Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 737 November 2026

Abstract | We used administrative police data on sexual offences from 2017 to 2022 to evaluate the factors that influence case attrition via withdrawn and unfounded case outcomes for adult sexual offences in Queensland.

We ran analyses of case, police and system level variables to identify factors that affect withdrawn and unfounded outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous men and women.

High demand, limited capacity and sexual offence severity increase withdrawn and unfounded outcomes. Specialist sexual offence trained investigators and referrals to external services are protective factors against case attrition.

Attrition of sexual offence cases in police investigations

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In Australia, 40,087 victim-survivors of sexual violence made reports to police in 2025—the highest number of victim-survivors recorded in one year in 32 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2025). One of the largest increases occurred in Queensland, where our research is focused: reports were up 11 percent in the previous two years alone (ABS 2025). Social surveys find that, in Australia, one in six adults (14%) has experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 (ABS 2023c). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience even higher rates of sexual violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019). However, these figures likely underestimate the scale of sexual violence in Australia.

CRIMINOLOGY RESEARCH FUND

While sexual violence can impact people of every age, gender, culture, sexual orientation and socio-economic group, children and young women experience higher rates of sexual violence than any other group (AIHW 2024, 2019; World Health Organization 2021). In Australia, 81 percent of police-reported sexual violence involved adult women and female children; more than one-third (39%) were between 10 and 17 years of age (ABS 2025). Indigenous women experience two to five times the rate of sexual violence of non-Indigenous women (AIHW 2019; Bryant & Willis 2008; Wundersitz 2010). The impacts of sexual violence on victims can be significant and include neurobiological and psychological coping behaviours such as fragmented memory, detachment and minimisation (Chaudhury et al. 2017; Haskell & Randall 2019). Victim-survivors are also more likely to experience anxiety, depression, chronic disease, substance abuse and unemployment (ABS 2023d; Brunton & Dryer 2022).

Despite its prevalence and devastating impacts, sexual violence is consistently one of the least reported crimes (Bright et al. 2021; Daly & Bouhours 2010). In Australia, just eight percent of women who experience sexual assault contact police (ABS 2023d). Men report sexual violence at significantly lower rates than women (Mathews et al. 2025; Rumney 2008) and are more likely to withdraw than female victims of the same age (Walker et al. 2021). These findings are unsurprising, given the exceptionally intimate nature of the crime and potentially traumatic experience of recounting the details to a stranger such as a police officer. Research suggests that fear of not being believed, feelings of shame and distress and lack of confidence in the justice system are contributing factors in the under-reporting of sexual violence (Brooks & Burman 2017). Thus, every victim-survivor of sexual violence who contacts police represents an opportunity for justice, perpetrator accountability and prevention of future offending.

Case attrition

Victim-survivors who contact police are unlikely to achieve justice because most cases do not result in conviction (Bright et al. 2021; Pattavina, Morabito & Williams 2021). Despite academic scholarship and policy initiatives, there remains a 'justice gap' (Temkin & Krahé 2008: 9) between the large number of sexual offences reported and the paucity of arrests, prosecutions and convictions that result (Daly & Bouhours 2010; Hoffman, Patton & Greeson 2024)—a process referred to as attrition. Attrition of sexual offence cases from the criminal justice system is a significant and widely acknowledged problem (Daly & Bouhours 2010; Garza 2024; Spohn & Tellis 2019). Attrition can occur at police investigation, prosecution review and trial stages (including not guilty). Upwards of 70 percent of cases do not proceed beyond the police investigation (Bright et al. 2021; Daly & Bouhours 2010); few of the remaining cases result in conviction (Australian Institute of Criminology 2007; Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). High rates of attrition during the investigative phase are problematic, indicating rare consequences for perpetrating sexual violence and little intervention to prevent further offending.

