What works in avoiding rape/sexual assault? Evidence from research and evaluation and implications for prevention campaigns and situational safety advice

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**Introduction and basic argument**

Police officers and the police service are frequently required to provide crime prevention advice – both in general and in contexts where local patterns and/or serious crimes are causing concern. These situations are complex requiring a delicate balancing act between information that might prevent (or detect) future crimes and raising levels of anxiety and fear of crime. Nowhere is this tension more acute that in relation to sexual crimes, against adults and children.

This document offers access to research and ideas which challenge the perception that resistance is a dangerous strategy, explores studies on self-defence and offers guidelines for safety advice and prevention campaigns which may avoid some of the traps that previous police interventions have fallen into, especially where the information only targets women as potential victims, and relies entirely on suggesting that they curtail normal activities. Not only are such messages frequently ill-focused, but some argue that they are dangerous, since they increase fear, focus on ‘stranger danger’ which is not where the greatest risks lie (Bart and O’Brien, 1985; McCaughey 1997), and offer little specific information (for example, about the approach/strategy used by a perpetrator) that women are not already aware of.

_Safety advice offered by police pamphlets, popular books... reinforces women’s knowledge about vulnerability, but only their vulnerability to faceless assailants... Although, not one of these safety tips explicitly mentions sexual assault, they are clearly directed at women because they are seen as targets for sexual violence. While giving this kind of advice may seem genuinely helpful, most women incorporated precautions like these (and more) into their everyday routines long ago... The best crime prevention must teach people to confront abuses of power. We must all be agents for our own safety._ (Stanko, 1990)

Our basic argument is that we ought be giving a different kind of advice and information, both because research shows that some strategies are more effective in preventing/avoiding attack than others, and because the approach we suggest will decrease fear of crime and potentially marshal more community engagement in crime reduction/prevention.

What we are suggesting is that safety advice should:

- Encourage pro-active, assertive responses as soon as anyone senses danger;
- The primary goal should be to act promptly enough to be able to get away/ run away and/or alert others;
- Recognise that where immediate escape is not possible physical resistance is often successful, and does not increase the risk of serious injury;
- Create a sense of community responsibility for enhancing women’s safety, rather than placing the responsibility on individual women; Never suggest that women should curtail their everyday activities or presence in public space in order to be safe – liberty, freedom of movement and bodily integrity are the most basic human rights;
- Present personal safety/women’s self-defence classes as positive options, especially for those who are worried/concerned about their safety.

What follows is a summary of the evidence base- the research evidence, which supports this approach.
The Research Evidence

Rather than include lots of descriptions of research in this text, a table accompanies it, where the samples, methods and basic findings of some of the most critical studies in this field are summarised.

What do we know about crime prevention?
Research on the effectiveness of crime prevention programmes that target potential victims – as opposed to targeting perpetrators and/or target hardening through environmental adaptation - is limited. Three studies (Davies & Smith, 1994; Norris & Johnson, 1988; Rosenbaum, 1988) report no relationship between use of crime prevention precautions and risk of victimisation within a one-year follow-up. These negative findings are often explained through implementation failures, but drawing on lessons from the field of health, we suspect that they rely too much on providing information and too little on active engagement, what some would call ‘empowerment’. In other words people need to have a sense that they can practically use knowledge before it becomes useful to them. Gidyecz, Rich & Marioni (2002) make similar comments about the shortcomings of many sexual assault and rape prevention programmes. Evaluations in the USA of prevention programmes on child sexual abuse reached a similar conclusion – those which frightened children least, and where they learnt and retained most, were ones where they got to practice and try out the information, rather than just show they had remembered it!

*Training people to manage risks by raising their anxiety is counterproductive. People respond far more positively if their knowledge, experience and beliefs in their coping skills are improved and supported.*

What do we know about avoiding rape and sexual assault?
Whilst studies of avoidance of sexual assault are not as common as research on the experience of rape and its aftermath, there has been a steady flow of them over the last twenty years. Remarkably for social research, particularly across diverse fields, their conclusions are consistent and point in a single direction. Drawing on the studies of rape avoidance in the attached table we can conclude the following:

- Any form of assertive action/ resistance may interrupt/prevent attacks.
- Assertive action, physical resistance and multiple strategies are by far the most effective.
- Some verbal strategies, such as pleading and crying are less effective.
- Acting immediately increases the likelihood of avoidance.
- Anger and fear can be transformed into energy and motivation to act.
- Women are not powerless in the face of sexual predators.

