



A Comparative Analysis of Operation Bluestone: A Specialist Rape Investigation Unit - Summary Report*

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1.1 Context

The police service has a long history of using narrowly focused investigative units to perform tasks that require specialist skills and techniques in response to crime. In the United Kingdom, there has been recognition of the utility of specialist investigation units in dealing with cases involving rape since at least the early 1980s. The rationale underpinning the creation of specialist units to investigate rape cases include - improving the quality of police investigations and victim care; increasing the skills of officers; improving victim engagement and developing better inter-agency working.

1.2 The core characteristics of a specialist rape investigation unit revolve around recruitment, victim focus, improvement and investigative skills:

A specialist rape investigation unit is comprised of carefully recruited police officers who are motivated and exclusively focused on rape and other serious sexual offence investigations. The officers possess strong investigative skills and see victim care as a crucial part of the investigative process. The unit works closely with other agencies and specialist services in order to encourage victim reporting, engagement and the timely collection and analysis of all relevant evidence. The leadership of the unit seeks to maintain high investigative standards and improve the skill set of officers who work within the unit.

1.3 Over half of the police forces in England and Wales have some form of specialist capacity when investigating rape or other serious sexual offence cases. However, there is no single model of operation for specialist units. Instead, there is a diverse range of approaches currently in place across England and Wales.

1.4 The existing literature on specialist rape investigation units suggests that they produce benefits such as improved attitudes among officers, a greater emphasis on victim care and support, better inter-agency working and the creation of a good working relationship between officers. However, this evidence base is limited and up until now, research has not compared specialist unit performance with a non-specialist policing approach using data derived from a large number of police case files.

¹ For further details of these findings, see: P. Rumney *et al*, 'A Specialist Rape Investigation Unit: A Comparative Analysis of Performance and Victim Care,' (2019) 29 *Policing and Society* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10439463.2019.1566329>

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2.1 Methodology

The approach taken in this study is the retrospective interpretation of police case file data held on rape and attempted rape investigations. Such a process of 'reconstructing' or 'tracking' provides detailed information on demographics, case characteristics and factors that influence case progression. For the purpose of this study, Avon and Somerset Constabulary provided the research team with access to its case file logs for all rapes and attempted rapes recorded by its specialist rape investigation unit known as 'Operation Bluestone' (hereafter Bluestone) from two calendar years. In addition, case file data for all recorded allegations of rape and attempted rape over the same time period was obtained from an anonymous non-specialist comparator area. The total case file data comprises 322 Bluestone cases and 119 comparator cases (n=441). This data includes allegations of rape made by males and females, and given Bluestone's remit, only includes those who were aged 14 and above at the time of reporting. Through a process of reading and coding the case file data, the research team constructed a quantitative database and subsequently performed an analysis of the data using statistical software packages.

2.2 A key challenge for this study lay in establishing an appropriate comparator (i.e. non-Bluestone) sample of rape investigations. Bluestone team investigations were confined to central Bristol and establishing an identical 'like-for-like' comparator that mirrored the characteristics of this urban area was not possible. The comparator sample was comprised of all rape investigations in an anonymous non-specialist policing area. As a result, the Bluestone investigations contained a range of case types that were not present in the comparator sample. These included reports made in the context of sex work/on-street prostitution (Bluestone N=38, Comparator N=0) and from victims experiencing homelessness (Bluestone N= 22, Comparator N=0). The data has been the subject of several adjustments in order to address this imbalance of case type in order to make the two samples more similar. Without these adjustments, the two samples would be too different in composition to engage in a meaningful comparison.

2.3 The performance of specialist rape investigation units can be measured by a variety of means. What might be termed more 'traditional' measures of performance, such as conviction rates and sanctioned detection rates, are widely used in the existing case tracking and evaluation literature. Whilst reliance upon these measures offer the significant benefit of broad coverage and the ability to compare trends over time, it should be acknowledged that these measures are unable to provide a complete picture of police responses to rape. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of police performance, other measures were developed for this study to allow the research team to assess the provision and facilitation of victim support and the quality of officer decision making in relation to crime recording.

