

The Impact of Being Wrongly Accused: Victims' Voices

Work by Carolyn Hoyle and Ros Burnett in the Centre for Criminology has drawn attention to the suffering of those in positions of trust who are wrongfully accused of abuse.



The Impact of Being Wrongly Accused of Abuse in Occupations of Trust: Victims' Voices highlights the lasting harm caused by wrongful allegations, more likely in a current social and legal climate committed to correcting past and preventing future injustice. Careful not to undermine the credibility of victims of abuse or diminish their confidence to report, Carolyn Hoyle, Ros Burnett, and Naomi-Ellen Speechley (PhD candidate at the University of Manchester), recognise the importance of giving a voice to the men and women falsely accused of harming people in their care.

The research, which has subsequently been published in a leading academic journal, documents the findings of thirty interviews with victims of false accusation who were legally innocent. Interviewees reported ruined careers, damage to their families, and experience of a mental trauma outlasting their sometimes brief encounters with the criminal justice system. Many others reporting similar experiences have since been in contact with Hoyle and Burnett to thank them for their work, some commenting that the report had brought them to tears.

In 2017, Hoyle and Burnett met with the PCC for the Thames Valley, who affirmed the importance of their study. He has disseminated it among other PCCs and it is included in his *Police & Crime Plan for the Thames Valley 2017-2021* to make clear the considerable harms that can be done by false accusations of non-recent sexual abuse. His report calls for an increased focus on prevention of current sex abuse, alongside investigation into historical cases.

The report has been distributed widely amongst public organisations and safeguarding bodies. In Canada, a barrister cited the research before the House of Commons, as part of a bill to amend legislation relating to sexual assault trials. Lord Lexden had this to say during a debate on 'Introducing statutory guidelines relating to the investigation of historical child sex abuse' in the British House of Lords:

'The difficulties and the damage that is done if [historical allegations of child sex abuse] are not successfully addressed have been most usefully highlighted in an authoritative recent report produced by three academics and published by the Centre for Criminology at Oxford University... The report leads us to the heart of the matter with which this debate is concerned.'

Published in the wake of intense publicity paid to high-profile allegations such as those against TV personality Jimmy Savile, the research has drawn interest across British media. Hoyle has been interviewed for BBC Belfast and the project discussed by articles in *The Times*, the *Barrister*, and various legal blogs.