Case withdrawal and unfounding

In their investigative role, police have discretionary power to influence case progression—and therefore attrition—by determining the scope and scale of the investigation, whether a crime occurred, the charge(s) to file and whether the case should be referred to the prosecutor (Spohn & Tellis 2012). Cases in which there is sufficient evidence to determine that an offender has committed the offence are referred to as 'solved'. Not all solved offences will progress to prosecution. The remaining cases have three potential outcomes: unsolved, withdrawn and unfounded (Queensland Police Service (QPS) 2024b: 75). Unsolved status applies to cases in which a suspect has not been located or identified or where the evidence is currently insufficient to proceed to prosecution. Withdrawn status results when a victim decides to disengage from the investigation. Cases are classified as unfounded when an investigator has determined and documented that there is sufficient evidence to reasonably suspect that the offence did not occur. The largest proportion of attrition occurs through victim withdrawal and police unfounding decisions (Hohl & Stanko 2015; Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2022; Venema, Lorenz & Sweda 2021). In Queensland, 27 percent of sexual offence cases exit the system through withdrawal and 13 percent through unfounding (Ting, Scott & Palmer 2020). Rates of withdrawal and unfounding are even higher in vulnerable populations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Christensen, Sharman & Powell 2016).

While investigations are to be guided by evidence, research suggests that police decision-making in sexual assault and rape cases is prone to influence by non-evidentiary or 'extra-legal' factors (Spohn 2020; Venema 2016). Queensland has one of the highest unfounded rates in Australia, with one in five reports of sexual violence determined as unfounded (Queensland Law Reform Commission 2020). Empirical evidence is needed to explain how case, police and system-level factors relate to withdrawn and unfounded case outcomes. The factors that explain these outcomes are the focus of this study.

Factors that influence case attrition

Case factors

Case factors, in the context of this report, relate to administrative offence classifications, offence details and outcomes. These include the date, time and location of the offence, sexual offence type, number of offences, number of victim-survivors and additional 'flags' used by police (eg a DV flag for domestic violence). Currently, the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification provides a national statistical framework for classifying offences, for use by criminal justice agencies in Australia (ABS 2023a). This includes the National Offence Index, which provides a measure of offence seriousness. Sexual offences for adults are classified into three categories: aggravated sexual assault (eg rape), non-aggravated sexual assault (eg sexual assault) and non-assaultive sexual offences (eg indecent acts; ABS 2023b).

Offence location (eg private dwelling vs public) is important, because more than half (69%) of sexual offences occurred at a residential location, most commonly a private dwelling (ABS 2023d)—increasing the likelihood that the victim-survivor will know the offender (Colombino, Mercado & Jeglic 2009). Time between the offence and when the victim-survivor reports to police can impact case outcomes, with greater delays in reporting presenting concerns about credibility (Thompson & Pozzulo 2024), and delays in investigative outcomes potentially increasing the likelihood of a withdrawn case outcome (Hanly & Tamara 2024).

Previous victimisation may also be linked to case attrition. Victim-survivors who have made prior complaints to police about sexual offending may experience a negative credibility bias (Pica, Sheahan & Pozzulo 2020), which may lead to subsequent offences being unfounded. In Queensland and nationally, offence data from 2022 estimated that two in five sexual offences were related to domestic and family violence (ABS 2023d). Sexual offences related to domestic and family violence are more likely to be withdrawn by the victim-survivor, because of threats and pressure from the offender (Hester & Lilley 2017) or victim-survivor reluctance to break up the family unit or to be perceived by members of their community as breaking up the family (Jones et al. 2024).

From 1 July 2021, police officers in Queensland have been required to record all criminal offences associated with domestic and family violence investigations (QPS 2024a); offences are 'flagged' for DV in the Queensland Police Records and Information Management Exchange (QPRIME) if a relevant relationship exists between the complainant and suspect.

Police response factors

Government audits of police responses to sexual violence in Australia have consistently highlighted gaps in specialist knowledge and skills needed to investigate sexual violence and have also noted widespread police bias against victims (Crime & Misconduct Commission 2003; Victorian Law Reform Commission 2004).

