



Domestic violence conviction rates at all-time high

Director of public prosecutions, Keir Starmer, to reveal that strategy of prioritising violence against women has been success



Keir Starmer implemented a four-year strategy to improve the conviction rate in cases of violence against women. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Domestic violence conviction rates are at their highest after a four-year campaign by prosecutors to tackle violence against women and girls, the director of public prosecutions will announce on Monday.

The overall number of prosecutions for violence against women – which include rape, sexual assault and harassment – has risen to 91,000 cases a year, Keir Starmer will say.

In an assessment of the strategy to improve the way prosecutors tackle cases of violence against women and girls, Starmer will reveal that in the past year the Crown Prosecution Service has reported its highest conviction rate for domestic violence.

In cases of domestic violence referred to prosecutors, the conviction rate stands at 73%, compared to 69% in 2007-08.

Rape convictions have also improved. In cases charged by prosecutors the conviction rate has risen from 58% in 2007-08 to 62.5% in 2011-12.

This contrasts starkly with the often-quoted rape conviction rate of around 6% for England and Wales, which relates to the percentage of allegations of rape reported to the police that result in a conviction.

In his speech, Starmer will say: "A lot has changed in recent years. We now have prosecutors who specialise in these types of crimes, we have introduced training and guidance and we have improved the way we engage with communities.

"None of that would have been possible without the support of the women's organisations, prosecutors and criminal

justice colleagues."

Starmer, who as DPP has made tackling violence against women and girls a priority, says more than 15,000 offenders are being brought to justice.

The latest statistics from the British Crime Survey show that every year in the UK more than 1 million women suffer domestic abuse, more than 300,000 are sexually assaulted and 60,000 are raped. But fewer than one in four people who suffer abuse by their partner and fewer than one in 10 women who experience serious sexual assault report it to the police.

"That makes it all the more important that when such a crime is reported it is dealt with professionally, effectively and with understanding," said Starmer. "In the past all too often the criminal justice system failed in this respect. But ... that is changing."

Historically, cases of violence against girls women – including rape and sexual assault – have had high rates of attrition as victims who are afraid to give evidence withdraw, or drop out of prosecutions for other reasons. But Starmer says this is improving as a result of the policy to focus on violence against women.

A snapshot in 2004-05 showed that 37% of all domestic violence prosecutions were discontinued: by 2011-12 this rate had reduced to 21%.

Starmer adds that the production of stronger cases against defendants has led to more guilty pleas, saving women the trauma of giving evidence. Guilty pleas have increased from 60% to 66% for all cases of violence against women, and from 35% to 40% for rape cases.

The four-year violence against women strategy adopted by the CPS has involved all 3,000 prosecutors in England and Wales receiving receive training in how to tackle domestic violence cases and chief prosecutors selected to champion the strategy in each region.

A spokeswoman for Refuge welcomed the CPS report. She said: "Refuge remains concerned that the numbers of perpetrators prosecuted and subsequently convicted represents the tip of an iceberg ... the 66,860 successfully prosecuted nationally, barely scratches the surface. "We are concerned that the British Crime Survey tells us that there are an estimated 1.2 million women who experience domestic violence each year in the UK. Some of these cases may not be reported to the police for a number of reasons, including women being too frightened to come forward. This leaves a huge number of domestic abuse cases that never reach the police and therefore the courts."