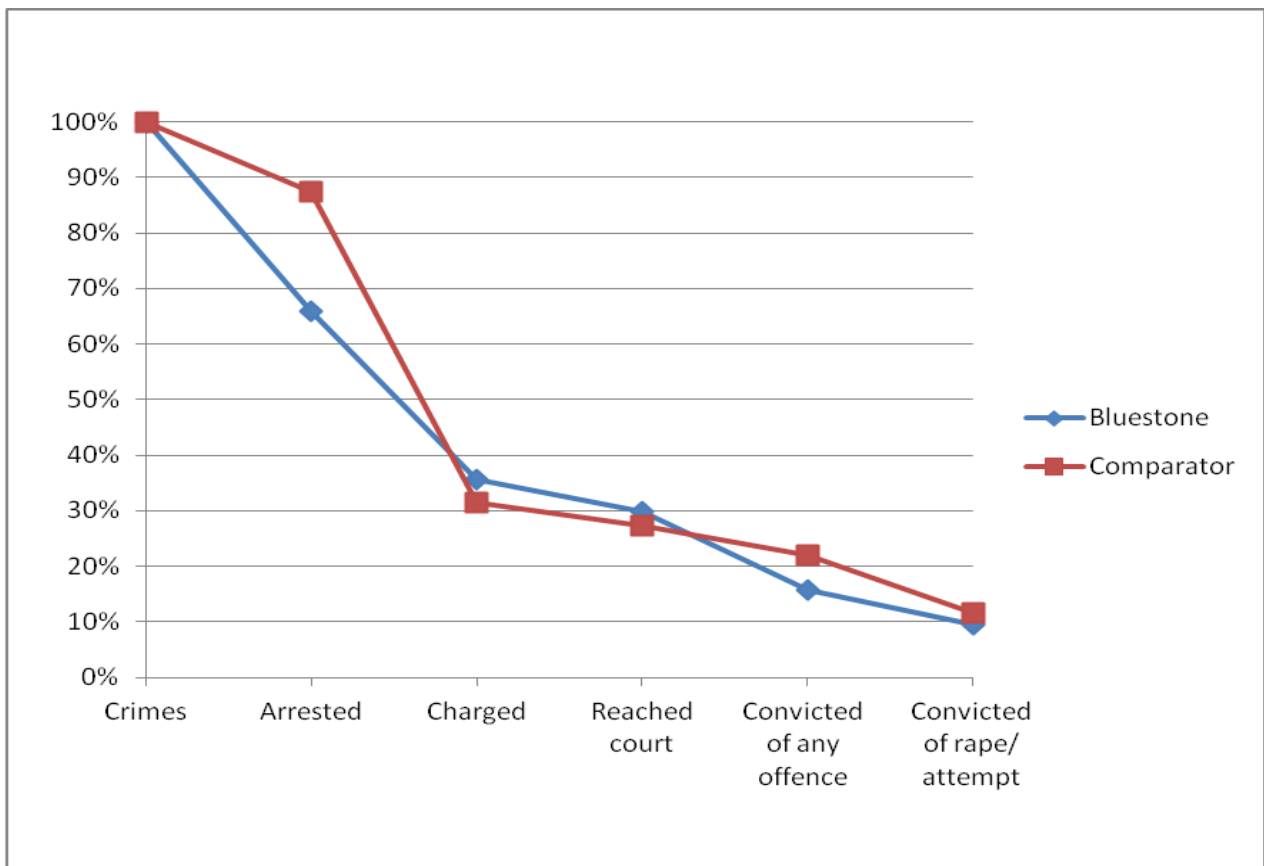
Findings

3.1 Case attrition

In broad terms, the Bluestone and the comparator investigations shared a similar profile of attrition with the steepest point of attrition being that between arrest and charge (Figure 1). Bluestone investigations exhibited somewhat higher charging rates than the comparator investigations (35.5% vs. 31.5%), and a slightly higher proportion of Bluestone cases also reached court (29.8% vs. 27.3%) despite Bluestone cases having a significantly higher concentration of victims with multiple vulnerabilities (para. 4.1). Bluestone's use of voluntary suspect attendance contributed to a lower arrest rate compared to that found in the comparator cases (65.8% vs. 87.3%, $P < 0.05$). It should not be assumed that the lower Bluestone conviction rate for rape (9.4% vs. 11.5%) or any offence (15.6% vs. 22.1%) compared to the comparator resulted from investigative failures by Bluestone officers. Conviction at the trial stage is the product of a complex array of factors, some of which are unrelated to the investigative process and evidence gathering by police officers.