In addition other studies have shown that:

- Women say they are more likely to resist a sexual assault than theft (Harris and Parson, 1985).
- Victims who do resist, even when it provoked more violence, say that their actions had a positive effect on the outcome (Abarbanel, 1986; Madden & Sokol, 1997; U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).

This information is seldom drawn on in thinking about crime prevention and safety advice, and even where it is explored – as Sharon Graces’s review (1994) does - the conclusions are usually cautious, raising issues about the limits of research (for example, there is little on what perpetrators say about resistance) and the limits of resistance (it does not always work, or may be less relevant with known assailants/domestic violence/child sexual abuse).

More recent data from the US suggests that women also resist assaults by known men (U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001a), but may delay acting, because of the context. Another example from a sexual abuse prevalence study (Kelly, Regan and Burton, 1991) is that all the young people who were repeatedly sexual abused reported that the abuse stopped when it did due to an action they took.
We need more research that asks about resistance, rather than focusing only on victimisation and its consequences.

**But doesn’t fighting back result in more injury?**
Data here is complex, but the first thing to say is that the majority of rape victims do not sustain serious physical injuries. Whilst some early studies show a correlation between resistance and injury, most did not control for whether the injury took place before or after fighting back. Later studies have found strong evidence that resistance is often prompted by physical violence (Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Kleck and Sayles, 1990; Madden & Sokol, 1997; McDaniel, 1993; Ullman & Knight 1992 and 1993). Whilst some studies do find a slight increase in injury to those who resist, it is not statistically significant, and many who do not resist are also injured. Grubin and Gunn (1990), based on research with 202 convicted rapists, note:

> Resistance whether verbal or physical did increase the risks of mild physical injury. The implication would seem to be that it makes sense for a victim of a rape attack to put up a struggle as those men who are likely to show extreme violence will probably do so regardless of the victims actions.

Sharon Grace (1994), concurs:

> ... it is the attacker's level of aggression and not the victim's level of resistance which is more directly correlated with injury.

**We can conclude, therefore, that resistance does not increase the risk of serious injury.**

**But not all rape can be avoided**
Obviously this is true. Whether an assault can be avoided/interrupted depends on what the victim feels able to and can do, and the actions and motivations of the offender. But the data above show that there are possibilities, and there is a danger in underestimating what is possible – women with disabilities, including those using wheelchairs, can and do resist/avoid sexual assault.

We also need to have an open understanding of what 'resistance' means – it is not used here to imply only being able to fight and overpower an assailant. Rather that acting at any point, but especially at an early point can change what happens and even prevent the sexual assault. The aim should always be to do the minimum necessary in order to get away. What strategies someone might use, and at what point, will be significantly determined by the context.

Our key contention is that many women and girls lack confidence in their abilities, and do not have accurate information on what strategies they might use in a range of situations. Contemporary self-defence courses can offer precisely this – ranging from learning how to use one’s voice, how to set strong and clear boundaries at the earliest opportunity, through to physical techniques that make escape possible. The point here is not that active strategies will always prevent sexual crime, but that the choice and option to use them should not just be considered, but also made possible through accurate information and development of new skills and confidence.

**The contribution of women’s self-defence**
Here we are referring to a particular form of self-defence training (referred to throughout as Women’s Self Defence, WSD), which whilst using techniques from martial arts, is not sport, but rather a tool for enhancing personal safety and autonomy. A recent study of WSD across Europe (Seith and Kelly, 2003) found that it now combines learning physical techniques with providing accurate information about risk and likely perpetrators,
assertiveness training and role-play - in some approaches extending to scenarios with
padded assailants, as well as space for discussion and reflection. It is also holistic in that
the whole range of potential violence is addressed – from sexual harassment through
domestic violence to rape and sexual assault. A number of WSD providers (in USA, UK,
Austria, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands) have extended and adapted their
approaches to meet the needs of men, boys and mixed gender groups.

