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# VICTIM ADVOCATES' PERCEPTION OF THE RELUCTANCE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS REPORTING

NASTASHA A. POWERS

76 Pages

Within the United States of America, more than half of all violent crimes go unreported (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). Failure to report to the police is a particular problem in cases of sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence. These crimes can carry a stigma that deters disclosure to both formal and informal sources. To better understand underreported sexual assault crimes, it is essential to look at the specifics of reporting. Data from victim advocates, who are practitioners who work with victims daily, finds that many victims of sexual violence never report the incidents to the criminal justice system. Reporting to the police varies based on the type of crime committed, with crimes like sexual assault having among the lowest reporting rates (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). The current project focuses on victims of sexual violence's reluctance to report victimization through the lens of practitioners who work with victims of sexual violence. This research builds on three key themes; (1) their perceptions regarding victims' reluctance to report sexual victimizations to law enforcement, (2) how the COVID pandemic impacted their victim advocacy, and (3) the support that was expressed to navigate a person's holistic journey post-assault.

**KEYWORDS:** Alternative Routes; Sexual Assault; Sexual Victimization; Sexual Violence, Victim Reluctance, Victim Reporting

VICTIM ADVOCATES' PERCEPTION OF THE RELUCTANCE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT  
SURVIVORS REPORTING

NASTASHA A. POWERS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Criminal Justice Sciences

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2022

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VICTIM ADVOCATES' PERCEPTION OF THE RELUCTANCE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT  
SURVIVORS REPORTING

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault is defined as *any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by federal, tribal, or state law; this also includes when a victim of this form of violence cannot give consent* (Sexual Assault, 2021). Under the law, age is also a contributing factor to cognitively consent to sexual activity. The definition of sexual violence goes into depth in the means of any sexual gratification that may arise from violating a person, ranging from verbal harassment to forced penetration. This can include coercion, social pressure, intimidation, or physical force (Organization, 2012). Sexual assault occurs less commonly with strangers, but usually involves someone who the victim is acquainted with, many times in an intimate partner relationship. Because of the intimacy, sexual violence can be very traumatizing for someone who has been a victim. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced sexual violence at some time in their life (Preventing Sexual Violence, 2021). Many survivors do not report the violent acts committed against them. Common reporting patterns for the last two decades, show only one-third of rape victims report their victimizations to police authorities (Allen, 2007). The effects a survivor can face after victimization can be physical and psychological, and if not treated can lead to more severe conditions. Victims who don't report offenses are less likely to seek aid post-assault, resulting in many suffering silently without knowing the resources in their community to assist them.

### **Underreporting of Sexual Violence**

It is necessary to look at the breakdown of the prison population to see if justice is present in the areas where victims are most affected. The United States is reported to have the highest imprisonment rate among developed countries. There were over 6.4 million Americans in the justice system during 2018, including prisons, jails, probation, and parole (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). However, statistics show there has been a decrease in the size of the prison

population in the last ten years, which in turn shows the prevalence of the representation of underreporting when it comes down to sexual violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics , 2021). In the year 2018, there were 65,600 prisoners in the US prison population convicted of sexual offenses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). In contrast, there were a total of 734,632 sexual acts committed within that timeframe, and only 175,057 were reported to police authorities (NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool Report, 2021). Although many movements and organizations are in place to promote the empowerment of victims' reporting to authorities, this is still an issue that is slow to find a solution. Whether it is because of not reporting or a justice system with some flaws, out of every 1000 acts of sexual violence committed, 975 perpetrators will walk free. Out of the same 1,000 victims, 310 will report to the police, leading to 50 arrests. Only 28 of the reported offender's cases will lead to a criminal conviction, and only 25 will serve time in prison for the offense (The Criminal Justice System: Statistics, 2020). The victims are 85% female and 15%, male.

### **History of Sexual Violence Laws**

When it comes to sexual violence, laws are evolving. For years, women were legally defined as property, and men could do with them as they desired without any penalties. In 1780 BC, during the Code of Hammurabi, from King Hammurabi, if the "wife" were with another man that was not her husband, they would both be punished. There were no immoral lapses, and it found that men were protected more than women. For instance, a woman raped or "betrothed," and she being the wife of another man, they would both be stoned (Prince, n.d.). The Mosaic Laws, created by Moses through the direction of God around this same timeframe contained similar laws. Deuteronomy Chapter 22, verses 28 and 29, states, if a person offends a female virgin that is not married, they would have to give the father of the victim 50 shekels and take

her to the altar and marry her. There is no punishment on the man's part unless he cannot pay the 50 shekels (James, 621 BC).

The Saxon Law, introduced in the middle ages during the 13th century, defined the offender's punishment for sexual violence according to the status of the victim. When a woman was the victim of rape, her husband or father would decide whether there should be punishment for the offender and possibly the victim (Reynolds, 2015). However, if the woman was a widow, was fatherless, or unmarried, there was less likely to be a punishment against the offender. Thus, women for years did not have a voice and were not respected in the manner that they would be able to speak for themselves, let alone defend themselves from unfair laws or violent acts committed against them. It would take the evolving mindset of King Edward I of Westminster to start to change the mindset of the people. English Laws are one of the first laws King Edward I made in regards to sexual violence (First Statute of Westminster, 2021). It amended the criminal laws moving rape from a property crime to a criminal offense. Though it would not be as serious as a capital crime, if someone were accused of rape; the offender could face imprisonment or starvation until admission of guilt (First Statute of Westminster, 2021). The laws were evolving for the better in many parts of the world, yet there were still flaws. If a victim were the offender's wife or a person of color, it was not criminal because victims were considered the property of another person. Later laws would argue that victimization did not occur if a woman conceived due to the myth that pleasures are present in the act for conception to happen (Heggie, 2012).

It was not until 1929 that there would be a definition for rape by the FBI as "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will" (Carbon, 2012). Under this law, it would not include all sexual violence; instead, it would only define the penetration of a penis and would consider only women, unmarried and white, to be victims of this crime. Several years later, women were found equal to men in the Women's Equal Rights Act of 1983 (H.R.1131 -

Women's Equal Rights Act of 1983, 1984). In this progression, more women fought for laws to support the hidden abuse allowed under previous laws. Although women have been fighting for years for protection, protecting and supporting victims is a continuous fight and slowly progressive. In 2012, the United States updated the laws that would define rape to include: "The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without consent of the victim" (Carbon, 2012). In 2021, laws are now in place to protect and support survivors of many forms of sexual violence.

On a national level, there are several laws to protect victims of these violent crimes and prevent the count of victims from increasing. In addition, more laws, statutes, and support systems are in place to provide for sexual violence victims on local levels. Some laws include a statute of limitations that establishes the time it takes for a victim to accept and report if they choose. Although a survivor can report an assault any time after the assault, extending the statute of limitations would apply to whether criminal charges could be filed against the offender. These statutes vary from state to state. However, despite laws created over the last two centuries, victims still are reluctant to report their assaults. Many survivors will go off the experience that they have had with police or other officials to determine whether they will report, while others will go off the experience of others (Beichner, 2021). It is also essential to take into account the mental state of a victim of sexual violence. Determining their mental state will assist in knowing if they can mentally take the effort needed to re-tell their story. It is often difficult for survivors who report to authorities to go through a system meant to protect victims while at the same time protecting the rights of offenders.

