

# Why, when and how men rape

## Understanding rape perpetration in South Africa

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*This article reports the findings of research conducted with a randomly selected sample of men aged 18–49 years from the general population of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, who were asked in an anonymously conducted survey about their rape perpetration practices, motivations, and consequences thereof. Overall 27,6 per cent (466/1686) of men had forced a woman to have sex with them against her will, whether an intimate partner, stranger or acquaintance. Some perpetrated alone, others with accomplices. Most men who had raped had done so more than once, started as teenagers, and often had different types of victims. Asked about motivations, men indicated that rape most commonly stemmed from a sense of sexual entitlement, and it was often an act of bored men (alone or in groups) seeking entertainment. Rape was often also a punishment directed against girlfriends and other women, and alcohol was often part of the context. A third of men had experienced no consequences from their acts, not even feelings of guilt. More commonly there was remorse and worry about consequences, and in a third of cases there had been action against them from their family, that of the victims, or respected community members, and about one in five had been arrested for rape. This research confirms that rape is highly prevalent in South Africa, with only a small proportion of incidents reported to the police. Many of the roots of the problem lie in our accentuated gender hierarchy. This highlights the importance of interventions and policies that start in childhood and seek to change the way in which boys are socialised into men, building ideas of gender equity and respect for women.*

South Africa has been dubbed the rape capital of the world, an epithet of quite uncertain validity. Whilst the number of rapes reported each year to the police is large (54 926 between April 2005 and March 2006),<sup>1</sup> and the rate is nearly four times higher than that in the United States,<sup>2</sup> the relationship between these and true rates of rape perpetration in the community is unknown, with

best estimates being that at most one in nine rapes are reported.<sup>3</sup> Rape is highly stigmatised, and research has shown that women commonly define sexual acts when they are physically forced into sex against their wishes as 'not rape' in order to avoid the stigma and sense of defilement of 'having been raped'.<sup>4</sup> Many women perceive that they are unable to legitimately refuse sex with a husband or boyfriend, to the extent that sexual coercion by an intimate partner is often regarded a 'not rape'. In similar vein, conducting research with women who might be victims may lead to underestimating the magnitude of the problem of rape in South Africa. Notwithstanding these limitations, research among pregnant women in

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Soweto found that 7,9 per cent had been raped by a non-partner as an adult, 5 per cent raped before the age of 15, 12,4 per cent raped the first time they ever had sex, and 20,1 per cent had been forced or threatened into sex by a husband or boyfriend.<sup>5</sup>

Work to prevent rape and other violence against women lies at the heart of gender equality interventions targeting men. These proceed from an assumption that all men (and women) can be violent, or directly or tacitly support acts of violence, and that it is therefore important to work across the community to advance the end goal of reducing gender-based violence. There are at least two approaches: one seeks to work with men to change ideas about gender relations and develop their willingness to confront their own vulnerability, while another attempts to build support for peace while condemning violence against women. In South Africa important initiatives with men by community organisations and NGOs on gender equality include high profile media campaigns such as 'Brothers for Life' and 'One Man Can'.

These interventions form one component of rape prevention strategies. If we are to develop holistic policy responses to prevent rape it is necessary to understand rape perpetration, including its prevalence, patterns, and why men rape. In most countries where this has been studied, the focus of attention has been on incarcerated rapists, yet given the very small proportion of men who rape that are jailed,<sup>6</sup> this group may be a highly biased sub-set of the raping population. This paper presents an analysis of data from research conducted with a randomly selected sample of men from the general population who were asked in an anonymously conducted survey about their rape perpetration practices, motivations, and consequences thereof. It will aim to describe these, and reflect on their implications for developing appropriate responses to rape.