Police, like the wider community, hold misconceptions of sexual offending that place disproportionate focus on victim-survivor credibility and excuse the offender (Estrich 1987; Franklin et al. 2020; Hine & Murphy 2019). Normative trauma responses, such as memory lapses, not resisting the perpetrator and emotional sensitivity, may be viewed with suspicion because they do not meet police expectations of a 'genuine victim' (Franklin et al. 2023; Sleath & Bull 2017). Research also indicates that, without specialist training, police may perceive particular cohorts and behaviours (eg alcohol or drug use) as reducing credibility (O'Neal 2019). Without knowledge of sexual offending dynamics and the impact of trauma, police may question victim-survivor credibility (Shaw et al. 2017), making it less likely that suspects are identified and investigated (Campbell, Wells & King 2021; Jurek, Kelley & Wells 2021). Police training is thus instrumental for developing their knowledge and skills to effectively respond to reports of sexual violence and, critically, to engage effectively with victim-survivors.

Specialist sexual offence investigations training in Queensland

In response to government inquiries and recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the QPS developed the two-week Investigating Sexual Assault—Corroborating and Understanding Relationship Evidence (ISACURE) course (Carr, Helton & Bennett 2021) in collaboration with criminologists, psychologists, behavioural scientists and critical stakeholders (eg victim-survivors, police, prosecutors). The course equips participants with the knowledge, skills and behaviours to support victim-survivors effectively and to improve communication and investigation strategies to prevent, disrupt and prosecute sexual offences (Carr, Helton & Bennett 2021). Participants receive training on the neurobiology of trauma, learning its effects on memory and counterintuitive victim behaviours, while also critically examining their own assumptions about trauma, victim behaviour, sexual offences and the investigative process (Carr, Helton & Bennett 2021).

The ISACURE course is grounded in the *Whole Story* approach to the investigation of sexual crimes, which recognises sexual violence offences as a relationship-based crime (Tidmarsh 2021, 2016). Understanding the context in which the crime occurred helps investigators to clarify seemingly counterintuitive victim behaviour, such as delayed reporting or a continued relationship with the offender (Tidmarsh 2021; Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). This understanding can help to reduce police bias against victims that contributes to case attrition (Tidmarsh, Hamilton & Sharman 2020). As part of specialist training, investigators also gain better insights into the role of support agencies in assisting with recovery and other victim-survivor services.

System-level factors

System-level factors impact police investigations of sexual offences in Australia and worldwide and play a role in whether cases proceed or are withdrawn or unfounded. Investigations rely on the capacity of other services, including health (eg forensic medical examination; forensic and scientific services), legal aid, courts and victim support services. Police rely on forensic evidence (eg DNA) to assist in the identification and prosecution of suspects. In Queensland, the agency responsible for the training and delivery of forensic medical examinations is Queensland Health (Queensland Audit Office 2019). Timely access to forensic medical examinations by specially trained medical practitioners who document injuries and collect and store forensic samples is necessary. Many medical practitioners may not be aware of the importance of this investigative step and its time-sensitive nature (Wieberneit et al. 2024), which creates a further barrier to case progression.

Capacity and capability issues include lengthy delays and unavailability or refusal at some hospitals or health services to perform the forensic medical examinations (Queensland Audit Office 2024, 2019). In Queensland, the sexual assault investigations kits (SAIKs) have been progressively replaced since 2023 by the forensic medical examination kit, which includes improved forensic collection and storage materials.

Prosecutorial decisions and court delays can further contribute to unsatisfactory case outcomes. The Director of Public Prosecutions oversees and manages the prosecution of criminal offences (Queensland Government 2025). Director of Public Prosecutions lawyers review evidence provided by police investigators and have discretion over whether to proceed with or discontinue the case, based on factors including the sufficiency of evidence, public interest and/or the likelihood of a successful conviction (Queensland Government 2025). Delays in decisions to charge can occur because of delays in accessing police and forensic evidence and staff availability. The Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence (2022), Director of Public Prosecutions annual reports (Queensland Government 2024, 2023, 2022) and the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (2022a, 2022b, 2021) note the detrimental accumulation of system-level barriers to justice outcomes for victim-survivors of sexual, domestic and family violence and make recommendations for improving multiagency responses.

