

## **Attitudes to Sexual Consent**

**Research for the End Violence Against Women Coalition  
by YouGov**

**December 2018**

## Summary

There is a [crisis](#) in the way the justice system deals with rape and sexual violence. Despite increasing numbers of women reporting rape to the police, the rates of people charged with and convicted of rape are [falling](#). There have been [recent investigations](#) revealing worrying findings about juries' reluctance to convict some defendants of rape.

It is in this context that we wanted to better understand attitudes to rape, and people's understanding of the law on rape.

Since #MeToo hit the news last year it's been clear that people have different understandings of what constitutes rape and sexual violence. In response to many of the experiences which have been shared, the question of whether what's been described is 'really' rape keeps being asked.

For years campaigners against sexual violence have had to fight the notion that 'real rape' is a stranger in a dark alley. We know that the vast majority of reports are about rape within relationships, between friends, partners and acquaintances. And the law is unequivocal - rape happens when there is sex without consent – it doesn't matter if it's a stranger or someone you've been married to for years, it is still rape.

This research, with almost 4,000 respondents, shows a worrying confusion both about what rape is, and how much harm rape does.

## Key findings

- A third (33%) of people in Britain think it isn't usually rape if a woman is pressured into having sex but there is no physical violence
- A third of men think if a woman has flirted on a date it generally wouldn't be rape, even if she hasn't consented to sex (21% of women believe this). Almost a quarter (24%) don't think that, in most cases, sex without consent in long-term relationships is rape (despite laws against rape in marriage being in place since 1991)
- Over 65s have most troubling attitudes to rape, while younger people have opinions that are more closely aligned to the law
- Some people (11%) believe the more sexual partners a woman has, the less harm they experience from rape.
- 'Stealthing': 40% think it is never or usually not rape to remove a condom without a partner's consent
- 60% of people think that free counselling services are available to victims of rape.
- Around one in 10 are unsure or think it's usually not rape to have sex with a woman who is asleep or too drunk to consent

## **Many people can't identify rape and in some cases the public's view doesn't match the laws on rape**

97% of people believe it's definitely rape, and therefore illegal, if a stranger forces themselves on a woman in a park at night. But that number drops to 89% of people who are sure that it is rape if a man has sex with a woman who is very drunk or asleep. That means around one in ten aren't sure (5%) or think it usually or definitely isn't rape (6%).

## **Most people are raped by someone they know - the vast majority of reports are 'acquaintance' rape. But, there is a lot of confusion about this, especially amongst men**

A third (33%) of the men we asked didn't think it could usually be considered rape if the woman had flirted on a date then changed her mind (compared with 21% of women). The same number also believe a woman can't change her mind after sex has started.

## **Rape in marriage and long-term relationships is still not accepted as a serious offence by many**

Almost a quarter (24%) of the people we asked thought that in most cases it isn't rape if non-consensual sex occurs within a long-term relationship.

## **Rules about consent, whether it is coerced and what is being consented to, are not known**

33% think that sex which happens without consent, but where there is no physical violence, isn't really rape.

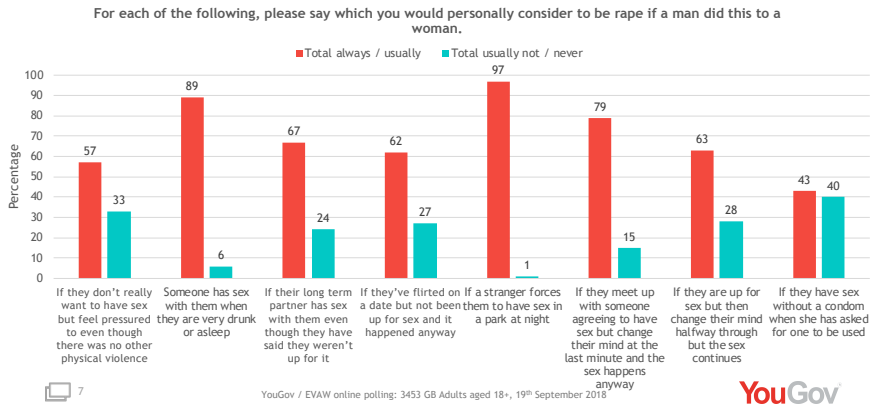
It is extremely worrying that 'stealthing' (removing a condom without their partner's consent) is not understood as rape – 19% think this is never rape, and 21% think that this would not normally be rape with some exceptions.

## **Generations are divided about rape and consent – older people are much less likely to agree non-consensual sex is rape**

More than a third (35%) of over 65s we asked think that in most cases it isn't rape to have non-consenting sex with your wife or partner, compared to just 16% of 18-24s. 42% of over 65s generally think that in most cases if a woman changes her mind halfway through but the sex continues, it isn't rape compared with just 22% of the 25-49s.

This generational difference is concerning because many of the cases being reported to the police are younger women who have a clear view of consent, which may not be shared by many of the people who make up juries.

