

6,500 rape and sex attacks – including gang rape and child assault – in hospitals in the last three years

By Liam Coleman

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A new report has laid bare the horrific sexual abuse that has taken place inside hospitals over the last three years.

More than 6,000 sexual attacks were reported, new figures from the Women's Rights Network (WRN) have shown. Some of the horrific crimes faced by patients, staff and visitors include gang rapes and assaults on children, it has been reported.

The figures are based on freedom of information requests to police forces in England and Wales.

At least 2,088 rapes and 4,451 sexual assaults were reported between January 2019 and October 2022 – a rate of 33 a week. The data does not detail whether the offences were carried out at NHS or private facilities. But a shocking one in seven took place on hospital wards.

And just 4.1 per cent of the crimes resulted in the suspect facing a charge or summons.

Founder of WRN Heather Binning said the figures were 'just the tip of the iceberg' and that it shows hospitals are 'just not safe spaces' She said: 'They are almost a market for sexual offenders. It's absolutely terrifying.'

She said the sheer extent of the problem had echoes of the Jimmy Savile scandal and his abuse of patients at Stoke Mandeville. Ms Binning claimed this 'added to the horror' and showed hospitals and police forces were failing to protect the vulnerable.

She said: 'The police are not doing enough in terms of recording the crimes properly and pursuing them – these are places with CCTV and restricted access. Why is the charge rate so low?'

Her WRN group is calling on the NHS, the Care Quality Commission and police to acknowledge this 'hidden domain of sexual violence'.

Ms Binning said: 'These statistics are jaw-dropping. We began this investigation because of concerns about the safety of women and children on NHS wards, but we are horrified at what we have uncovered.'

'The volume of sexual assaults and rapes is even more horrific when you consider that this data covers the pandemic, when much of the country was in lockdown and hospitals were supposedly even more vigilant.'

The crimes reported include the rape of a girl under 13 and the rape of a woman by 'multiple offenders' in hospitals in the West Midlands.

Three young girls and a boy reported being raped in facilities in Cambridgeshire while six girls were said to have been attacked in hospitals in Lancashire.

Jo Phoenix, the Reading University criminology professor who wrote the report, said the findings showed NHS trusts were 'failing in their duty to protect both patients and staff'.

She added: 'The fact that 95.9 percent of all reports were either no-further-actioned or not recorded (officially as crimes) is also truly appalling. Although there are no reasons given within the research for this alarmingly low figure, what is clear is that there appears to be ingrained inertia in dealing with this safeguarding and policing failure.'

WRN researchers sent freedom of information requests to 43 police forces. Eight, including those in Scotland and Northern Ireland, were unable to provide the data.

Ms Binning added: 'The true figures are going to be undoubtedly much higher. Crimes of this nature notoriously go under reported as it is and in addition to that there is a lot of missing data.'

The WRN said there needed to be better record-keeping of crimes in healthcare facilities and called on the Home Office to set guidelines for the police to build a more accurate picture of the problem.

Ms Binning added: 'This is serious, it's not going to go away and it's only going to get worse if we don't get a handle on it. We thought we were past the days when someone like Jimmy Savile could go in and wander the wards unchallenged. This does have echoes of that.'

An NHS England spokesman said the figures were 'unacceptable'.

They added: 'All NHS Trusts and organisations must ensure robust measures are in place to ensure immediate action is taken in any cases reported to them and anyone who has experienced any misconduct or violence should come forward, report it and seek help.'

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, you can contact Dignity4Patients, whose helpline is open Monday to Thursday 10am to 4pm.