The current study

The current study was guided by the following research aims:

- to assess the proportion of withdrawn and unfounded adult sexual offence cases in Queensland;
- to examine the distinct demographic, case, police and system factors associated with the withdrawal of adult sexual offence cases in Queensland;
- to examine the distinct demographic, case, police and system factors associated with the unfounding of sexual offence cases in Queensland; and
- to determine influences on attrition of sexual offence cases by demonstrating the relationship between the demographic, case, police and system factors and withdrawn and unfounded outcomes.

We gained QPS Research Committee approval (QPSRC-1222-3.03) and The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics approval (HE000452) to use de-identified administrative crime data from QPRIME and to conduct interviews and focus groups with QPS staff and support services, in accordance with the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement 2007). The study involved two parts. Part 1 examined the characteristics and outcomes of sexual offences using QPRIME administrative crime data. Part 2 explored contextual factors through interviews with police investigators and support services. This paper reports on Part 1 findings. The full report, including qualitative findings, is available as *Attrition of sexual offences in police investigations: Exploring police, case and system factors that lead to withdrawn and unfounded outcomes* (Bennett et al. 2026).

Administrative data

The current study used de-identified QPRIME data on all recorded sexual offences reported between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2022. Offences were included only where data could be linked to all analysis factors (victim-survivor, case, police and location). Offences with incomplete data were excluded.

Analytic approach

Multinomial regression analyses were conducted to explore how different factors can affect offence outcomes (ie solved vs withdrawn or unfounded). We ran a series of multinomial regression models to explore the associations between variables. Given the differences in case outcomes across Indigenous status and gender already noted (Bailey, Powell & Brubacher 2017; Bright et al. 2021; Lievore 2003; Mayhew & Reilly 2007), we ran separate analyses across the following demographic categories: Indigenous women, Indigenous men, non-Indigenous women and non-Indigenous men. This allowed us to identify the unique factors that can affect withdrawn and unfounded outcomes for each group.

Several independent variables were included across the categories of victim-survivor factors, case factors, police response factors and system resource factors.

Victim-survivor factors:

- victim-survivor's age (in years) at the time of reporting the offence and at the time of the offence; and
- repeated victimisation (0=no repeat victimisation, 1=repeat victimisation).

Case factors:

- DV flag (0=no DV flag, 1=DV flag);
- multiple victim-survivors at offence (0=single victim-survivor, 1=multiple victim-survivors);
- multiple offences at occurrence (0=single offence, 1=multiple offences);
- dwelling status (0=other location, 1=domestic dwelling); and
- sexual offence severity (0=non-aggravated sexual offence, 1=aggravated sexual offence).

Police response factors:

- referral to support services provided to victim-survivor (0=no referral, 1=referral);
- days between reporting and clearing of offence; and
- specialist sexual offence trained officer investigating offence (0=no, 1=specialist sexual offence trained investigator).

System resource factors:

- regionality (1=metropolitan, 2=regional, 3=remote) based on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard score of the district (ABS 2023b); and
- SAIK was provided to the victim-survivor (0=no SAIK recorded, 1=SAIK recorded).

Data limitations and considerations

The extracted administrative data include multiple periods between 2020 and 2021 in which the Queensland Government implemented COVID-19 restrictions. That may have influenced the reporting of sexual offences as well as the case outcomes within the data review period for this study.

In 2022, the independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence (2022) released its report, *A call for change*. This report included recommendations to the QPS that have resulted in organisational investments in training and other factors to support policing responses. It is acknowledged therefore that the results presented in this paper may not fully reflect the current state of responses and outcomes in Queensland.

Results

Sexual offence incidents and outcomes

Table 1 provides descriptive details of the sample and offences. For the period of focus, the final dataset draws on 12,395 victim-survivors of sexual violence reported to police in Queensland. Of the 19,343 offences reported, approximately one-third (36%, *n*=6,971) were solved, 31 percent were withdrawn by the victim-survivor, and over one in 10 (11%, *n*=2,112) were unfounded by police. The remaining offences (22%, *n*=4,276) were unsolved. Because this study is focused on offences with cleared outcomes (*n*=15,067), descriptive details of these offences are presented before the analysis of offence characteristics.