### **Rape Trauma Syndrome/PTSD**

Rape Trauma Syndrome is defined as "*a stress reaction to the threat of being killed while living through and surviving completed or attempted rape*" (Fisher, 2010), and is

often interwoven with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with victims of sexual violence. There are three known phases of RTS, of which there is no set period of time for each phase. First is the acute phase, occurring shortly after the offense, where a victim may feel a wide range of emotions in a very expressive way, such as shaking, tension, or being restless (Rape Trauma Syndrome, 2021). Next, the victim will react in a more controlled manner while being rational about the offense. Finally, many thoughts and concerns go through a victim's mind while trying to process the act committed against them.

The second phase is an external adjustment; a victim is trying to get back to their routine and reestablish regular activities that may have been practiced before the assault. However, even when trying to go back to a pre-assault lifestyle, many survivors will often feel moments of doubt and anxiety from the victimization (Biggers; 2003; Rape Trauma Syndrome, 2021).

The third is the long-term reorganization or resolution phase. This is when the assault is not the victim's central focus. It has happened to them, but it does not define them. Even after going through the three phases of Rape Trauma Syndrome, many will still mentally battle the attempted or completed assault and suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder develops in some who have experienced shocking, scary, or dangerous disturbances (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 2021). Depending on the event's severity, this disorder can be acute; however, if it is very traumatic, they can develop ongoing (chronic) PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 2021). There is no set time frame for symptoms to develop, and there is no timeframe for a person to recover. It varies from case to case. PTSD has been documented in many research articles and has been found to be strongly associated with a victim's mental health post-assault (O'Callaghan, Shepp, & Ullman, 2019). Qualitative reviews have found that 17% to 65% of sexual assault survivors develop PTSD (O'Callaghan, Shepp, & Ullman, 2019).



These factors for Rape Trauma Syndrome, PTSD, and other mental health issues have been taken into consideration when it comes to a victim reporting their offense. Service providers who work closely with victims of sexual violence understand that mental capacity and other factors must be taken into consideration when serving them. Many facilities are open to those that have experienced these offenses, many times free of charge and not dependent on if they reported the crimes (Peters, 2019).

### **Research Question**

There are many reasons a victim of sexual violence chooses not to report their offense to the police. Research identifies these reasons for nonreporting, however, those reasons are not always presented to practitioners, and in turn researchers may never get full explanations. Although researchers are getting the voices of many that either choose or choose not to report, there are still many victims who will remain silent. Given the effects that a victim of sexual violence can endure after the offense, it is vital to seek some form of care, and assistance post-assault. There are national as well as local organizations worldwide that are in place to serve victims of sexual violence regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, citizenship, or reporting status. While these organizations exist and are serving many, just like underreporting to police, many survivors are not utilizing these services. Nevertheless, these organizations are promoting themselves and raising awareness of the services they provide. The majority of them are non-profits, ready to assist when the time comes. These organizations are key actors when it comes to assisting victims in regaining some form of normalcy post-assault. There are many services in place to support and protect survivors of sexual violence. Most crisis centers have a 24-hour resource and response system to serve and support survivors. Many of these organizations will be staffed by an array of representation of diversity to mirror the survivors they serve. One of the most important factors is they are protected by state-by-state

confidentiality laws. Any form of communication with practitioners of crisis centers is protected, outside of abuse to another (Civil Procedure, 2012). This allows survivors to talk about their victimization without fear of having to report outside of their means of comfort. Crisis centers tend to be resource centers connecting survivors to other resources in their community. Once a survivor is connected to one organization they have the opportunity to get resources from other organizations that tailor services to best serve their needs, giving them as much normalcy in their lives as possible post-assault.

This study will examine the perception of those who work closest with survivors to gain answers to the question: Why are victims reluctant to report their victimizations to police authorities? Data will be collected through an interview guide designed to understand the obstacles faced when reporting victimization. By using the interview guide the research will gain knowledge of this question by looking at: (a) which victim services advocates are used most in the health/human service community, (b) where do they see the most reluctance in not reporting, (c) what alternatives outside of reporting do they find most resourceful when serving survivors of sexual violence.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the United States of America, more than half of all violent crimes go unreported (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). Sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence can carry a stigma that deters disclosure to both formal and informal sources. A critical review of the literature finds there are various reasons why sexual assault survivors do not report. To better understand underreported sexual assault crimes, it is essential to look at the specifics of reporting. Compared to data from practitioners who work with victims daily, criminal justice system reports vary from victim advocates' reports based on victimization. Reporting to the police varies based on the type of crime committed; some crimes, like robbery, have high reporting, while others- like sexual assault- have some of the lowest reporting rates. For instance, robbery is one of the crimes with the highest number of victims unreported (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). The current project focuses on victims of sexual violence.

This chapter will provide an overview of the relevant literature related to the under-reporting of sexual assault. It will explore the laws that are in place to support survivors of sexual violence and how victim-offender relationship can influence reporting. Later it will explore the effects of victim-blaming, victim attrition, and reluctance. This chapter will conclude by exploring how race and history can affect victims; victim fear of not being believed; the connections of sexual assault and race and how it influences victims reluctance Lastly, exploring gendered based violence. Before embarking on the national research examining survivors' reluctance to report their victimizations, it is helpful to examine Illinois and federal laws related to sexually violent offenses.

### **Laws Evolving for Survivors**

For years women and girls have been victimized by sexual violence, with a slow evolution of justice in their favor. They were known as a byproduct of wartime activity,

collateral damage, or even spoils of war (Brownmiller, 1993; Enloe, 2000; Farwell, 2004). While most war rape literature is used in the context of military and government advancement, it is crucial to examine history. There have been many acts of sexual violence in which no justice was served. Rape was used as a weapon by one nation against another and was used as government-sanctioned violence within the women's own country. War rape was considered a trophy after the victory of a battle, or to build up aggression to be better prepared for war (Farwell, 2004). The history of sexual violence includes the stigma of cultural norms of gender and sexuality and social dominance and power (Milillo, 2006).

One of the first known laws designating rape as a crime dates back to the 17th century, known as The Code of Hammurabi, which placed the burden on the male for whom the victim was considered property (Smith, 1974). Past sexual violence laws described rape as the carnal knowledge of a female over the age of 10 years by a man, not her husband, through force or against her will (Smith, 1974). For years women were defined as the property of either their father, husband, or during slavery; her master. Even if a woman was to acknowledge an act of sexual violence, the report would have to be made by the property owner (Bevacqua, 2000).

It wasn't until the second wave of the feminist movement in 1970 that the success of sexual violence was at the forefront of legislation, and laws began to reform and move in favor of hearing and believing survivors (Bevacqua, 2000). Rape Crisis Centers began to evolve and work with victims and activists to support and bring new legislation. Many movements and activists fought for justice on behalf of survivors of sexual violence from an organization known as The National Organization for Women (NOW). Under the leadership of Betty Freidan, Bella Abzug, and Gloria Steinem, NOW brought one of the most prominent sexual violence laws to legislation (National Organization for Women, 2021). In 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed by Congress, banning discrimination by sex and seeking to

have legal equality for all women (Bevacqua, 2000), allowing the leeway for more support and justice for survivors of sexual violence. However, the Amendment failed to get the support of the 38 states needed to add it to the Constitution.