Many self-defence trainers evaluate their own courses, findings of which are consistent with
published studies. The vast majority of participants greatly value the experience. There
has been less external evaluation, but a range of studies (Ozer & Bandura 1990; Cox, 1999;
Henderson, 1997; Mazer, 1997; Michener, 1997; Shim, 1997; Weitlauf, Smith and Cervone,
2000; Weitlauf et al., 2000) conclude that WSD increases women’s ability to sense danger
earlier and enhances their confidence and belief in their ability to act (rather than freeze).
It also, for most, decreased anxiety – i.e. fear of crime. Evidence from studies (Ozer &
Bandura; Chipping 1997 & 2002; Shim, 1997) indicates that the benefits of sound training
are enduring.

In addition many personal testimonies by survivors (see, for example, Brisson, 2002) and
discussions by therapists specialising in trauma (see, for example, Herman, 1992) suggest
that WSD can be an important element in dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence.
Research also supports these wider therapeutic benefits, recording decreases in depression,
PTSD and other negative health measures (Shim, 1997), and increased well-being and

**What WSD training cannot prevent it can help heal.**

None of the frequent criticisms of self-defence – that it creates ‘over confidence’, that
women who are not able to fend off an attack will feel even more to blame – are born out
by research (Madden & Sokol, 1997).

*Self defence training and publications can recognise and celebrate women's success
stories, giving confidence and inspiration to other women and helping them to
recognise the skills and strengths they already possess.* (Stanko, 1993).

*Self defence is arguably the most evidence based prevention method, focused on the
direct empowerment of women and girls. Yet, it is seldom included as a vital aspect of
strategies to address gender violence. All research that asks about avoidance and
resistance in relation to rape, child sexual assault, domestic violence and sexual
harassment finds that preventing and limiting assaults correlates with use of multiple
and more assertive methods.* (Seith & Kelly, 2003)

Good self-defence provides choices, the knowledge and the experience to create and adapt
responses as appropriate to the circumstances. It will also make clear that if an assault
does take place the responsibility for this lies solely with the aggressor.

**Implications for safety advice**

We are not suggesting that the police either issue literature encouraging everyone to resist
or provide self-defence classes¹. Rather what we are proposing is that this information and
research leads to a re-assessment of the ways in which safety advice is provided by the
police – in printed material, on web-pages and when responding to particular crimes. The
following guidelines offer suggestions as to how this might be developed.

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¹ Existing skilled practitioners who specialise in this work are the best service providers.
**Guidelines:**

- The consistent findings reported in this paper of best practice rape and sexual assault prevention should no longer be denied to people, especially women in the UK - *What we know* should inform Police public safety guidance.

- Current advice should be reviewed in the light of this evidence.

- A more diverse range of experts in the field should be consulted in the production of such Public Safety information.

- Stereotypical advice which evidence shows is less likely to be effective even counter productive should no longer be advocated e.g. encouraging women to rely on certain ill advised verbal strategies.

- Resistance in its broadest sense including self-defence should be presented as valid options in a balanced manner and not undermined by non-evidence-based qualifications, which is the current practice norm.

- Enhanced awareness of WSD within the violence against women sector, as one element in a holistic response, Seith & Kelly (2002).

- Support additional UK research on the extent of resistance to sexual attacks and the outcome of various strategies. Studies should also address the extent to which basic pro-active defence strategies can be used by the elderly, infirm and disabled women.