Table 1: Victim-survivor demographics, offence outcomes and characteristics										
	Indigenous women		Indigenous men		Non-Indigenous women		Non-Indigenous men		Total sample	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Victim-survivors										
Total	946	7.6	124	1.0	10,246	82.7	1,079	8.7	12,395	100.0
Multiple victimisation	362	38.3	20	16.1	3,152	30.8	101	9.4	1,512	14.8
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age at time of offence	29.53	12.12	29.81	10.39	29.4	14.12	32.04	15.49	29.64	14.08
Age at reporting of offence	29.84	12.11	30.74	10.63	30.1	14.28	33.61	15.44	30.39	14.23
Age range	16–90		16–59		16–99		16–99		16–99	
Investigative outcome										
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Total offences	1,500	100	181	100	15,979	100	1,683	1,683	19,343	100.0
Solved	566	37.7	56	30.9	5,758	36	591	35.1	6,971	36.0
Withdrawn	437	29.1	64	35.4	5,047	31.6	436	25.9	5,984	30.9
Unfounded	178	11.9	31	11.9	1,627	10.2	276	16.4	2,112	10.9
Unsolved	319	21.3	30	16.6	3,547	22.2	380	22.6	4,276	22.2
Cleared offences										
Total	1,181	100	151	100	12,432	100	1,303	100	15,067	100.0
Single offence at occurrence	991	83.9	116	76.8	10,495	84.4	1,026	78.8	12,628	83.8
Multiple offences at occurrence	190	16.1	35	23.2	1,937	15.6	277	21.2	2,439	16.2
Occurred in non-domestic location	379	32.1	87	57.6	5,152	41.4	808	62	6,426	42.6
Occurred in dwelling	802	67.9	64	42.4	7,280	58.6	495	38	8,641	57.4
No DV flag	1,103	93.4	148	98	11,677	93.9	1,290	98.9	14,217	94.4
DV flag	78	6.6	3	2	755	6.1	14	1.1	850	5.6
DV flag in dwelling	61	78.2	2	66.7	697	92.2	13	92.9	773	90.8

Table 1: Victim-survivor demographics, offence outcomes and characteristics (cont.)

	Indigenous women		Indigenous men		Non-Indigenous women		Non-Indigenous men		Total sample	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Single victim-survivor at occurrence	1,033	87.5	140	92.7	11,055	88.9	1,130	86.7	13,358	88.7
Multiple victim-survivors at occurrence	148	12.5	11	7.3	1,377	11.1	173	13.3	1,709	11.3
Metropolitan area	298	25.2	57	37.7	8,217	66.1	826	63.4	9,398	62.4
Regional area (inner, outer)	373	31.6	39	25.8	3,171	25.5	362	27.8	3,945	26.2
Remote area (remote, very remote)	510	43.2	55	36.4	1,044	8.4	115	8.8	1,724	11.4
No specialist sexual offence trained investigator	895	75.8	114	75.5	9744	78.3	1,056	81	11,804	78.3
Specialist sexual offence trained investigator	286	24.2	37	24.5	2,694	21.7	247	19	3,263	21.7
SAIK recorded	304	25.7	13	8.6	1,748	14.2	94	7.2	2,179	14.5
No SAIK recorded	877	74.3	138	92.8	10,664	85.8	1,209	92.8	12,888	85.5
Referral provided to victim-survivor	437	37	15	9.9	4,785	38.5	262	20.1	5,499	36.5
No referral provided to victim-survivor	744	63	136	90.1	7,647	61.5	1,041	79.9	9,568	63.5
Non-aggravated sexual offences	426	36.1	84	55.6	5,496	44.2	774	59.4	6,780	45.0
Aggravated sexual offences	755	63.9	67	44.4	6,936	55.8	529	40.6	8,287	55.0
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Number of days between offence and reporting	113.22	654.7	325.1	989.01	288.75	1245.94	624.35	1975.04	304.39	1293.57
Number of days between reporting and cleared	61.79	129.73	74.81	147.34	70.26	328.6	70.65	131.63	69.68	303.53