Laws are in place to assist survivors in holding their aggressors accountable for the harm they have caused. In Illinois, there are statutes to charge an offender for acts of sexual violence. Illinois Criminal Sexual Assault Act, Criminal Code 720 ILCS 5/12-12 provides detailed information on criminal sexual assault, aggravated criminal sexual assault, predatory criminal sexual assault, criminal sexual abuse, aggravated criminal sexual abuse, and sexual misconduct (Illinois Criminal Sexual Assault Act Illinois Criminal Code). These statutes were designed to hold an offender responsible for the acts they committed, with most of these acts resulting in a felony charge. Sexual violence can be very traumatic and often leaves a victim shocked and in a state of disbelief. It can take time to process and come to terms with the act. Therefore, the law provides the victims with expanded reporting time to report this offense, as far as ten years after the crime the offender can still face felony charges. For lesser offenses, a victim can report and lead an offender to a charge of sexual misconduct as far as 18 months after the crime (Illinois Criminal Sexual Assault Act Illinois Criminal Code). Although these codes are in place, many survivors still do not report their victimizations to authorities.

Often people are unaware that acts of sexual violence are criminal (Griffin, 2021). For , many college students report that they don't report their victimizations because they don't perceive the assault as criminal, or if they do see it as criminal they don't see it as a serious enough crime to report to authorities (Griffin, 2021). It is important to educate communities to understand the effects of reporting crimes, the protection that is available from further victimizations, and the opportunities to create safety plans for survivors. Without education survivors may be unaware of the assistance that is available, resulting in many not reporting,

which could contribute to nonreporting (Mulla, 2014). If survivors are not comfortable reporting offenses to authorities, they have the right to go through civil proceedings (Illinois Attorney General, 2021). There are three forms of protection to keep the offender from communicating with or in contact with the victim (725 ILCS 5/112a; 750 ILSC 60/ArtI.). All of which can be requested as an emergency order. Emergency orders are in place to assist if a survivor is in imminent danger, and the orders will continue to protect them until the day of the hearing. The hearing determines a granted order which is suitable for two years. First, the order is known as an Order of Protection for victims of domestic violence, or if they have a previous or familial relationship with the victim(750 ILSC 60/Art.I). Second, a Civil No Contact order is if the victim was subjected to sexual violence and didn't have any current or previous relationship with the offender(725 ILSC 5/122A-14). Last, suppose there is no prior relationship, and the offender has stalked or continuously attempted to reach the victim after being asked not to contact them. In that case, they can file a Stalking No Contact Order. All orders can be modified to meet the victim's request within reason for their level of security(725 ILSC 5/112A-14). This civil proceeding is one of the many forms of safety planning that the victim's center works with survivors on.

The estimated financial burden for someone who is a victim of sexual violence is \$122,461 per victim (Peterson, 2016). Based on 25 million victims, the United States carried a weight of 3.1 trillion dollars on victims during their lifetime. According to the CDC, 39% of that goes toward the medical cost, 50% is from loss of work/productivity, 8% is spent in the criminal justice system, and 1% is spent on other expenses (Peterson, 2016). Only 32% of those expenses were covered by government sources, the remaining 68% fell on the victims and their loved ones. Government agencies and victim-center organizations have grants and funding to assist victims in alleviating their financial burdens. With support from local and regional agencies,

many parts of the financial obligations they endure can be lifted. In the state of Illinois, there is a bill called the Sexual Assault Survivors Emergency Treatment Act. This bill requires that hospitals provide health care to sexual assault survivors while establishing forensic evidence collection at no charge to survivors (Illinois Department of Public Health, 2020). After the initial medical exam, the voucher will cover a victim's medical expenses related to the assault for up to 90 days. This voucher would include medications, follow-ups, specialist referrals, and counseling. The additional medical costs that accrue past the 90 days, transportation costs to different appointments, transportation during criminal proceedings, and replacing things lost or damaged during the offense can be covered under the Crime Victim Compensation Act (CVCA). The CVCA allows survivors within the state of Illinois compensation of up to \$27,000 in financial assistance to restore anything damaged or lost because of violent crime (Illinois Attorney General, 2020). There are additional resources for survivors, whether state-funded or privately funded, to assist them with medical and other charges from violent crimes.

Other measures of safety planning can include laws that protect a survivor in their homes and job protection. In Illinois, the Safe Homes Act will allow a victim of intimate partner violence or sexual violence to relocate without being penalized if they are in a current lease at their dwelling (Illinois General Assembly, 2021). Safe Homes Act protects victims assaulted in their home, if the offender knows their home location. This statute allows victims to request an emergency lock change and relocate without being liable for the leasing terms and length.

For victims of human trafficking, Laws under a federal statute known as the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 are in place. This law protects those that are not U.S. citizens with a T Visa, where they will be able to reside in the country and receive medical and mental health care as needed (Byrne, 2019). In addition, many victims of violent crimes need assistance with job protection. According to the Illinois Department of Labor, The Victims

Economic Security and Safety Act will protect a victim with job allotting for up to 12 weeks (unpaid) off work in a year. Although this is evidence that laws have evolved and are conforming to meet the needs of survivors, there is still evidence that many survivors are still not confident in reporting their victimizations; local statistics highlight this ongoing issue.

**Illinois Coalition against Sexual Assault Reporting Database**

Whether one examines sexual assault reporting at the national- or state level, the same patterns of under-reporting emerge. For the state of Illinois, where this study takes place, data were gathered by the Illinois Coalition against Sexual Assault (ICASA), a sexual assault victim support organization. ICASA collected data for the number of people who contacted their organization statewide and compared it to the number of police reports of sexual violence reported to authorities from 2008 to 2014. Data are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1:

Comparison of Victimization reported to Law Enforcement and ICASA

<b>Year</b>	<b>Reported to Law Enforcement</b>	<b>Reported to ICASA</b>
2008	5,625	18,803
2009	5,316	18,433
2010	4,533	18,349
2011	4,397	18,896
2012	4,330	18,093
2013	3,960	18,048
2014	4,089	18,489

As the previous statistics indicate, 20-30% of sexual assault cases in Illinois are ever reported to the police authorities in any given year. 2013 has the lowest reporting rate of 21% reporting their victimization to police while the most reporting was done in 2008 at 30% reported to the police.



Various studies have shown the problem with police facilities and victim reports; however, there hasn't been a concrete solution. Moreover, as covered in the next section, it is estimated that around 40% of victims are assaulted by an acquaintance (Black, 2011; RAINN, 2021).

### **Victims Know Their Offender(s)**

Research shows that another reason sexual assault is not reported is that the survivor knows their perpetrator. Some victims have stated they are dealing with the trauma itself and protecting their "known" offender. Almost half of the female victims in the dataset that focused on the Prevalence and Characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner victimization found (46.7%) had at least one offender that was an acquaintance, and 45.4% were victims of intimate partner violence (Breiding, 2014). While for males, 44.9% reported sexual violence through an acquaintance, and 29% were victims of sexual intimate partner violence (Breiding, 2014; RAINN, 2021). The U.S. Department of Justice Bureaus of Justice Statistics found that among college students as many as 80% of victims are acquaintances of their offenders (Sinozich, 2014). Researchers have seen an even higher number of statistics for children. Approximately 90% of sexually abused children know their offender (Finkelhor, 2012). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that in the United States girls sexually assaulted identify their offenders as 43.6% acquaintances, 28.8% current or former partners, 27.7% family members, and only 10.1% strangers (Krathe, 2000; Basile, 2018; RAINN, 2021).