Readers are referred to the Sapphire Safety Working Party proposed media guidelines for Police safety advice on sexual violence, which links to the information in this paper.
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<th>STUDIES</th>
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<td>Queens Bench Fund, 1976</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>108 women, 68 raped, 40 who avoided rape</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Women who avoided rape use: more strategies, more active ones, reacted immediately, were more rude and angry</td>
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<td>McDermot, 1979</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2,2000 random sample</td>
<td>National Victimisation study</td>
<td>4 out of 5 attempted rapes were stopped when the victim: screamed, ran away, threatened or reasoned with attacker, and physically resisted</td>
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<td>McIntyre, 1980</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>320 women, 198 raped; 128 who avoided rape</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Women who responded immediately and aggressively were more likely to avoid rape</td>
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<td>Block &amp; Skogan, 1982</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>347 stranger rapes, random sample</td>
<td>National Crime Survey data</td>
<td>Forceful resistance increases avoidance</td>
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<td>Quinsey and Upfold, 1985</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>136 convicted rapists</td>
<td>Police reports-analysis of rape event sequencing</td>
<td>No association between victim resistance and probability of later injury, resistance increases chances of avoidance</td>
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<td>Bart &amp; O'Brien, 1985</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>84 women, 43 raped; 51 who avoided rape</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Active and multiple resistance strategies were associated with avoidance of rape</td>
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<td>Levine-McCombie &amp; Koss, 1986</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Comparison of 35 acquaintance rape avoiders and 47 acquaintance rape victims</td>
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<td>Physical strategies most effective, but some suggestion that verbal most effective when attacker is known</td>
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<td>Ullman &amp; Knight, 1992</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>274 rape survivors from 732 cases on clinical files of 256 rapists committed as 'sexually dangerous’ to treatment centre because of repetitive and/or violent attacks.</td>
<td>Analysis of offenders institutional file, including original accounts of women’s reports to police, official police reports and women’s court testimonies</td>
<td>85% physically responded because of attackers physical violence, 15% resisted physically because of attackers verbal violence. Those responding physically were more likely to avoid rape, with no greater risk of injury than those using other strategies or who did not resist. Resistance strategies worked for some women even in 'worst case scenarios’ i.e. strangers with weapons</td>
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<td>Brieter, 1995</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Case files of reported rapes and attempted rapes</td>
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<td>Echoes Bart and O’Brien findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
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<td>Sample Size/Characteristics</td>
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<td>Scully, 1990</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>114 convicted rapists, control group 75 felons without history of sexual violence</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Offenders expect predictable stereotypical victim responses such as pleading, fear and passivity giving control to offender. Women who resist have better chance of rape avoidance, pleading ineffective, even counterproductive.</td>
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<td>Grubin &amp; Gunn, 1990</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>142 imprisoned rapists</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews &amp; questionnaires</td>
<td>Excluding cases where violence was excessive and gratuitous (about a third) and where few victims resisted, resistance was not associated with more severe injury, but it increased risk of minor injury.</td>
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<td>Hazelwood et al, 1989</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>41 imprisoned offenders – serial rape/ homicide/ sexual violence</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>No link between resistance and injury</td>
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<td>Ozer &amp; Bandura, 1990</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>43 women taking Women self-defence (WSD)/Impact style students. 38% identified as survivors of violence, 27% prior experience of rape by known assailant</td>
<td>Questionnaires Pre, post course, six month follow up</td>
<td>Self-defence increased women's skills, confidence and 'self-efficacy', &amp; decreased fear and anxiety across diverse measures. Increased vulnerabilities of prior victimisation negated by training.</td>
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<td>Chipping, 1997 (unpubs)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>54 students of WSD/ LCPS, 85% female</td>
<td>Adapted Ozer &amp; Bandura questionnaires – Pre, post and six month follow up</td>
<td>Support Ozer &amp; Bandura findings with mixed gender population. Significant increase in coping skills and social activity. Decreased anxiety. Significant reductions in fear of crime.</td>
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<td>Shim, 1997</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>64 women WSD/ Impact students 40% previous abuse story</td>
<td>Questionnaires – Pre, post, &amp; 6 month follow-up</td>
<td>Support Ozer &amp; Bandura findings. Significant improvements to PTSD symptoms, depressions and anxiety. Increased coping self-efficacies. No increase in hostility.</td>
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<td>Chipping, 2002 (in preparation)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>20 women WSD/LCPS + Impact</td>
<td>Adapted Ozer &amp; Bandura questionnaires. Pre, post and follow-up 3 years post training</td>
<td>Support findings of Ozer &amp; Bandura, Chipping, '97; Shim,'97. Wide ranging benefits to quality of life and social engagement. Benefits enduring 35% report using 'boundary setting skills' and 20% using physical skills to prevent assault.</td>
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