Factors that predict withdrawn and unfounded offences

Table 2 shows the results of the multinomial regression for withdrawn and unfounded versus solved offence outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous female and male victim-survivors. All the covariates are significant, and all have the expected effect. Because of the low number of offences with DV flags, this variable was not included in analysis of Indigenous male victim-survivors. A figure showing days between time of offence and reporting was initially included in this analysis; however, it was found to covary with victim-survivor's age at reporting and at the time of offence, so it was removed. To ensure that the variable of SAIK provided to victim-survivor was not acting as a proxy for recency of offence to reporting, the pattern of results was reviewed for the initial model, the final model and an additional model that examined cases with a time between the offence occurring and reporting of two days or fewer. The overall pattern of results was found to be consistent across these models.

An odds ratio greater than one indicates that the variable is associated with a greater likelihood of the offence being withdrawn or unfounded, rather than solved. An odds ratio of less than one indicates that the variable is associated with a greater likelihood of the offence being solved, rather than withdrawn or unfounded.

Table 2: Factors predictive of withdrawn and unfounded outcomes across all groups

	Indigenous women		Indigenous men		Non-Indigenous women		Non-Indigenous men	
	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR
Withdrawn								
Victim-survivor factors								
Age at reporting of offence	−0.19	0.83	−0.53	0.59	0.13**	1.14	−0.04	0.96
Age at time of offence	0.19	1.21	0.53	1.70	−0.14**	0.87	0.02	1.02
Repeated victimisation	−0.07	0.94	0.32	1.38	0.00	1.00	0.01	1.01
Case factors								
DV flag	0.26	1.30	–	–	0.41*	1.51	0.77	2.16
Multiple victim-survivors at offence	0.30	1.34	−0.45	0.64	−0.15**	0.86	0.53*	1.69
Days between reporting and clearing of offence	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Multiple offences at occurrence	−2.20*	0.11	−2.39*	0.09	−1.90*	0.15	−2.25*	0.11
Dwelling status	0.18	1.20	−0.11	0.89	0.32*	1.38	0.06	1.06
Sexual offence type	1.09*	2.97	0.52	1.68	1.40*	4.06	1.37*	3.93

Table 2: Factors predictive of withdrawn and unfounded outcomes across all groups (cont.)								
	Indigenous women		Indigenous men		Non-Indigenous women		Non-Indigenous men	
	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR
Police response factors								
Referral provided to victim-survivor	−0.35*	0.70	−0.53	0.59	−0.28*	0.75	−0.38*	0.69
Specialist sexual offence trained investigator	−0.43**	0.65	−1.43**	0.24	−0.39*	0.68	−0.55*	0.58
Resource factors								
Regionality	−0.31*	0.73	0.04	1.04	−0.15*	0.86	−0.31*	0.73
SAIK provided to victim-survivor	−1.18*	0.31	0.27	1.31	−0.86*	0.42	−0.47	0.63
Unfounded								
Victim-survivor factors								
Age at reporting of offence	−1.14*	0.32	0.43	1.54	−0.05	0.96	−0.11	0.90
Age at time of offence	1.16*	3.20	−0.41	0.66	0.07**	1.07	0.12	1.13
Repeated victimisation	−0.14	0.87	−0.23	0.79	0.20*	1.22	0.18	1.19
Case factors								
DV flag	−2.34**	0.10	–	–	−1.14*	0.32	−0.78	0.46
Multiple victims at offence	0.30	1.35	−0.45	0.64	−0.27**	0.76	0.11	1.12
Days between reporting and clearing of offence	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Multiple offences at occurrence	−1.01*	0.36	−2.34**	0.10	−1.53*	0.22	−1.67*	0.19
Dwelling status	−0.47**	0.63	0.41	1.51	−0.14**	0.87	0.01	1.01
Sexual offence type	1.55*	4.73	1.14	3.12	1.33*	3.78	1.26*	3.54
Police response factors								
Referral provided to victim	−1.03*	0.36	−1.62	0.20	−0.80*	0.45	−0.61*	0.54
Specialist sexual offence trained investigator	0.12	1.13	−0.18	0.84	−0.17**	0.84	−0.11	0.90
Resource factors								
Regionality	−0.27**	0.77	−0.12	0.89	−0.03	0.97	−0.02	0.98
SAIK provided to victim	−1.09*	0.34	0.63	1.87	−0.32*	0.73	−0.22	0.80