In situations where a victim is sexually assaulted there is often the case of a woman conceiving during her attack. Women who are victims of sexual intimate partner violence are more likely to experience conception through force or coercion by 58%. However, women outside of intimate partner abuse still experienced rape conception by 22.1% (Basile, 2018). According to Basile, there are almost 2.9 million U.S. women who experience pregnancy by

sexual assault in their lifetime (Basile, 2018). This invasive offense is made more invasive by going through additional procedures to abort or deciding to bring the embryo to term.

Sexual violence is a prevalent offense that unfortunately happens every day. Because of the prevalence of victim-blaming, many victims suffer silently, and it is imperative to review those effects.

### **Victim Blaming and Rape Culture**

Often, a survivor will decide whether to report a crime based on what the reaction was from the first person they divulged their victimization to (Maier, 2012; McGregor., 2000). The first person to disclose is known as an outcry witness (Gold, 2021). Often if their outcry witness responds in a way that makes the survivor feel accountable for the offense, they will more than likely choose not to inform authorities (Smith, 2015). Reactions from others can also prevent survivors from seeking medical attention. Living in a society where victim-blaming is so prevalent makes victims think twice before reporting the crime. They will remain silent and in agony to avoid the additional scrutiny and criticism they feel will come from speaking out, one of the effects of rape culture.

Rape culture, for years, promotes the idea that the victim has contributed to their trauma and is partly to blame for their victimization (Maier, 2012; O'Neal, 2019). Promoting false beliefs to justify sexual aggressions include: "boys will be boys," "they were just horsing around," and "it wasn't that serious, "that wasn't their intent," or even "they were young and dumb (Phillips, 2017; University of New Hampshire, 2021)." These are the narratives that are used and will continue to have survivors of the most intimate gender-based violence second guess whether it was a violation. It can lead to many devaluing the offense and fewer criminal reports (Mancini, 2015; Fox, 2011). Hearing the phrase "what you were wearing" placed the offense's fault on the victim because of their choice of clothing. When blaming intimate partner

violence victims, victims are asked, "why didn't you just leave the abuser?" Just because a victim of sexual assault did not scream or fight does not mean they consented to the offense.

Rape culture and victim-blaming are prevalent on campus, resulting in as many as 80% of student victims not reporting their victimizations (Beichner, 2021). Beichner (2021) discusses the reluctance to report victimizations, as demonstrated in the documentary, *The Hunting Ground*, in which survivors who reported their victimizations were then blamed for their victimizations. It is the culture of frequent predators that seek out and sexually assault intoxicated individuals. Even when there were attempts to report, the responses from authorities at the universities were to have the victim reflect on how they could have handled it differently, how much did they drink, or was the wrong message sent to the offender about their relationship (Beichner, 2021; 168). As a result, many victims held the weight of the rape culture in either being too ashamed to report or not perceiving their victimization to be severe enough for anything to be done about it (Beichner, 2021).

Victim blaming is even more severe in an intimate partner relationship. It is essential to know that many victims of intimate partner abusers choose not to leave because of the risk that if they do, they are more endangered than staying (Hennings, 2011). These phrases take the blame off the offender and place it on the person who has been harmed. Victims are not to be held accountable for the crimes committed against them. Instead, it is important to stand with them against their offender. It is essential to eliminate victim-blaming, therefore it is also necessary to address the issues with the victim's reluctance due to attrition.

### **Victim Attrition Causing Reluctance**

To understand the intimacy of the offense is to understand the lack of comfort in admitting the sexual offense occurred. Sexual violence is a crime that is difficult to share with a person's closest circle, let alone making it "public" and communicating with other parties to

allow them to fight for justice on their behalf. Victim attrition can cause many who have been offended sexually to walk away from the court proceedings, if they choose to go through them at all (Beichner, 2021). Victim attrition has been an ongoing issue that can be dated back to 1978 when Representative Elizabeth Holtzman addressed Congress on how many victims are re-victimized when going through the criminal justice system to find a form of closure from their victimizations (Beichner, 2021). Victims of sexual violence continue to feel blamed, shamed, or doubted by police when they report sexual assaults (Jordan, 2001; Mulla, 2014; Spencer, 2018). Many of them have to go through telling the events of the acts committed against them to multiple police officers, waiting long periods before a detective follows up, and then more waiting to see if the state will pick up the case. When going through the court system, there are often continuances and status hearings from both the state and the defense attorney, which will drag the case out sometimes for years before even taking the offender to trial. Spencer (2018) exhibits how sexual assault investigations and the treatment of victims are contingent on the evidence that the investigators and prosecutors collect and the credibility perceived by the victim's statement—later coming to question if a victim's evidence and testimony meets the expectations of the courts (Maier, 2012; Spencer, 2018:192). Police are often conditioned to look at the probability of prosecutors' success in court instead of the need to validate and support the survivors (Spencer, 2018). Therefore, this process can often deter victims from finding justice in a system where justice is often unfounded.

### **Fear of Not Being Believed**

Survivors of sexual violence will sometimes choose not to report to authorities because of a fear of not being believed. Some will choose to find solutions on their own or find a center/organization that will allow them to disclose without going through the criminal justice system (Bevacqua, 2000). As previously mentioned, more reports are made to rape crisis centers

than to local authorities. Survivors are more comfortable disclosing to confidential organizations that allow them to maintain anonymity, something not just seen locally but globally.

Proximity among victims and perpetrators preclude reporting, but police have historically mistreated individuals, resulting in fewer reports of sexual victimization. Despite the rising number of calls and engine searches related to violence during the pandemic, many of those seeking help are not turning to their local authorities because they feel this is not a viable option for them (U.N. Women, 2020). For example, in Bangladesh, because of the distrust of the authorities, citizens began seeking alternative routes such as self-defense classes for their women and children, feeling this will avoid discourse with the police and reporting the victimizations to them (U.N. Women, 2020). As a result, in many countries, historically excluded individuals have become more distrusting of the police and will seek alternative routes for assistance when dealing with violence. The history of violence and deterrence of not reporting victimizations on African Americans is imperative to this literature. Consequently, it is crucial to explore the findings of victimizations and reluctance associated with African Americans.