Figure 1

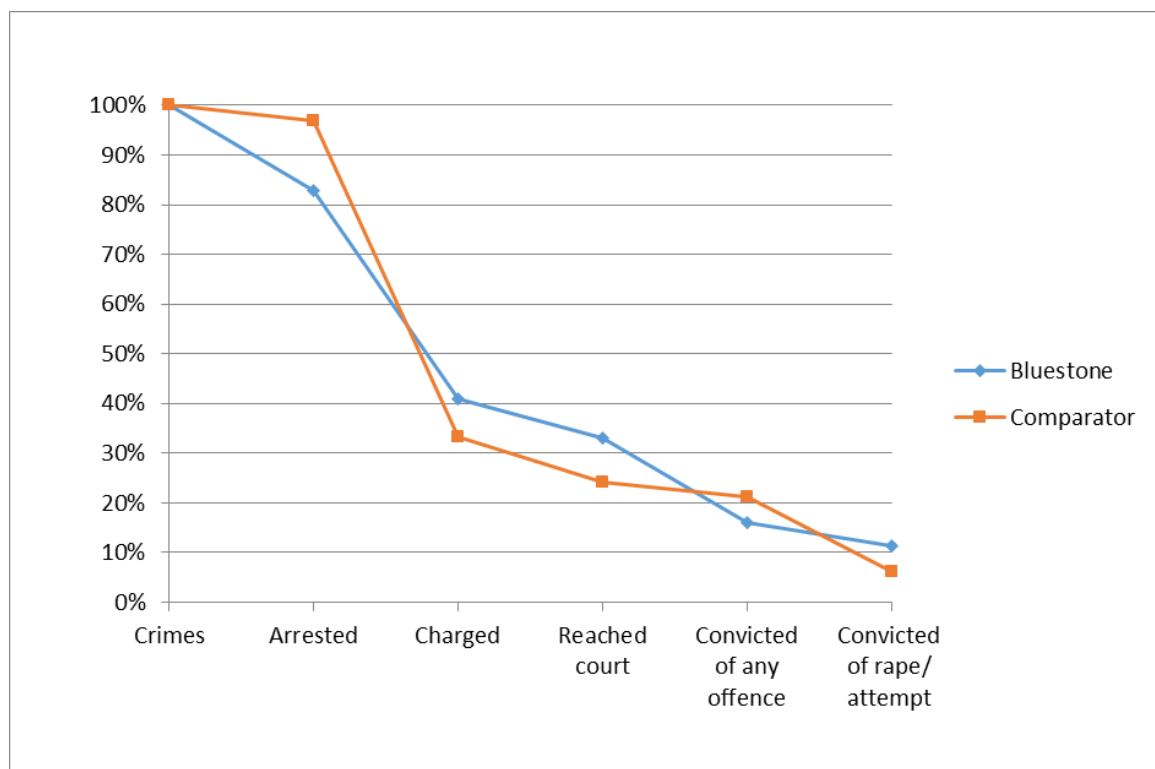
Bluestone and comparator attrition profile



3.2 Bluestone had more favourable case progression and outcomes in 'live' cases (those reported within 7 days of the offence) than the comparator area (Figure 2). This appears to result from the higher proportion of stranger rape cases in the Bluestone 'live' cases compared with the comparator area. 19.3% of Bluestone 'live' cases and 9% of comparator cases were stranger rape cases. Of those, the Bluestone stranger rape cases had a rape conviction rate of 35.2%. None of the comparator 'live' stranger rape cases proceeded beyond the investigative stage. As with the general attrition profile in Figure 1, Bluestone's use of voluntary suspect attendance contributed to a lower arrest rate in 'live' case investigations compared to that found in the comparator case file data.