## METHODS

The study was undertaken in three districts in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa. These form a contiguous area, and

include rural areas with communally-owned land under traditional leadership, as well as commercial farms, small towns, villages, and a city, inhabited by people of all South African racial groups, several ethnic groups (predominantly Xhosa and Zulu) and a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

The sample used a two stage proportionate stratified design to identify a representative sample of men aged 18–49 years living in the three districts. Using the 2001 census as the primary sampling frame, 222 census enumeration areas (EAs) were selected as the primary sampling unit, stratified by district and with numbers proportionate to district population size. The sample was drawn by Statistics South Africa. Households in each EA were mapped and twenty were systematically selected. In each household one eligible man was randomly selected to take part in the interview. Men were eligible for the study if they were aged 18–49 years and had slept there the night before.

Of the 222 selected EAs, two (0,9 per cent) had no homes, and in five (2,3 per cent) we could not interview because either permission from the local political gatekeepers was declined (n=1) or we could not access any eligible home after multiple visits at different times of day (n=4). In all the latter EAs, we established that many households were ineligible due to age or absence of a man. We completed interviews in 215 of 220 eligible EAs (97,7 per cent), and in these in 1 737 of 2 298 (75,6 per cent) of the enumerated and eligible households. Ethics approval was given by the Medical Research Council's Ethics Committee. The men signed informed consent for the interview and as an incentive they were given R25 for the interview. All data were collected anonymously.

Questionnaires were administered in isiXhosa or isiZulu and English using APDAs (Audio-enhanced Personal Digital Assistants), and took 45–60 minutes to complete. They included categorical variables measuring age, education, race, employment and income. Rape of women and girls was assessed, using seven questions adapted for the study from previously used items, and further validated through cognitive interviewing.<sup>7</sup> A typical item was 'How many times have you slept with a

woman or girl when she didn't consent to sex or after you forced her?"<sup>8</sup> Questions were asked about rape of a current or ex-girlfriend or wife, rape of a non-partner, gang rape and rape of a woman who was too drunk to consent. Men were then asked two questions about perpetration of rape of a man or boy. We also asked about the age of the youngest victim raped, and how many victims they had raped.

Respondents were also asked questions, which differed slightly by type of rape, seeking to understand the motivations associated with different rape forms. These took the form of a series of statements to which they should say if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed. At the end of the questions on rape a question was asked about the consequences of 'making a woman or man have sex when they did not consent'. The question had a list of consequences and a 'yes/no' answer could be given for each.

## Data analysis

The dataset provided a self-weighted sample. Analyses were carried out using Stata 10.0. All procedures took into account the two-stage structure of the dataset, with stratification by district and the EAs as clusters. Variables were summarised as percentages, and, when relevant, 95 per cent confidence limits were calculated using standard methods for estimating confidence intervals from complex multistage sample surveys (Taylor linearisation). Pearson's chi was used to test associations between categorical variables. No efforts were made to replace missing data. To test statistical significance of associations between rape perpetration prevalence and race, income and education, adjusting for age and other factors, random effects logistic regression models were used, including a variable for stratum (study design).

## Results

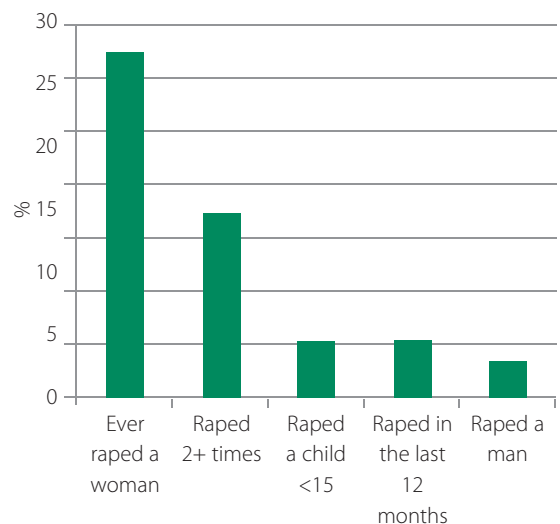
Overall half of the men interviewed (51,5 per cent) were aged 18–24 years, 19,1 per cent were aged 25–29 years, 11,7 per cent aged 30–34 years