### **Race and History**

For centuries history shows there has not been a good relationship between people of color and police. Because of this, many minorities in the United States distrust police officers, fearing victimization by the criminal justice system or minimizing the crimes they report. Due to their skin color, they hesitate to inform, fearing judgment or being discriminated against. People of color feel they don't have a place of safety due to media and what's happening in their neighborhoods. Sexual assault during slavery was the birth of the ideology that women of color were loose, immoral, and overly sexual (Thompson-Miller, 2017). As previously mentioned, during slavery, people of color were considered property of their masters, and therefore their bodies did not belong to them. Also considered a profit for women who conceived during the act,

and later their children would be used for slavery or sold off to another master (Thompson-Miller, 2017; Tilman, 2010). If a slave were to be assaulted by anyone outside of their master, they would have no voice, but instead, it would be the master's decision in reporting (Tilman, 2010)

Oppression did not stop for African Americans once slavery ended. Instead, it opened the door for more victimizations; slave masters were not their only offenders. During the slavery era, women were still considered property, and if they didn't have a master or someone white to make the report, they would not be protected (Thompson-Miller, 2017; Tilman et al., 2010). In the confines of sexual assault, rape was a method that continuously oppressed women of color and had racial control over them (Donat et al., 1992; Thompson-Miller et al., 2017). They intended to maintain the supremacy of White men, and consequently, Black female victims were victimized and left to remain silent, simultaneously sending a message to African American men (Donat et al., 1992). There was no deterrence for white men who committed these crimes against African Americans because, by law, they were still unable to testify against a white person in court (Thompson-Miller et al., 2017). Those that did attempt to report the victimizations often faced retaliation (Donat et al., 1992; Thompson-Miller et al., 2017).

For instance, if a black man were accused of sexually assaulting a white woman, they would receive the harshest penalty of being beaten, lynched, or killed. Whereas if a white man was accused of sexually assaulting a black woman, the women were ignored, and men had no consequences (Donat et al., 1992; Tilman et al., 2010). Likewise, if an African American man was to try to protect a family member from sexual violence, it could open the opportunity for them to be battered or even killed with no disciplinary actions to white offenders (Donat et al., 1992; Thompson-Miller et al., 2017). While women were the majority of the victims, male victimizations occurred during lynching. They were sodomized and castrated before being hung

(Donat et al., 1992; Thompson- Miller et al., 2017). The history of injustice toward people of color has been acknowledged and seen as one reason why people of color are still hesitant to report their victimizations to this day (Donat et al., 1992; Tilman et al., 2010; Thompson-Miller et al., 2017).

There has been a noticeable trend regarding the victimizations of those historically excluded. African Americans are not the only ones showing the gaps of victimization than whites, American Indians, and Asians. Recently we have seen headlines that continue to display brutality. Organizations created movements to raise awareness to find justice against the hatred behind these crimes that continue to be an issue; Stop Asian Hate, Black Lives Matter, and more. In 2015, Washington Post began to see the problem of fatal shootings by police officers and started to log the police killings. Since 2015 Washington Post logged over 5,000 fatal shootings by on-duty police officers. These numbers showed approximately 1,000 shootings per year. African Americans were killed twice as much as white Americans (Tate, 2021).

People of color recently experienced a rise in racism in the United States, and the racism that built it was exposed to an unimaginable level. Roxann McCoy, the president of Las Vegas' NAACP chapter, expresses many people of color's concerns. She states, "*There has been an all-around rise in racism, in part because of the rhetoric of former President Donald Trump.*" In 2019, 48% of all 4,930 hate crimes reported to the FBI were associated with Blacks (McDevitt, 2021). Many survivors are unsure of whom they can trust and if they will be protected. However, those that are victims of violent crimes, depending on their demographics, fear they will not be treated equally. Questioning justice also comes into play when a person of color is the victim, and the offender is white, from continuous years of being overlooked and ignored (Arneil, 2001; Tilman et al., 2010).

## **Underreporting Due to Gender-Based Stigma**

In the offenses of sexual violence, the victim is often depicted as someone who identifies as a female. It is important to note that sexual victimization is a common form of gender-based violence, most often committed by men against women (RAINN, 2021). However, because there is a wide variation in reporting patterns across male versus female survivors, it is necessary to examine them in greater depth. Prevalence of assault against women notwithstanding, the first topic of reporting in this section relates to men. When Griffin defined sexual assault during data collection it was found that approximately 15-25% of college women reported experiencing sexual assault but only 6% of men admitted to offenses against them (Griffin, 2021). Victim-centered organizations find that men are less likely to report sexual victimization to the authorities than women. Many will question if this is the face of masculinity that pushes them not to inform authorities? When it comes down to masculinity, until recent years, men and women have been seen differently because of society's traditional gender roles (Elliot et al., 2020). Men, by their families, are perceived as the breadwinners, providers, and protectors and as fully responsible. Society sees them as strong, aggressive, and always in control. Therefore, they wouldn't see men as vulnerable targets or victims, even when victimized.

Men are seen more as criminals than as victims. In the article "Boys Don't Cry," Goodey (1998) states his concern for males and the damage that could be done to them as individuals when they have to form this masculine mask to hide their trauma from society. Even during their most vulnerable and innocent years as children, men are told not to cry, not to express their emotions, or to brush it off and move forward. So, in these older traditional upbringings, men are taught to repel the trauma as if it did not happen. The statistics of 1:3 women victims compared to 1:14 men victims is a prime example of men repelling their trauma as if it hadn't happened. It is the harmful gender norms that prevent male victims from seeking justice for the acts that were



committed against them, including laws, until recently, that defined sexual violence in a form to exclude male victims (Goodey, 1998; Elliot et al., 2020). Because of this, outsiders would assume that men don't come forth because of consenting to the act. YWCA McLean County reports surveys that show 29% of heterosexual men, 26% of gay men, and 37% of bisexual men have reported experiencing rape, physical violence, and or stalking during their lifetime (CDC, 2010; YWCA, 2017). They choose not to tell anyone about the offense because of the rape culture that men cannot be assaulted, or they wanted it and didn't say it.

The LGBTQ+ community is another group disproportionately affected by sexual violence and not reporting their crimes. The marginalization of LGBTQ people prompts them to be less trusting in reporting their offenses to authorities (Beichner, 2021). Beichner (2021) mentions the discrimination they face is higher and places them at a heightened risk, often dating back to their childhood (Beichner, 2021: 167). Figures in the United States reported transgender people and bisexual women are sexually victimized. Nearly 1 in 5 women who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual have faced victimization, more than triple the rates of heterosexuals (YWCA, 2017). Reports show 19% of transgendered have experienced domestic violence from a family member because of how they identify themselves (YWCA, 2017). Almost half of them will experience a form of sexual victimization during their lifetime (Beichner, 2021). In 2015, 77% of intimate partner-related homicides were LGTQ people of color (YWCA, 2017). Even when seeking help, more than 60% of LGBTQ reported being denied assistance, and when in homeless shelters, more than half transgender faced harassment or was turned away (YWCA, 2017).

The same service denied to those who identify as LGBTQ was recently limited and inaccessible to survivors of violence during the recent pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the effects it had on survivors of sexual violence.

## COVID

The Covid pandemic placed a more significant toll on survivors of sexual violence because they were combating two pandemics while the world only faced one. At the beginning of 2020, the world faced a massive, deadly pandemic forcing many to stay home. But, unfortunately, it was the stay-at-home ordinance that could have possibly been the spotlight for victims of a hidden pandemic. Two hundred forty-three million women and girls reported their victimizations in 2020. The number of victimizations reported will continue to rise as it becomes safer for victims to seek safety and assistance from continuous abuse. While this shadowed pandemic was on the rise, the Center for Global Development showed that 50% of the research reported in 2020 verified an influx of victimization that was going on during the Stay-at-home ordinance (Peterman et al., 2020). This influx left many victims of sexual violence in a vulnerable state, where they were at risk of being re-victimized by their offenders or allowing time for the evidence to expire.