**statistically significant at $p<0.01$, *statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Factors that predict withdrawal

The strongest association with victim-survivor withdrawal is offence severity. Aggravated sexual offences are significantly more likely to be withdrawn than solved for Indigenous women (197%), non-Indigenous men (293%) and non-Indigenous women (306%). Sexual offences that occurred in a domestic dwelling or had a DV flag attached to the offence were also more likely to be withdrawn than solved for non-Indigenous women (increased probability of 51% and 38%, respectively).

Several factors were found to reduce the likelihood of withdrawal. These factors include:

- multiple offences in an occurrence (reduces the probability of withdrawal by 91% for Indigenous men, 89% for Indigenous women and non-Indigenous men and 85% for non-Indigenous women);
- offences occurring in a regional or remote location (reduces the probability of withdrawal by 27% for Indigenous women and non-Indigenous men and 14% for non-Indigenous women);
- involvement of a specialist sexual offence trained investigator (reduces the probability of withdrawal by 76% for Indigenous men, 42% for non-Indigenous men, 32% for non-Indigenous women and 30% for Indigenous women);
- victim-survivor undergoes a forensic medical examination (ie SAIK; reduces the probability of withdrawal by 69% for Indigenous women and by 58% for non-Indigenous women); and
- referral to victim support services (reduces the probability of withdrawal by 35% for Indigenous women, 31% for non-Indigenous men and 25% for non-Indigenous women).

For non-Indigenous women and men, occurrences involving multiple victim-survivors are also less likely to be withdrawn—a decreased probability of 85 percent and 69 percent, respectively. The remaining factors did not make statistically significant contributions to the probability of withdrawal.

Factors that predict unfounding

Police unfounding of cases is also strongly associated with offence severity. Compared with a solved outcome, aggravated sexual offences have an increased probability of unfounding for Indigenous women (373%), Indigenous men (212%), non-Indigenous women (278%) and non-Indigenous men (254%). Strong effects are also seen for age at the time of the offence for Indigenous women (OR=3.20) and non-Indigenous women (OR=1.07). Previous victimisation was found to increase the probability of unfounding; however, this was only observed in non-Indigenous women (OR=1.22).

Age was also found to influence the likelihood of unfounding for female victim-survivors. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, the older they were at the time of the offence, the more likely it was that the offence would be unfounded by police (OR=3.20 and OR=1.07, respectively). The effect of age at the time of reporting was reversed for Indigenous women; the older they were, the less likely it was that the offence would be unfounded (OR=0.32).

Across all demographic groups, the number of offences is strongly associated with an unfounded outcome. Compared with a solved outcome, occurrences with multiple offences decrease the probability of unfounding by 64 percent for Indigenous women, 90 percent for Indigenous men, 78 percent for non-Indigenous women and 81 percent for non-Indigenous men.

Several other factors were found to reduce the probability of unfounded outcomes, compared with solved:

- a DV flag associated with the offence (reduces the probability of unfounding by 90% for Indigenous women and 69% for Indigenous women);
- offence location, specifically offences that occurred in a domestic dwelling (reduces the probability of unfounding by 37% for Indigenous women and 13% for non-Indigenous women);
- a referral to victim support services (reduces the probability of unfounding by 64% for Indigenous women, 55% for non-Indigenous women and 46% for non-Indigenous men); and
- victim-survivor undergoes a forensic medical examination (ie SAIK; reduces the probability of unfounding by 66% for Indigenous women and 27% for non-Indigenous women).