and 17,6 per cent aged 35–49 years. This is a slightly younger sample than men generally aged 18–49 in the South African population. About 40 per cent of the sample of men had completed matric or had attended a tertiary institution. Five per cent of the men had a tertiary qualification, 8,8 per cent incomplete tertiary studies, 27 per cent had matric and 4,2 per cent had never been to school. Eighty-five per cent were African, ten per cent were Indian and five per cent white and coloured. The high proportion of Indians reflected the choice of study site, which included Ethekwini municipality (Durban).

The majority of men (61 per cent) were single. Just under a quarter were married and about one in eight (12 per cent) were cohabiting. Only 31,4 per cent of men said they provided the main source of income for the home; nearly half (48,6 per cent) said the main providers were their parents. Nearly half of the men interviewed had no income, and two thirds either had no income or earned less than R500 per month. Less than a third of men had regular work throughout the year. More than half of the sample said they occasionally or regularly went hungry.

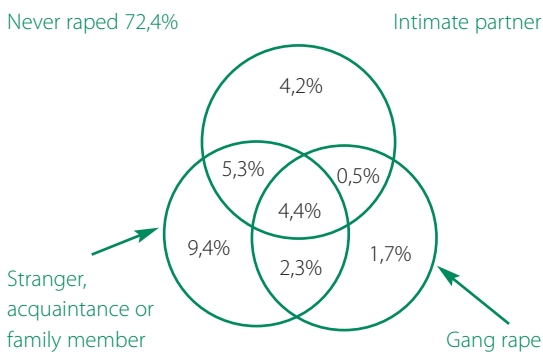
The proportion of men in the sample who had perpetrated different acts of rape is shown in Figure 1. Overall 27,6 per cent (466/1686) of men

**Figure 1:** Proportion of adult men who have perpetrated different acts of rape



had forced a woman to have sex with them against her will, whether an intimate partner, stranger or acquaintance, and whether perpetrated alone or with accomplices. One in twenty men (five per cent) had raped a child under the age of 15 years, and a similar proportion had raped in the 12 months before the interview. Three per cent of men disclosed having raped a man. Among those who raped, the majority had raped more than once. There was some missing data (from 18,7 per cent of men who had raped), but the information given by 379 men who had raped revealed that 23,2 per cent had raped 2–3 times, 8,4 per cent had raped 4–5 times, 7,1 per cent 6–10 times and 7,7 per cent said they had raped more than 10 times. The others said they had just raped once.

**Figure 2:** Venn diagram showing overlapping patterns of rape perpetration



Those men who disclosed having raped a woman said that they had most often raped a stranger or acquaintance (21 per cent). Fourteen per cent had raped an intimate partner and nine per cent had engaged in gang rape. It was not always disclosed whether the latter group raped a stranger or acquaintance or an intimate partner. There was considerable overlap between the perpetration of these different types of rape (Figure 2). The majority of men who had raped an intimate partner had also raped a stranger or acquaintance. 4,4 per cent, which is nearly one in twenty, had participated in a gang rape as well as raping a stranger/acquaintance and a girlfriend.

Table 1 shows the prevalence of having perpetrated rape by age, race, educational achievement and income. There were statistically

