

# Book review

## Policing Rape: The Way Forward

by *Katrin Hohl and Elizabeth A. Stanko*  
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**P**olicing rape is outstanding academic book as it gathers, triangulates and critically analyses theories and evidence about sexual violence and its control by the state. But it is also much more than that because it shows how an intervention can be enlightened and grounded in theory to prompt effectiveness. The biggest strength of the book is also its most significant shortcoming for a reader like me, sceptical of the effectiveness of interventions that target the symptom rather than the cause. Operation Soteria Bluestone is the police intervention with more systemic reach than I have ever known of. Still, at times, it appears over-focused on police cultures rather than why and how those cultures are so prominent across time and cultures.

### 1. Summary and evaluation

The reason why this is an intervention enlightened by academic research is not so much the fact that 50 academics were involved, but rather that theory is cherished in the process. The researchers of Operation Soteria acknowledge that every definition of a problem needs a lens. This starts by making explicit the question that most of previous research was asking: *what is it about rape that makes it so difficult to investigate*, and changes it into *what is it about the police that makes rape so difficult to investigate?* A first systemic remark is made in the answer: *Rape investigations are not successful by design not by mistake.*

Firstly, the police were created by Victorian upper-class men whose interest was to keep control of growing industrialised and urban spaces. From the start, the police were intended to protect the interests of the ruling class. In this context rape was only considered as an offence against the rights of a man over a woman and not a vulnereating of the woman as a person. Illustrative is the fact that marriage rape was not criminalised until 1991.

Secondly, the police fulfils the function of signalling to society what is normal and what is deviant, and what is the social status of the subjects that interact with the police, e.g. it has an important symbolic power. Adding to that, the function of the police is not as much *law enforcement* as it is peace maintenance. The public engages with the police as a last resort, when something needs to be done. An example of this is that 85% of the calls are related to mental health crises that have nothing to do with criminality.

Tied to the analysis of the nature of the police is the development of the concept of default policing. What do you think when you think of the police? Default policing could be best depicted by the recruitment slogan: “choose a career most people only see on screen” (p. 22). The control and containment of disorder is at its core. Recognising the limitations of the use of force, policing by consent implies that the system actively disincentivises the use of the criminal justice system, as it is seen as the very last resort when nothing else works to keep order. It also implies a focus police on “lived cases” that represent a current threat.

Entrenched with these analyses, the authors define and characterise rape,

wondering if and how the police as it is designed fails in addressing it. As a form of recognition that rape is a normal outcome of misogynistic social structures, the authors emphasise a continuum between consensual sex and rape, distinction blurred by porn. Furthermore, contrary to stereotypes, the perpetrators of rape are by large majority known to the victim (90%); stranger rape is of rare occurrence. In fact, often, the perpetrators create or exploit a vulnerability or dependence of the victim, being common in the context of family violence. Related to this, rape is often not disclosed immediately, but a long time after the events, it also happens inside of private spaces; only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of cases happen in public spaces.

Policing *defaults* to minimise the investment of time in something that appears numerically rare, not affecting public order, a risk “only” the particular victim and not a “lived” threat. Therefore, the investigation focuses on if the victim can be easily discredited, being reasons for that, having reported a previous rape and having a mental health condition or a relationship with the suspect. This, the books acknowledges, has something to do with rape myths but goes beyond. It functions as a heuristic to avoid investing time in a case considered destined to failure. Therefore, victim blaming is not as much a discourse as it is an outcome. The consequence of this is that 86% of the cases are closed by the police before reaching further stages. This is problematised as an exercise of symbolic power by acting as if the victim is the one to blame, therefore denying her belonging in society.

It is interesting to notice that what victims want when reporting a rape is not that much a perpetrator behind bars but rather for him to stop. This is of highest relevance since even if the perpetrator is charged and sentenced, this process often takes more than two years, in which the perpetrator remains mostly

unbothered. The investigation itself does not stop the perpetrator. Furthermore, only 2 in 100 suspects are charged. Considering that false cases of rape are very rare, a large majority of perpetrators are not even bothered with a court case, being rape *de facto* decriminalised. This is highly concerning inasmuch as it is thought that most perpetrators are repeat offenders and consequently, the lack of consequences is emboldening them instead of deterring them.

Operation Soteria Bluestone is mostly driven by a double-fold goal: to improve justice outcomes and the experiences of victims. The strategy is based in six pillars. First, focusing the investigation on the perpetrator trying to gather information on his manipulative tactics and *modus operandi*. This, in order the reconstruct “the whole story” (Tidmarsh, 2021). Second, stopping known perpetrators, since it is believed that most perpetrators are repeat offenders. In doing this, the role of civil orders is promoted and encouraged, as it is already within the powers of the police. Third, procedural justice must inform the engagement with victims, emphasising a treatment that acknowledging the consequences of rape (e.g. emotional instability, vulnerability, among others). Fourth, officer learning, development and wellbeing as organisational justice is proven to impact the effectiveness of training and the treatment with the public. Fifth, data and analytics; the information gathered from the victim is not a bureaucratic task, but rather intelligence on the perpetrator that must be triangulated with previous information in power of the police. Sixth, digital forensics is a key tool in a world in which everyone’s life’s are recorded in digital devices.

Throughout this account, I have tried to do justice to real spirit of the book oriented towards being a full diagnosis of the structures of the police. Nevertheless, at times, those

structures that go beyond discourses or cultures appear scattered or underemphasised: “policing’s cultural context is both the starting and landing point for change” (p. 145). An example is the fact that the authors say it does not make a difference if these logics of rape investigation and their outcome are caused by personal beliefs or just a “downstream orientation” (p. 41). Nevertheless, it does; the cause of the poor investigations lies in correctly unveiling its mechanisms and, therefore, the key to effective interventions. Altering the beliefs of officers, even in a systemic way, will not make disappear the pressures of high workload, performance measures based on justice outcomes, wider internalised gender norms, or the normative foundations of the police (on this point, [Pateman, 1988](#)). Furthermore, when outlining the proposal, the authors recognise that these issues appear to be denounced worldwide ([Hohl and Stanko, 2022](#)) [1]; since it is unlikely that there is a coordinated system of belief dissemination across different police forces, it is reasonable to think that those structural concerns can be located way beyond police cultures and intentions.

On another sort of matters, the idea that heterosexual relationships are crossed by power is endorsed by all sorts of feminists, but the link with porn and the involvement of the criminal justice system are highly debated. Furthermore, structural discrimination, including rape myths is double faced: it also needs the idea of a “good woman”. In this context, porn appears as an easily targeted symptom.

## 2. Unique value and contribution

As an academic book *Policing Rape* is a theoretically transparent and critical

account that allows detailed scrutiny of its rationality and inspiration. As an intervention, Operation Soteria Bluestone has so far proven to be effective, doubling charging rates and improving victims’ satisfaction. This is not surprising as it addresses several areas of police action, not limiting itself to cultures and beliefs, but developing strategies to effectively reset police response. Overall, it seems that researchers alongside with police officers deployed enormous effort guided by a pragmatic spirit that can improve the outlook of rape investigation. Making the police as good as possible is a challenge worthy of the bravest researchers and police officers.

Yet, sociological imagination invites the question: if we were to design a system tailored to investigate and prevent rape, would we design something that our police systems?

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### **Note**

[1.] As an example, a protest song was created in Chile mirroring the anthem of the police, the song spread throughout the world. It is titled “a raper in your path”, referencing the motus of the police “a friend in your path”.

### **References**

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