



Sexual Assault, Criminal Justice and Policing since the 1880s

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Victorian models: the law

- 1875 Offences Against the Person Act: raised female age of consent from 12 to 13
- 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act: raised female age of consent to 16
 - Unlawful sex with females under 13 a 'felony'
 - Unlawful sex with females between 13 and under 16 a 'misdemeanour' (later 'offence')

Victorian models: cultural attitudes

- Janus-faced approach
- Younger children more likely to be believed
- Weighing up of 'character'

News of the World , 19 May 1895, p. 4.

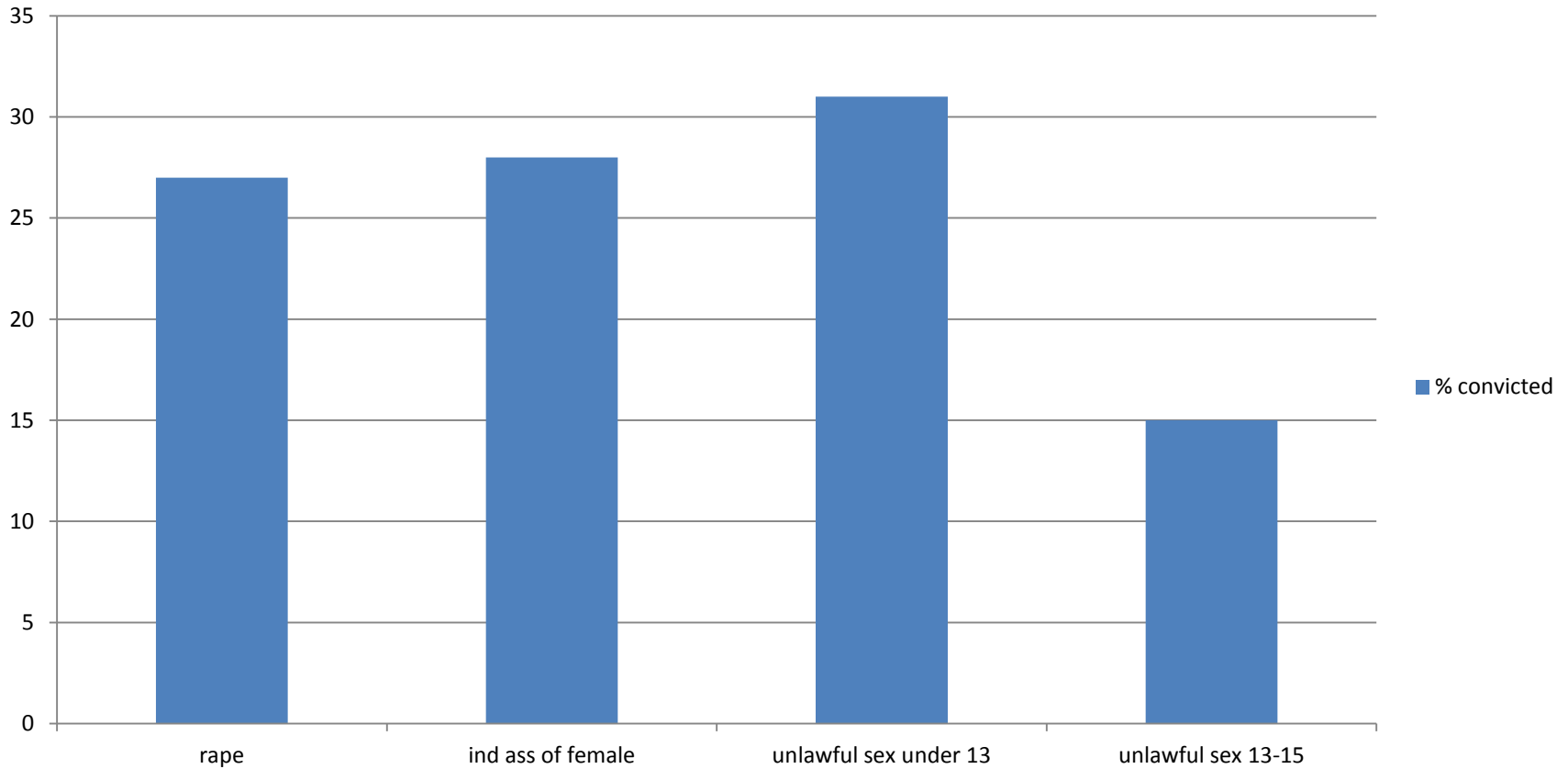
‘[The Defence solicitor], on behalf of the accused, spoke of the improbability of a clergyman committing such an abominable acts, especially after coming from a funeral ... The prisoner had always taken notice of children and he was connected with the Waifs and Strays Society ... Mr Mead [magistrate] did not think a jury would convict, and therefore the prison was discharged.’

Continuities

Sir Matthew Hale: rape 'is the most detestable crime' but 'is an accusation easily made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, though never so innocent'.

Criminal Justice statistics, England/Wales 1965

% of cases reported to police resulting in convictions



Summing up

- Sexual abuse considered the most serious of offences C19th-C20th.
- To be believed female 'victims' had to demonstrate innocence and respectability
- Younger victims more likely to be believed than older ones
- Police assumed rape allegations were false because 'so easily made'
- Legal status of girls aged 13-15 a grey area which created space for them to be seen as legitimate sexual targets