**Table 1:** Prevalence of rape perpetration by age, race, education and income

	%	95% CI	n/N
<b>Age group:</b>			
18–20	21.3	17.4, 25.2	92 / 432
21–24	31.9	27.1, 36.7	140 / 439
25–29	31.8	26.7, 36.9	103 / 324
30–34	28.7	21.6, 35.8	58 / 202
35–39	31.9	24.3, 39.6	38 / 119
40–44	19.4	9.9, 28.8	18 / 93
45–49	22.1	12.2, 32.0	17 / 77
<b>Race:</b>			
Black African	27.1	24.4, 29.8	389 / 1436
Coloured	45.7	32.5, 58.9	32 / 70
Indian	27.5	19.4, 35.5	42 / 153
White	11.1	0, 23.7	3 / 27
<b>Education:</b>			
None	27.9	16.3, 39.5	19 / 68
Primary schooling	24.3	19.0, 29.6	61 / 251
Secondary schooling	26.7	22.7, 30.7	182 / 682
Matric complete	28.9	24.2, 33.5	130 / 450
Incomplete tertiary education	38.8	30.4, 47.2	57 / 147
Degree	20.3	10.8, 29.7	16 / 79
<b>Monthly income:</b>			
None	24.9	21.5, 28.2	190 / 764

significant differences between the prevalence reported by men from different age groups ( $p=0.004$ ). The youngest and oldest men had the lowest prevalence, with 21 per cent of 18–20 year olds disclosing having perpetrated rape, as well as a similar proportion of 40–49 years olds. There was very little difference in the prevalence reported by the other age groups, at 32 per cent. This suggests that most men who rape do so for the first time as teenagers and almost all men who ever rape do so by their mid 20s.

There were significant differences in rape perpetration prevalence between racial groups ( $p=0.003$ ). In particular coloured men in the sample were significantly more likely to have raped than black African men ( $p=0.012$ ) and white men were significantly less likely to have raped than black African men ( $p=0.005$ ). These differences were not explained by differences in age or income.

There were some statistically significant differences in the prevalence of rape by level of educational achievement ( $p=0.04$ ), although rape perpetration was frequently reported by men in all educational categories. Men who had completed a university degree, or who attended school but without securing matric, were significantly less likely to have raped than their counterparts who had studied to tertiary level but without completion. The latter was the highest prevalence group.

There were also significant differences in rape perpetration prevalence between some of the income groups ( $p=0.0005$ ). Men who had no income or an income of no more than R500 per month had a significantly lower prevalence than men earning R501–R2000 per month, even after adjusting for age and race.

Insights into why men raped are presented in Table 2. Most commonly, rape had been perpetrated out of a sense of sexual entitlement. This was captured in questions asking whether the men simply wanted sex, wanted the woman or girl, wanted to prove they could do it, or were

experimenting with sex. This was a motivation for two thirds of rapes, and pertained across all rape types, although it was somewhat less common in gang rapes and more common in rapes of girlfriends or young girls. Half or more of men who had engaged in gang rape or raped a girl under 15 said they did so to have fun or as part of a game. Peer pressure to rape was evident here also, with over half of gang rapes seen as acts of 'fun', and this was a motive in a quarter of stranger/acquaintance rapes.

Raping out of anger or as a punishment was a motivation for more than half of the rapes of girlfriends, and also a common motive for rape of strangers/acquaintances and gang rapes. It was much less commonly seen as driving rapes of children under the age of 15, although some men disclosed having raped the girl to punish a third party, such as her mother.

Boredom was an explanation for a third of rapes, and was more common when young girls were raped. Men also linked these rapes to opportunity, as half the men perpetrating young child rape said they felt the girl wouldn't tell.