Figure 2

Bluestone and comparator 'live' case attrition profile



4.1 Vulnerability and complex needs

Taken as a whole, 96.6% of Bluestone cases had a victim presenting with a vulnerability compared to 93.6% of the comparator cases. However, the Bluestone and comparator cases differed significantly in terms of the presence of victims with multiple vulnerabilities. 23.0% of Bluestone investigations involved victims identified as having three or more vulnerabilities whereas this figure was 12.0% for the comparator. Bluestone also had a higher proportion of victims exhibiting two or more vulnerabilities compared to the

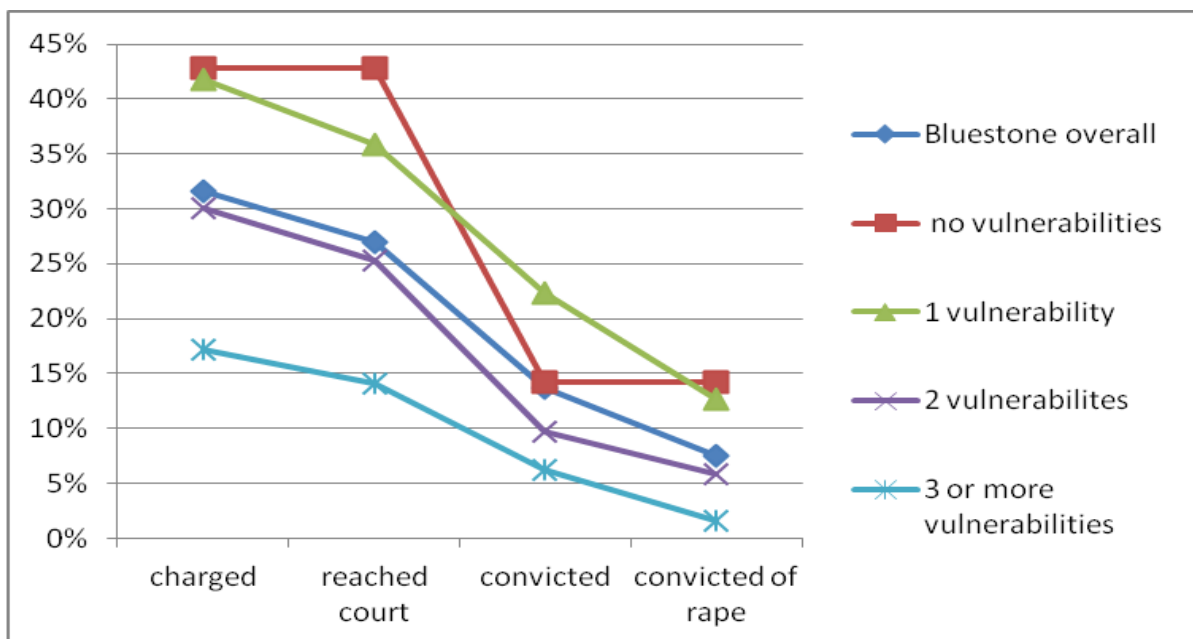
comparator (60.0% vs. 42.0%). In the adjusted sample (para. 2.2 above), a greater number of two or more (54.2% vs. 43.6%) and three or more vulnerabilities (18.1% vs. 13.8%) were found in the Bluestone sample.

4.2 Rape victim vulnerability and rape case attrition were linked (Figure 3).² Put simply, the higher the number of victim vulnerabilities in a case the greater the rate of overall attrition.