Defining rape: in all circumstances majority consider the act to be rape, however opinions tend to soften when scenarios already include some sexual activity



Rape is known to be harmful. But, some people think being raped by a stranger causes more physical harm, while believing rape may be more emotionally harmful if it's someone you know

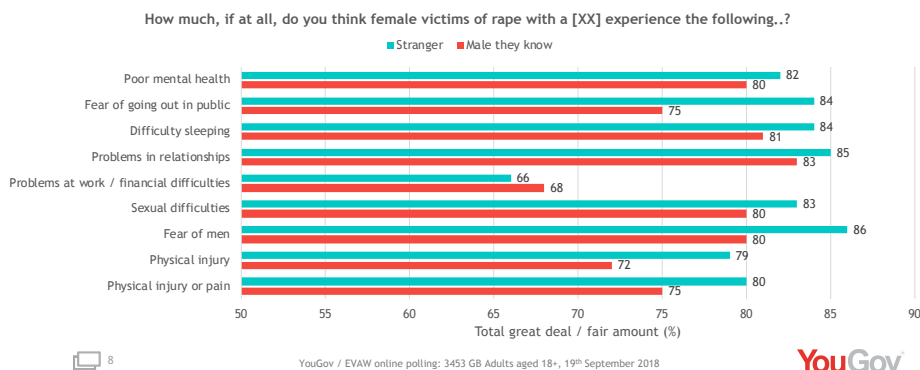
Most of the people we spoke to understand that rape can have very serious consequences, and can lead to long term physical and emotional harm.

Most people understand that rape by a stranger causes physical injury (79%) and pain (80%). There is less understanding of the financial impact of rape, with only 66% believing that rape with a stranger can lead to problems at work / financial difficulties.

Slightly fewer believe that rape can lead to fear of going out if the rapist is someone known (75% compared to 84% if the rape was with a stranger).

Types of harm: majority think victims of rape suffer regardless of whether the act is by a stranger or a male they know

- Problems in relationships are most impacted, with problems at work / financial difficulties the least
- Also there are substantial differences in fear of men when rape is committed by a stranger or a known male

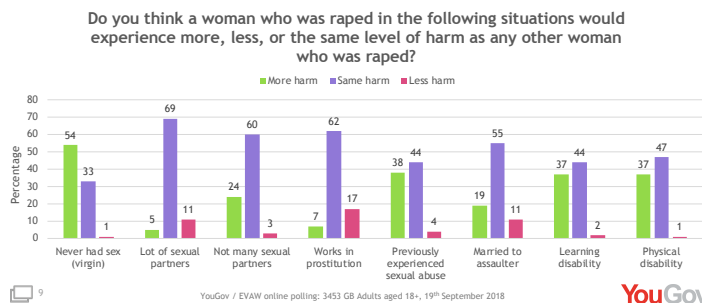


## The more sexual partners a woman has had, the less she is believed to be harmed by rape

More than half of people (54%) think that a woman who has never had sex would suffer more harm from rape than any other woman who was raped. On the other hand, 11% believe that a woman who has had a lot of sexual partners is less harmed if she is raped compared to any other woman. Again, there is a generational divide with 24% of over 65s believing that a woman with lots of partners is less harmed, with almost a quarter (24%) of this age group also believing that women in prostitution are less harmed by rape.

### Over half think those who have never had sex before rape experience more harm than any other woman who was raped

- There is also a majority or plurality in the other cases where people think the same level of harm is experienced in different situations as any other woman



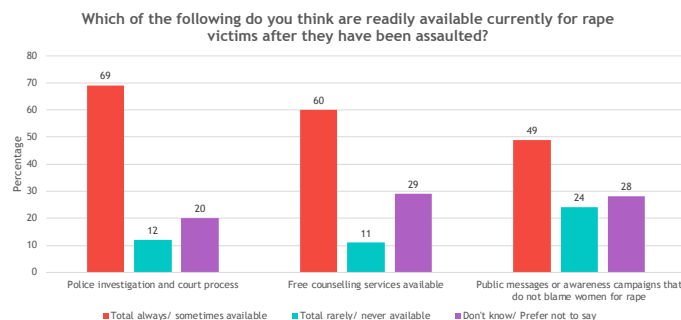
## Most think victims are getting what they need

Most people (69%) think that if someone is raped a police investigation and court process will be available to the victim. That number is even higher amongst Conservative voters, with 76% believing the criminal justice system is available for rape victims. That group are also more likely (65%) to believe that free counselling services are available.

Younger people are more realistic about the availability of services, with only 50% of 18-24s thinking counselling is available to all victims, and only slightly more (56%) believing the criminal justice system is available to all.

85% of the people we asked think it's important that the perpetrator admits that what they did was wrong and the vast majority (92%) say that the support of friends and family is important to victims of rape.

### Victim aftercare: majority think that police investigations and free counselling are available



## Methodology

YouGov surveyed 3922 GB adults aged 18+. Respondents were given the opportunity to answer / opt out of survey segments.

N = 3612 answered questions on gatekeeping and social norms; N = 3453 answered questions on rape and harm.

Fieldwork carried out on 19th September 2018. The survey was carried out online

Figures have been weighted and are representative on:

- Age, gender and education level
- Political attention
- Region
- General election vote in 2017
- EU referendum vote in 2016
- Social grade



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