**Table 2:** Motivations for raping

	% strongly agree or agree		% strongly agree or agree		% strongly agree or agree		% strongly agree or agree	
	Girlfriend or wife	n/N	Non-partner	n/N	Stream-lining	n/N	Girl under 15	n/N
<b>Anger / punishment</b>	53.5	129/241	43.4	56/129	34.4	45/131	12.0	9/75
Angry	50.0	112/224	38.7	48/124				
Punishment of her	36.4	82/225	29.3	36/123	34.4	45/131	11.4	8/73
Wanted to punish another person	n/a		n/a		n/a		7.1	5/73
<b>Fun / game</b>	n/a		24.7	30/122	53.7	80/149	50.0	35/70
Wanted to have fun, it was a joke or game	n/a		n.a		54.6	72/132	50.0	35/70
Friends forced or pressurised me	n/a		24.7	30/122	34.6	45/131		
<b>Sexual entitlement</b>	69.3	167/241	65.1	84/129	57.1	85/149	70.7	53/75
Sexually desired her	53.6	120/224	52.0	64/123	44.3	58/131	57.8	41/71
Wanted sex	60.0	135/225	60.2	74/123	49.2	64/130	54.3	38/70
Wanted to prove I could do it	40.1	91/227	34.7	42/121	31.5	41/ 130	47.1	33/70
Experimenting with sex					31.5	41/ 130	36.6	26/71
<b>Boredom</b>	29.8	67/225	32.0	39/122	31.1	42/131	45.7	32/70
<b>Cleansing</b>	15.8	36/228	18.2	22/121	n/a		22.9	16/70
<b>Had been drinking</b>	34.7	78/225	38.8	47/121	45.0	82/149	17.1	12/70
<b>Opportunity:</b> thought she wouldn't tell	n/a		n/a		n/a		49.3	34/69

Alcohol was an important part of the context for gang rapes, being mentioned in relation to nearly half of these rapes, but was only in a third of girlfriend, stranger or acquaintance rapes. Overall, most men had not been drinking when they raped. Men were asked about whether cleansing had a role in their motivations for rape, and this was confirmed for rapes of girlfriends or wives as well as strangers or acquaintances, and mentioned by one in five men who had raped children under 15. The relatively large group of men who cited this as a motivation, and the mix of rape victim type, suggest that 'cleansing' reflects the broad indigenous medical views of sex as cleaning, rather than cleaning to cure specific diseases.<sup>9</sup>

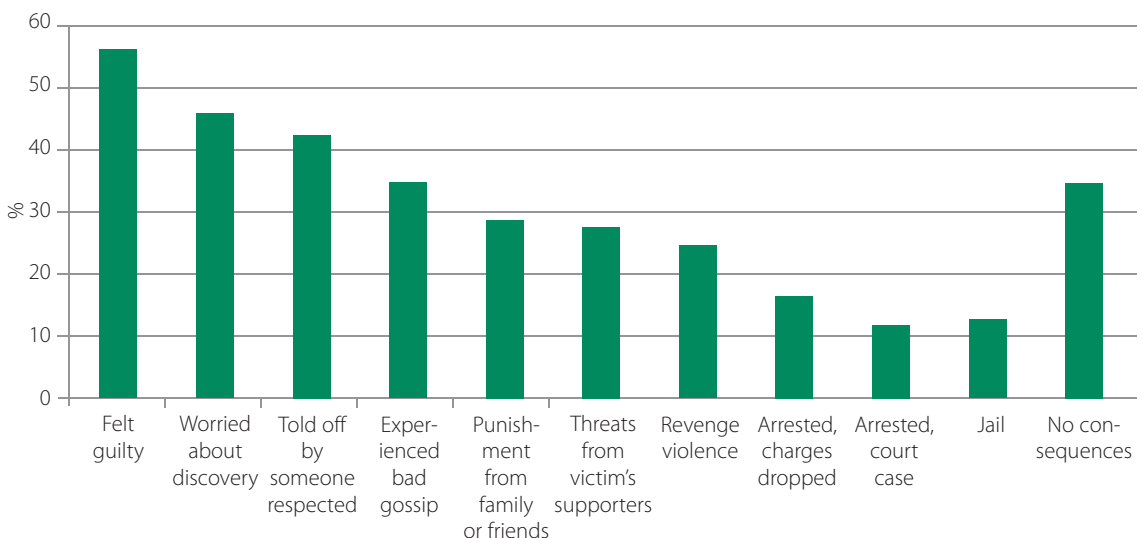
Men were asked about the consequences they had experienced after having raped (Figure 3). A third said there had been none; these were men who had not only not been 'caught' but lacked remorse for their actions. More commonly, men said they had felt guilty and just under half of men worried about being found out, which clearly indicated that they feared the consequences. A substantial group had experienced disapprobation from family, friends, or someone respected because of their actions. Forty-two per cent had been verbally admonished, a third made the subject of negative gossip, and 29 per cent had been