4.3 Vulnerability and victim withdrawal were also linked. Those with three or more vulnerabilities exhibited higher rates of withdrawal than those with fewer or no vulnerabilities. Withdrawal rates for those with three or more vulnerabilities were highest (47%) compared to those with two vulnerabilities (37%), one vulnerability (31%), and no vulnerabilities (14%).

Figure 3

Attrition and victim vulnerability in Bluestone cases



5.1 Victim care and the role of SAIT officers and ISVAs

Sexual Assault Investigation Team (SAIT) officer allocation was the standard procedure in Bluestone investigations and these officers took an active role in the investigative process, including - building a relationship of trust with victims; encouraging victim engagement with the investigative process and making referrals to other specialist services. The Bluestone

² The 'no vulnerability' category in Figure 3 should be read with care as it comprises only 3% of the Bluestone cases.

case files suggested that SAIT officers maintained regular contact with victims and specialist services.

5.2 By contrast, a SAIT officer was allocated in 41.0% of comparator cases. Some case files revealed very active SAIT involvement, similar to that in the Bluestone file data. In other cases, a SAIT officer was allocated but there was little evidence of activity. Instead, detectives would contact victims regarding such things as case updates and other tasks normally assigned to SAIT officers.

5.3 Where support referrals were made Bluestone officers made Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) referrals more often than officers in the comparator cases (72.9% vs. 42.1%, $P < 0.01$). Further, it was found that ISVA support referrals were a crucial factor in preventing victim withdrawal ($P < 0.05$) (Figure 4). Within the Bluestone cases, where no form of victim support referral was made, 50.9% of victims withdrew from the investigatory process. Where some form of support referral was made (excluding an ISVA), 42.8% withdrew, whereas the withdrawal rate was 27.1% for those victims where a referral to an ISVA was made.

Figure 4

Support referrals and victim withdrawal³

Type of referral	Withdrawal %	No withdrawal %
ISVA	27.1	72.8
Other support referral	42.8	57.1
No support referral	50.9	49.0

6.1 Crime Recording

The research sought to examine the nature and accuracy of crime recording by Bluestone and comparator area officers in line with the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR). Bluestone transferred or cancelled fewer cases than the comparator area in both years covered by this study (18.6% vs. 26.5%; 9% vs. 11.3% respectively). Bluestone officers were also recording allegations of rape more accurately than officers in the comparator area (77.5% vs. 64.7%). There was evidence in both the Bluestone and comparator area file data that some officers misunderstood the HOCR or used inappropriate grounds for decision making. This was more evident in the comparator cases.

6.2 The research team also examined the number of allegations that were false and used the HOCR 'Additional Verifiable Information' that no crime occurred (AVI) category as a proxy

³ This data is calculated from unadjusted Bluestone cases only (N=278).

measure for false allegations. The research team determined that 35 Bluestone and comparator cases fell within the AVI category (7.9% of all cases).

7.1 Conclusions

In considering the investigations performed during the research period, it is apparent that those undertaken by Bluestone were more likely to present investigative challenges to officers than those in the comparator area. For instance, the investigations carried out by Bluestone featured a comparatively higher proportion of victims exhibiting multiple vulnerabilities. This research found that Bluestone outperformed the comparator area across a range of measures. In terms of victim care, the findings illustrate that rates of ISVA referral and SAIT allocation were higher in Bluestone than in the comparator area. Analysis of the Bluestone cases showed that support referrals were found to reduce the rate of victim withdrawal. The research also established that Bluestone officers were more likely to be accurate in their crime recording than officers in the comparator area.

7.2 Furthermore, this research illustrates that the attrition profiles for Bluestone and the comparator investigations were different. Overall, despite having a somewhat lower conviction rate, proportionally more Bluestone cases were charged and reached court than those in the comparator area, despite the larger number of vulnerability cases handled by Bluestone. When considering outcomes in 'live' cases only, Bluestone exhibited lower rates of attrition at most stages of the criminal justice process.⁴

⁴ The one exception was at the arrest stage. However, the emphasis on voluntary suspect attendance by Bluestone officers contributed to the lower rate of arrest (para. 3.2 above).