Additionally, the probability of unfounding decreased for offences that occurred in a regional or remote location, although this effect was only observed for Indigenous women (23%, OR=0.77). For non-Indigenous women, cases involving multiple victim-survivors had a decreased probability of unfounding (24%, OR=0.76), and the involvement of a specialist sexual offence trained investigator reduced the probability by 16 percent (OR=0.45). The remaining factors did not make statistically significant contributions to the probability of unfounded outcomes.

Discussion

Following the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (2022a, 2022b, 2021) and the Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence (2022) reports, the Queensland Government committed to a substantial investment in system reform. The QPS Sexual Violence Response Strategy (QPS 2023s) outlined 25 actions to enhance the QPS's response to victim-survivors of sexual violence, including victim-centric and trauma-informed training, engaging with support services and developing evidence-informed practices. As the 'face of justice', police investigators play a critical role in whether cases progress to prosecution or are withdrawn, unfounded or unsolved. Police investigations are therefore essential to reducing attrition of sexual offences and supporting national and international efforts to improve outcomes for victim-survivors.

There are several factors that influence the withdrawal and unfounding of offences across the four demographic groups (non-Indigenous women and Indigenous women; non-Indigenous men and Indigenous men). Aggravated sexual offences are consistently more likely to be both unfounded and withdrawn, rather than solved. Offences that occur in regional or remote areas are less likely to be withdrawn, which could speak to the capacity and capability of policing units in metropolitan areas.

Investigations that include a specialist sexual offence trained investigator consistently lower the probability of a withdrawn offence outcome and, in the case of non-Indigenous women, lower the probability of the unfounding of offences. Referrals to external services are a protective factor against the victim-survivor withdrawing and the investigator unfounding in all groups except Indigenous men. Recording that a SAIK was conducted in cases involving women also lowers the chance that the case is withdrawn or unfounded, although this effect does not appear for men. This may be the result of a very small sample of recorded SAIKs in cases involving male victim-survivors (7–8%) and warrants further research.

If the offence occurs in a domestic dwelling, an offence outcome of unfounded is less likely for female victim-survivors; for non-Indigenous women, however, this factor increased withdrawn outcomes. These results may speak to the confounding effect of the offender being known to the victim-survivor and the role that legislation may play in the investigative processes enacted by the police.

We also found that non-Indigenous women who report subsequent sexual offences (repeat victimisation) are more likely to have their subsequent cases unfounded. Additionally, occurrences with multiple non-Indigenous female victim-survivors were less likely to be unfounded or withdrawn, suggesting a focus on the need for corroboration before being taken seriously.

Investigators continually reference how the system is under extraordinary pressure—especially Queensland Health and the Director of Public Prosecutions. Investigators express frustration with delays to forensic medical examinations and prosecutorial decisions not to progress a case, adding to the trauma experienced by victim-survivors. Specialist training—like the intensive two-week QPS ISACURE—and practice experience are seen as critical to support investigations of sexual offences. Additionally, investigators spoke to the challenge of working under constant pressure because of competing priorities and a lack of trained staff.

Recommendations

The analysis of the administrative data provides several key insights into reducing case attrition and improving outcomes for victim-survivors. Investigating officers should formally learn what support services are available in their area. The inclusion and recording of referrals to these services should be a component of the standard investigative process. Particular attention should be paid to providing referrals to victim-survivors and to exploring resource availability for Indigenous men. Investments in training that equips officers with the knowledge and skills they need to respond more effectively to victim-survivors, alongside evaluation models (such as from ISACURE in Queensland) to evidence the return on investment in this training, should be considered.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the sustained research partnership and collaboration with the Queensland Police Service that guided the research focus and enabled the research. The authors extend their gratitude to Detective Senior Sergeant Kirsten Helton, Dr Michelle Hayes, the police and health services staff who participated in interviews and focus groups, and senior leaders who supported the research. The authors also acknowledge Peta Colbert, Jeremy Verrier and Dr Hexia Zhang for their contribution to the research. The authors acknowledge and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of Country throughout Queensland, where this research was conducted. This respect is extended to Elders past, present and emerging.

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ISSN 1836-2206 (Online) ISBN 978 1 922878 48 9 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.52922/ti78489

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