punished by family or friends. A substantial group had experienced threats (28 per cent) or violence (25 per cent) from supporters of the victim. In total, 21,2 per cent of men who had raped had been arrested in connection with a rape. Of those who had been arrested, half had eventually been jailed (53,6 per cent). Among the 401 men in this sample who had raped and for whom there was no missing information (86 per cent of the 466 men disclosing rape), 52 (13 per cent) had been jailed for rape – that is one in eight of the men who had raped.

## DISCUSSION

This study has shown that the prevalence of self-disclosed rape perpetration among men in the general population in South Africa is indeed very high; yet, it is not unbelievable, as it is relatively similar to the proportion of pregnant women in Soweto who had been raped<sup>10</sup> and to the proportion of young men in a volunteer sample from the Eastern Cape who were participating in a HIV prevention trial and were asked about rape perpetration.<sup>11</sup> Among the latter group, 21,3 per cent disclosed having raped a woman partner (8,6 per cent) or non-partner (16,2 per cent), whilst 13,9 per cent had gang raped a woman who was not a partner. Further, 5,5 per cent of men who had not previously disclosed sexually coercive

Figure 3: Consequences experienced after raping





practices, reported coercing sex over 12 months of follow up,<sup>12</sup> a figure very similar to the five per cent reporting perpetration in the last year in our sample.

We have shown that most men who rape do so more than once and commonly rape women with varying relationships to themselves. Furthermore, raping mostly commences during the teenage years. These findings support those of research on rape patterns from the United States.<sup>13</sup> They highlight the importance of consistency in policy and criminal justice responses to rape across victim types, and irrespective of the age of the rapist. They also highlight the importance of addressing rape prevention activities in the first instance to children and teenage boys, and effectively using the school curriculum and environment to instil the appropriate values and gender attitudes.

The analysis of prevalence of rape perpetration by age, race, level of educational attainment and monthly income confirms that rape perpetration is found among all social groups. Indeed, none of the social subgroups examined had what might be regarded as a 'low prevalence' of rape perpetration. Yet there were significant differences among levels of all these social status indicators. The lower prevalence of rape among the youngest men is most likely to reflect their having had fewer years over which to perpetrate. Among men over 40, it is difficult to be sure whether the lower prevalence reflects an age-related recall bias, or whether there has been a true increase in rape perpetration prevalence in succeeding generations of men. This age pattern, and the prevalence levels, are similar to those found in recently released results of a survey of adult men in the general population in Gauteng province.<sup>14</sup>

The pattern of prevalence by race was based on relatively small numbers of white and coloured men, yet differences observed were statistically significant. Whilst racial differences in exposure to important risk factors for raping, notably exposure to abuse and trauma in childhood,<sup>15</sup> may explain the lower prevalence of raping by white men when compared to black African men, it

does not explain the higher prevalence in coloured men. It is most likely that this difference reflects differences in cultural practices related to the socialisation of boys. They demonstrate the inherent possibility of reducing rape perpetration in South Africa through appropriate interventions around gender norms and gender relations. The finding among coloured men further confirms a pattern that has been related in many other studies on gender-based violence,<sup>16</sup> namely a particularly high prevalence of socialisation into a very violent, accentuated masculinity of a type typified by gangsters.<sup>17</sup> An essential part of prevention of violence and crime in South Africa must involve efforts to change this.

