexual Violence Survey uncovered that in more than 7 in 10 cases the perpetrator was known to the victim.

Attitudes Towards Sexual Violence and Reporting

- **Increase in Sexual Violence Rates:** 2 in 3 people agree that the rates of sexual violence are increasing in Ireland.
- **Education on Consent:** Almost 3 in 4 believe that education about consent can help reduce incidents of sexual violence.
- **Gender Differences in Reporting:** Almost 7 in 10 feel it is more difficult for men than women to report sexual violence. This could be true as women report being more likely to tell another person and reporting to the Gardai. The CSO has found that 23% of male victims of childhood sexual abuse disclosed to another person, of which 8% reported to Gardai.
- **Male Sexual Violence Awareness:** Almost 9 in 10 people agree that society should do more to recognise the issue of male victims of sexual violence.

The Harmful Impact of Victim-Blaming Beliefs

- **Belief in Allegations:** One in ten agree with the notion that a survivor should not be believed unless there is a guilty verdict in court.
 - This figure is as high as 3 in 10 in men under the age of 24.
- **Non-Reporters:** A similar cohort agree that survivors who do not report to the Gardai should not be believed.
 - This figure is as high as 3 in 10 in men under the age of 24.
- **False Allegations:** Concerningly, 1 in 5 people believe that false allegations of sexual violence are common. This has been comprehensively disproven in research.

- **Attitudinal variations by gender and age:** These views vary strongly by gender, with younger men under 24 most likely to show victim-blaming attitudes and women over 35 least likely. However, there is also a considerable variation among men along age lines, with younger age groups more likely to hold victim-blaming attitudes than older men:
 - A man aged between 16-24 is 7 times more likely than a man aged 55-64 to think that people make a big deal about sexual violence when it's not really.
 - A man aged between 16-24 is 5 times more likely than a man aged 55-64 to say that you should only believe that someone has been sexually assaulted if they report it to the Gardai.
 - A man aged between 16-24 is almost 8 times more likely than to a man aged over 65 to say that it is only guilty verdicts in court that determine whether you should believe someone was raped.

Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence

- 1 in 8 people would be unsure or express doubts if someone if they told them they had been raped or experienced sexual violence while under the influence of drink or drugs. This scepticism was highest among under men under 25 (23%).
- Over 3 in 10 would not suggest that the Gardai are contacted.
- Somewhat more positively, six in ten would suggest seeking support services like Rape Crisis Centres.

Barriers to Accessing Support Services

- **Fear of Not Being Believed:** Eight in ten respondents identified the fear of not being believed as the primary barrier to accessing support.
 - This fear was more prevalent in women (almost nine in ten, versus just under three in four men).
 - Amongst women, this fear was particularly prevalent among the older cohort, and lower among women under 34 (though still seven in ten).
- **Fear of Stigma:** Seven in ten highlighted the fear of stigma as another significant barrier.
- **Fear of Others Finding Out:** Over six in ten expressed concern about others finding out, which also prevents some survivors from seeking help.
- **Trust and Knowledge of Support Services:**
 - Almost six in ten respondents stated a lack of trust in support services.
 - Over 4 in 10 mentioned a lack of knowledge about available support services. These findings suggest an urgent need for greater public awareness to enhance confidence in and knowledge of available support services.

Disclosure of Sexual Violence

- **Personal Experience of Sexual Violence:** Almost 3 in 10 individuals reported experiencing some form of sexual violence. This compares to the CSO Sexual Violence Survey where 1 in 2 women and 1 in 4 men were found to have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.
 - Dublin Rape Crisis Centre asked respondents to self-identify sexual violence whereas the CSO listed abuse that falls under the term 'sexual violence' and respondents indicated which ones they had experienced, hence the varied levels of reporting.
- **Awareness of Others:** 1 in 2 people are aware of someone they know having experienced sexual violence.

Perception of Court Trials

- **Challenges for Survivors:** Worryingly, 1 in 2 also believe that sexual offence trials are much harder for survivors compared to other types of crimes, indicating a perceived difficulty in navigating the legal system for survivors.

Media Influence

- **Positive Role of Media:** Over 3 in 4 respondents believe that the media positively influences public attitudes towards sexual violence. This presents an opportunity to leverage media to raise awareness of available support services, reinforce the message that survivors should be believed, and challenge the stigma associated with sexual violence.

Recommendations:

1. **Increase Public Awareness:** Given the lack of trust and knowledge about support services, it is crucial to enhance public awareness campaigns about available resources and their effectiveness.
2. **Education on Consent:** Invest in continued and widespread education on consent, as the public strongly believes it can reduce incidents of sexual violence.
3. **Leverage Media Positively:** Use the media's positive influence to further educate the public on sexual violence, reduce stigma, and highlight support services for survivors.
4. **Address Barriers to Reporting:** Focus on reducing the fear of not being believed and stigma, two major barriers preventing individuals from disclosing and reporting sexual violence.
5. **Support for Male Survivors:** Increased efforts are needed to recognize and address the sexual violence experiences of men, as indicated by the public's strong support for acknowledging this issue.

Conclusion

While the new research reveals positives, such as growing awareness and concern about sexual violence, it also shows that significant challenges remain. Reinforced efforts are still needed to destigmatise disclosures for victims of sexual violence, increase trust in and

awareness of support services, particularly amongst male survivors, and support victims in accessing justice.

We believe that regular research is key to understanding the culture of sexual violence in Ireland. Informing these campaigns and reducing the prevalence of sexual violence. The reality of sexual violence in Ireland is complex, and ongoing education and awareness initiatives, informed by regular research, will be critical to increasing understanding and reducing the prevalence of the sexual violence.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is committed to supporting victims and continuing our ongoing education and awareness campaigns to prevent sexual violence. Our vision is of a society in with zero tolerance for sexual violence but that when it does occur, survivors are provided with information and care that supports their empowerment and resilience.