The inverted U shaped patterns of rape perpetration seen by income and educational attainment can be explained if rape perpetration is understood to be inherently a demonstration of gendered power. Rape is seen, at times, as an appropriate means of expression of gender power among men who have fantasies of status and power, but who lack sufficient education or earning ability to be able to enjoy most of the benefits of a higher social position.<sup>18</sup> The importance of gendered power and the related concept of sexual entitlement in rape perpetration are very vividly demonstrated in the data on motivations for raping. Whilst there were some variations in the proportion of men agreeing that this was a motivation for rape according to the type of rape perpetrated, it was very common across all types of rape that men indicated that they sexually desired the woman or girl, or because they wanted to prove they could force her, with complete disregard for her wishes.

There has been considerable debate in the public arena, particularly the popular press, about motivations for raping, and popular attention has focused on varying factors from a virgin sex cure for HIV to the role of alcohol and drugs fuelling rape. At the extreme of these public debates is the spectre of a psychopath, the serial rapist (and often murderer) who is a danger to society.<sup>19</sup> Our findings on motivations for rape indicate that the most common ones lie in our society's accentuated gender power hierarchy, and the

concomitant socialisation of children from early childhood into social norms that legitimate the exercise of gendered sexual power.<sup>20</sup> Related to this is the motivation of anger and punishment in rape perpetration, which clearly forms part of a common idea that punishment of women is not only legitimate but that this may be appropriately expressed through sex. The degree to which boys' socialisation conveys norms and values of sexual entitlement may vary by social class and between other social groups in South Africa, and this may explain some of the patterns in rape perpetration prevalence between groups, as well as providing evidence that this would be amenable to change through social engineering.

Alcohol was clearly part of the context of many acts of rape, but these were a minority and furthermore our findings support evidence that suggests alcohol is a contextual factor in rape rather than a 'cause' of rape in its own right.<sup>21</sup> Many of the rapes were perpetrated as recreation, either from boredom or by men seeking fun, or viewing rape as a game. In the case of rape of young children, they were often selected as victims with an expectation that there would not be consequences.

The consequences of rape perpetration can be divided into four categories: legal/criminal, familial, community and personal. As we have shown, relative to the national population of prosecutions and incarceration, a fairly large proportion of men (one in eight) who had raped experienced a legal/criminal consequence of their action. While the percentage remains low, especially bearing in mind the gravity of the offence, it is interesting (and possibly heartening) to note that 21,2 per cent of those who had raped had been prosecuted, and over half of these jailed. This compares well with national prosecution and incarceration rates but still calls for much more effective police and prosecutorial response. It is possible to speculate that familial responses have something to do with the relatively high levels of official action against rape perpetrators. Over a quarter had experienced violence or threats from family members or supporters of the victim, and nearly half had

been scolded and criticised for their actions. The fact that men are identified and action taken against them by family members is likely to create a climate in which police and prosecutors will find it easier to identify and act against offenders. In a similar way, community action – primarily negative gossip and forms of street justice – is likely to deprive the act of rape of any social legitimacy, as well as create a climate of openness in which the gathering of information necessary for arrest and prosecution is created. But possibly the most important consequence of rape is the reflection of the perpetrator himself. Not all men who perpetrate rape understand their actions as criminal<sup>22</sup> and there are indications that when they do, they are helped to understand the harm that they have done to the victim. Arrest and prosecution constitute a salient moment for reflection, for it is amongst those (a third of all perpetrators) who have not been 'caught' that lack of remorse is highest. There clearly is a sense, for the majority of respondents, that the perpetration (be it out of anger or seeking fun) is 'wrong'. Feeling guilty and being remorseful are important in reducing levels of rape and in the personal project of rehabilitation, including highlighting the importance of work on masculinities as part of rehabilitation in prisons.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms the high prevalence of rape in South Africa and demonstrates that within the lives of men who rape, the trajectory normally starts young, in the teenage years. Also, men who rape commonly rape multiple women on multiple occasions and have different types of victims. The evidence on motivations for rape clearly places the problem at the foot of our accentuated gender hierarchy and highlights the importance of interventions and policies that start in childhood and seek to change the way in which boys are socialised into men. Building a more gender equitable society is crucial for efforts to prevent rape.

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## NOTES

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