Globally, many victims were limited to what was accessible to them during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). For survivors of these offenses, many resources were put on hold to avoid the risk of Covid exposure. Because of the increase in reports and demands for emergency shelters for those seeking protection in Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, victim centers were working overtime to assist (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). For example, France reported a victimization increase of 30%, Singapore increased by 30%, and Argentina's emergency calls alone increased by 25%. It is imperative to understand that these are the victims who can report. While there is an increase in global reports due to the ongoing pandemic, it is appropriate to assume that many are still unable to notify resources of their victimizations.

## **Conclusion**

Exposure to sexual violence is an invasive offense that many survivors are uncomfortable reporting because of its shame. Although there are protective laws, victims remain silent. Sexual violence is one of the most complicated criminal processes that a victim of crime has to go through. It is first deciding on whether to report. Survivors made the choice to go through the reporting process with the intent to gain justice for the offense. Unfortunately, it can do quite the opposite and cause a victim more harm than justice. After a victim has chosen to report the crime, there is a chance that police will make the decision not to investigate. Numerous Forensic Sexual Assault Exams are backlogged and sitting untested. Whether a police department decides to investigate a crime of sexual violence doesn't guarantee that prosecutors will press charges. Even when going through the criminal proceeding, many survivors of these crimes are re-traumatized. Criminal proceedings can be insensitive, and defense attorneys often shame victims during their testimony and blame them for the offense. Last is the sentencing and possibly an impact statement that the victim will read openly in court. Often sexual offenders' charges are dropped down to lighter sentences, receive suitable behavior acknowledgments, and get out sooner. The more severe the crime, the more laws should support and protect survivors of sexual violence. There is a saying, "No justice, no peace." However, if the justice system is not working with appropriate tools, there is no peace to begin with. Laws regarding sexual victimizations should be created to set the precedence for justice, and those laws can be the beginning of a victim's peace if exercised correctly.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

Sexual violence is one of the most underreported, invasive crimes committed against a person. Statistics continue to show that, on average, only one in three victims of sexual violence will report their victimizations to the police (Griffen, 2021; RAINN, 2020). When it comes to sexual violence, there is much trauma included with each offense. For that reason, it is crucial for society, as a whole, to find a way to restore victims of sexual violence. At the same time, we must find solutions for underreporting of these offenses.

This chapter provides an overview of the planned research study and associated methodology. In addition, the chapter includes a summary of human subjects' protections, the processes underlying data collection, and the analytic plan to be used with the qualitative interview data gathered from participants. Before embarking on the research methodology, it is imperative to understand the overall purpose of the research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The central purpose of this study was to gain insight into why survivors of sexual assault are reluctant to report their victimizations. Given that victims of sexual assault can be triggered when retelling their stories, the study sought information on sexual assault, but from the perspective of victim advocates and practitioners—not the survivors themselves. The researcher interviewed sexual assault victim advocates and practitioners who work closely with survivors in the community. The practitioners who were interviewed were primarily employed in the Human/Health service community. The expertise and years of service prove that these practitioners understood the depths to which many survivors underreported their victimizations to police authorities and worked to assist survivors in gaining normalcy after the offense. Although advocacy work undoubtedly carries the potential for vicarious trauma, this research did

not pose additional risks to those interviewed, because the interview content was consistent with their daily work experiences. It was helpful to examine things qualitatively to gain the best conclusion while providing insight specific to the interviewees' perceptions of victims' reluctance to report their victimizations.

### **Sample**

This study used qualitative (over-the-phone interviews) analysis. Practitioners from the Human/Health service community within McLean County were invited to participate in this study. The qualitative data collected provided a clear perception of members of the Human/Health community field. Practitioners in these fields were from various backgrounds, including but not limited to, nurses, advocates, counselors, case managers, volunteers, from crisis centers, as well as ministerial staff. This study interviewed 13 respondents who work with victims of sexual violence in McLean County. This research collected data from these practitioners who advocate for and are the resources to survivors of sexual violence. Given that the study included human subjects, many protections were added, as explained in the next section.

### ***Human Subjects Protection***

Prior to data collection, we obtained an endorsement from the McLean County Sexual Assault Crisis Center—YWCA Stepping Stones—administrators, who provided a letter of support encouraging Human/Health service practitioners from the community to take part in the study. Knowing that many of the practitioners with whom we conducted interviews had a long-standing relationship with the YWCA Stepping Stones organization, we wanted to include a letter of endorsement in hopes that this would bolster our response rates. The study overview we provided to prospective interviewees clarified that the study was not being conducted by YWCA Stepping Stones. The proposal received approval from Illinois State University Review Board. The paragraphs that follow provide an overview of crucial protections.

### ***Informed Consent***

Given the nature of the research participants and the ties to the community, the researcher took several necessary steps to ensure human protection and confidentiality. Participants were given a consent form before the interview and encouraged to ask questions or address concerns (See Appendix A). Before questions began, there was an additional opportunity for any questions or concerns and reviewing the consent form copies upon request. They were notified that this study was completely voluntary. Each consenting participant provided their electronic signature on the consent form. There was an additional signature that was required for the interviews to be audio recorded, so that they could be transcribed later. The researchers retained a copy of the signed informed consent forms

### ***Data Storage***

All electronic data generated from the study was kept in a file on the researchers' computer with password protection for the file. The transcribed data were stored without any personal identifiers. In addition, signed consent paperwork for the study was saved in a password-protected folder. Only researchers had access to the files

### ***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

All participants identifying information were be kept confidential. The researcher created and maintained a numbered master list of the interviewees that included the participants employing organization and the interviewees' initials. The master list was deleted once the study was completed to avoid linking the respondent's information to each practitioner. The researchers' knowledge of who participated notwithstanding, once the master list and the informed consent forms were redacted, all data was stored to ensure the anonymity of respondents.

## ***Recruitment***

Knowing that many participants might wish to participate in the research during their workday schedules, we wanted to make sure there were no issues with their supervisors. The researchers sent an email message to all of the local health and human service provider administrators announcing the project. The solicitation email included informational letters, a flyer regarding the study, and a letter of support from McLean County YWCA (See Appendix B). The researcher allowed two weeks for administration from these organizations to correspond with any questions, concerns, or objections from staff participating. After two weeks of the correspondence of administrators without reservations about the research, additional correspondence was sent out to the organization's employees that work closely with survivors. The second round of emails was sent directly to the practitioners.

The direct solicitation email contained a duplicate of the administrative email, but also advised participants that their administrators had been notified about the study. Participants who agreed to participate in the study provided researchers with their preferred time/date/ for interviews and telephone contact details. In addition, participants were given an informed consent letter and asked to read, review, and provide signatures indicating voluntary participation in the project.

## ***Data Collection***

The researcher engaged in an in-depth telephone interview with each consenting participant. Research interview questions were grounded from a guide that the researcher created (See Appendix C). The interview centered on practitioners' perceptions of why victims of sexual violence are reluctant to report victimizations, how the community human/health service workers provide resources for victims post-assault; and practitioners' perception of the best tools needed to decrease the numbers of victimizations and hold offenders of sexual violence accountable for

their actions. While the focus of the interview was to get practitioners' perceptions on why victims of sexual violence were reluctant to report, researchers encouraged practitioners to add any additional information that they felt would be helpful to the study. After completing the interview, researchers addressed any further questions and advised interviewees that findings would be sent to the associated organizations.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected, through the perceptions of practitioners, was obtained through interviews. After the transcription of the interviews, the qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Practitioner's answers were organized into themes created from researchers' categories based on the patterns of repetitions in answers during the review of transcripts. This and more will be discussed in the proceeding chapter.



## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Sexual violence is prevalent in our society; it's often overlooked and under-addressed. The victims of these offenses will attempt to navigate life without addressing the harm that has been inflicted upon them. In turn, this can lead to survivors experiencing many obstacles when attempting to improve their holistic physical and psychological well-being.

Although the literature has been established to collect data on victims' reluctance to report, it is mainly in the hands of victims to tell their stories. These victims are also at risk of being re-triggered during the interview process. This study uses an approach to examine victims' reluctance to report without triggering victims. Rather than calling on victims to retell their experiences, it centers on practitioners' perceptions. The study is a qualitative study of McLean County, Illinois practitioners who work with survivors of sexual violence. The central research question explores why victims are reluctant to report their victimization to law enforcement and what can be done from a community approach to increase the number of survivors of sexual violence seeking help post-assault.

This chapter will provide a detailed analysis of the qualitative data gathered through interviews with 13 sexual assault practitioners. The data for the study were collected through telephone interviews with practitioners. The interviews, lasting anywhere from 25-60 minutes, were audio-recorded and later transcribed. This chapter will first discuss the description of the interview sample, followed by the qualitative analysis of information obtained through telephone interviews.

### **Description of Interview Sample**

With the support of YWCA Stepping Stones and from members of the Human/Health service community, a study notice was distributed to 48 members listed on the Human Service Council email listing. A total of 17 practitioners responded, indicating they were interested in

participating in the study. Four interested participants indicated they did not have any sexual assault disclosures throughout their career as Human/Health service practitioners, so they were not scheduled for interviews. This yielded a final sample of 13 interviewees.

The researcher worked with the 13 members of the Human/Health Service community to schedule telephone interviews. Due to the spike in COVID cases in McLean County and the heightened protection protocols, it was decided to take safety measures and interview each respondent over the phone. Each interview was scheduled and held in a private and quiet setting of the interviewee's choice. Following the protocols for human subject's protections, the researcher either obtained a copy of the respondent's signed consent form or reviewed the consent form with the respondent and received a verbal response to continue the interview process. The interview consisted of questions that were constructed from the interview guide (see Appendix C). After transcribing the collected data, each interview was analyzed through thematic analysis. The practitioners' answers were organized into themes/categories the researcher created in the analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool that is rarely acknowledged but widely used in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

Although some of the practitioners' employment agencies were not specific to sexual violence or victim assistance, each of the study participants received disclosures of sexual victimization. To get a better understanding of the work these practitioners do, and to build rapport between the primary investigator and the interviewee, each of the interviews began with some questions about the interviewee's work history. The information regarding their organization types and professional positions are displayed in Table 2. It is important to note that because the researcher is striving to keep the data anonymous, the information in Table 2 is disaggregated. Six of the interviewees disclosed that their organizations worked directly with

clients of sexual violence. Although the remaining seven respondents were in positions that did not work with sexual violence survivors, each had received disclosures of sexual violence.

Table 2

Respondents: Profession: (N=13)

Organization Type	Respondents	Positions	Respondents
Specific to Children	5	Advocate	3
Specific to Homelessness	2	Mental Health	5
Specific to Sexual Victimization	6	Medical	2
Total Respondent	13	Self-Help	3
		Total Respondents	13

Many of the respondents who fall into the category of community advocates or allies for survivors of sexual violence worked in organizations that supported clients with needs related to homelessness, mental health, self-help, and medical services. Out of the 13 respondents, ten went into the field of human and health services intending to help people. At the same time, content in their positions was routed to this particular field through the course of career placement.

In addition to asking respondents about their positions within their employment agencies, the primary investigator asked respondents about the amount of time they have worked in their professions. To protect practitioner anonymity in the county, the individual practitioners' length in career is not listed. The practitioners' experience in the field spanned a period of more than three decades. While one of the practitioners had only been employed for seven months in this line of work, another had 30 years of experience.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed with the thematic analysis approach similar to Clarke and Braun (2008). The purpose of this methodological approach is not to organize and describe the data, but instead to interpret the aspects of the data that were collected (Clarke, 2008). With this method, the researcher identified and analyzed respondents' transcribed interviews looking for patterns (themes) in the data (Clarke, 2008) by focusing on repetitions. The Health/Human service providers were asked about three subject areas: (1) their perceptions regarding victims' reluctant to report sexual victimizations to law enforcement, (2) how the COVID pandemic impacted their victim advocacy, and (3) the support that was expressed to navigate a person's holistic journey post-assault. The subsections that follow provide an overview of the thematic analysis for each topic area.

### **Theme 1. Victim's Reluctance**

The researcher sought to gain insight on why victims are reluctant to report victimizations. It is understood that many who are sexually offended will choose not to go through the justice system. It is not pertinent to whether they choose to report, it is also important on what's the best way to heal from the victimizations. The following section will go over some of the top expressed reasons practitioners perceive victims are reluctant to report their victimizations. This data will be further broken down into four sub-themes on victim's reluctance. The first two themes will be 1) the concerns practitioners expressed for children survivors, and (2) the concerns practitioners faced for adult survivors. Later, the data will show the practitioners' perception of victim reluctance that is (3) influenced by media and (4) victim attrition.

### *Children's Reluctance to Report Victimization*

Six practitioners who specialized in working with children held strong views on the reluctance of children to report victimizations. This can roll over into adult victimizations as well as reluctance to report as adults. Children of sexual violence hold one of the highest rates of underreporting with victimizations. Statistics show that approximately 90% of children who are sexually abused know their offenders (Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012). Respondents noted that this is one of the main reasons child survivors are not reporting these offenses. One child specialist mentioned:

*When an investigation is opened up, it is less likely because a child disclosed, but instead it is more likely because they were discovered. [Respondent 2]*

Practitioners who work with children discussed investigations that were considered unfounded (no basis to take actions) because the information received in order to open the investigation was considered a non-disclosure. It was explained that children would disclose the abuse to a friend or trusted adult without the intent to make an official report. The witness, or disclosed party, would notify a parent or the police, resulting in the opening of an investigation. Many of these children who reported these incidents would choose not to speak because they were taught not to talk about "what happens at home," and respondents, without further evidence, would have to close the case. Below are the words from a specialist regarding non-disclosures and some of the main reasons why case are unfounded and closed:

*They wanted the abuse to stop, but they didn't want to get their brother, or their uncle or whomever it is to get into jail or go to prison... [Respondent 10]*

The child practitioners discussed how their clients felt obligated to protect the structure of the family more than they felt obligated to protect themselves. Many of these children have been abused by the same abuser for long periods of time, and are told not to tell anyone because if

they do, "they will get in trouble" or "be taken from their family". Whereas some respondents mentioned how children disclosed they're being victimized to a loved one and the witness brushed it off with gaslighting comments or ignored the disclosure. To some of the survivors, the patterns of abuse and grooming by their offenders became the new normal for them; they rarely thought of reporting it. The reluctance was also the result of a trusted family member's failure to be supportive of the survivor's disclosure, thus further prompting the survivor to remain silent about their abuse. This is also why many adults who were child victims remained silent. Two child specialist explains how child reluctance can carry over into adulthood before a survivor makes the decision to disclose:

*We get delayed disclosures from children that are more comfortable talking after the offender has been removed from the home, or when they are adults and feel safe. [Respondent 2]*

*We find adults who were children and were abused as a child, and they are now adults and have never said a single thing to a soul, and now they are talking. [Respondent 4]*

There are various reasons why child victims of sexual violence do not feel comfortable with disclosing their abuse. The patterns established in childhood create a silence often carried on to adulthood (Ullman, 2009). This will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Adult Reluctance to Report Victimization***

Survivors of sexual tend to carry the abuse over into adulthood, or just like the children, they won't disclose it because their body did not fight off the offender. They don't talk about it because they were not taught it was a criminal offense. They ultimately remain silent, which is what many are told to do when being assaulted. This then can cause a victim to downplay it as being offensive, but not offensive enough to speak about it. Victims of sexual assault are more likely to be victimized again. The likelihood of a child victims being revictimized is even

stronger than that of an adult survivors being revictimized (Papalia, 2021). Therefore, it is assumed the more trauma a survivor faces the more reluctance they will have to report (Ullman 2009). Adult victim's reluctance can have more hesitancy than a child survivor simply due to their experiences. It is often because the adults are no longer in contact with their predator which influences their decision to speak about the abuse.

Respondents spoke on this area of reluctance and equated it to not being properly taught the concept of consent as children and even as adults. It is important to consider the true prevalence of sexual assault and the agenda of advocates to push society to educate themselves on this matter. Simultaneously, there is another societal force exposing the stigmas of rape and the rampancy of rape culture. The emotions it triggers to acknowledge the occurrence of sexual assault are a lot for survivors to process; and while still trying to cope with the offense, many survivors tend to relive it in their minds.

Respondents spoke of how many survivors choose not to report because of the impact; accepting and acknowledging the offense can cause a person to be weary, especially when navigating the criminal justice system. One of the main fears of going through the criminal justice system is the fear of not being believed by society nor by the officers. The influence of social media can also impact a survivor's decision to report.

### ***Media's Influence***

Media tends to impact people's perception of many aspects of rape and sexual assault. The media's spotlight on a victim can have a negative impact on said victim's reluctance to report their assault. This was one of the many observations of media impact given by the respondents in this research. When asked about the role of social media in survivors' reporting behaviors, 11 out of 13 respondents agreed that social media influences a survivor's decision to report or not to report. The television shows and movies that often portray a victim navigating the criminal

justice system to then be victimized and triggered by the courts and news outlets were one of the top responses when respondents were asked to elaborate on their answers. There was a specific show, Law and Order Special Victims Unit (SVU), which was noted as one of those television shows. SVU tends to portray a survivor's stories as not having a favorable outcome. Respondents spoke of how many of these episodes involve a victim who has to watch their offenders get away with the offense, while said victim has to figure out how to get past the first offense and the trauma inflicted by the courts.

Negative stories told of survivors in the news would also influence their decision to remain silent. Practitioners spoke of the media and how it can be a toxic cycle of the victim being shamed, gas-lighted, re-victimized, and blamed for the actions committed against them. There was no privacy for survivors; even celebrities who disclosed sexual violence were portrayed as people who wanted attention. One practitioner verbalized the toxicity of victim blame that the media used against a popular actress in her words below:

*I can give Lindsey Lohan for example. They found all the bad things about the person instead of focusing on the fact that she was abused. She had mental health issues, but it didn't matter what her life was like before. She didn't deserve that. They highlight all the bad things you have done so that most women would be like, 'I'm never telling anybody after seeing that. [Respondent 9]*

If the media doesn't have a sad story to tell about the victim, others assume said victims are doing it for money, which, again, feeds into the toxicity of rape culture. There was also mention of the Brock Turner case, and the perpetrator being seen as the All-American boy next door described by another practitioner:

*I think society has the idea of the "perfect rape," which includes the creepy guy that jumped out the bushes, viciously attacks this woman, and rapes her. We don't think about the pastor, the priest, the teacher, the boss, or the coach. Then during high-profile trials, the judge speaks about not wanting to ruin the perpetrator's life. Society has sexualized children because 12, 13, 14, and 15-year-olds can be raped. And what we get in the*



*media is what is she wearing, or she represented herself as older than she was, and how was he supposed to know? [Respondent 13]*

There has been a significant change over the years in regard to what is considered appropriate compared to inappropriate social interaction. This includes a discussion about appropriate dress and behavior for certain people. Society often prompts victim-blaming by pushing the idea that a victim has been assaulted due to the clothes they were wearing or the behavior they were exhibiting at the time of the said assault. The society also posits that an assailant should not be reprimanded because of how active they are in their community. This is not just the case with the news, but with social media as well. Practitioners described it as pinpointing and exploiting the stigmas associated with sexual assault victims and rape culture. Many respondents discussed the abuse that happens via social media, and the influence said abuse had on a survivor's reluctance. For example, how a picture/video can be captured without the victims knowing. That same picture/video can be used as threats causing survivors to remain silent in the hopes the captured picture/video will not be posted. There have also been incidents where the picture or video is posted, then viewed many times before being taken down, causing more trauma and damage to the victim's mental and emotional well-being. Trolls, bullies found on social media, will continue to find ways to blame victims or to downplay the offense. In the end, the victims experience more trauma via the media, and respondents continue to express the impact it has on their reluctance. On a positive note, there have been more disclosures because of the #METOO movement; these disclosures only happen on social media and victims often find support in this way. Social media was a tool that could be used during COVID for survivors who were familiar with how to use it. However, there were many that were unable to utilize it among other things. These obstacles, and other concerns that practitioners spoke on will be discussed in the next section.

## **Theme 2. COVID**

At the beginning of 2020, the world faced a massive, deadly pandemic that forced many to stay home to prevent the spread of COVID. From the year 2020 until 2022 (present), there were 11 different variants of COVID (CDC, 2022). It has been a challenging time for advocates of sexual violence; they have faced some obstacles that no other generation of advocates has faced. They have to provide services for survivors during the pandemic, while also keeping some form of trust with their clients and managing a work-life balance.

COVID has placed reluctance on society as a whole. It has victimized many people on a daily basis. Individuals were hesitant to even step outside without wearing a mask or carrying disinfectant. Something that could not be detected by the naked eye placed fear in many hearts. Society became "COVID-fatigued," even those not directly impacted by the disease itself.

When practitioners were asked how they navigated their advocacy work during the pandemic, many practitioners expressed their concerns for survivors, their organizations, and the obstacles they faced when attempting to serve this population. There was an overwhelming response of how worry began to rise during the stay-at-home ordinances and how it could negatively affect survivors. One of the major concerns of many practitioners was controversial to what most of society was promoting. While society was promoting being safe at home, practitioners of sexual victimizations were exclaiming how many of their clients were far from safe while at home. The grounded theory analysis revealed four different themes related to COVID: (1) overall concerns that practitioners expressed, (2) practitioners' concerns for child sexual abuse, (3) college students, and (4) tele-therapy. And, the final theme is (5) the organizations' resilience to overcome obstacles preventing them from serving survivors.

## ***Overall Concerns***

The first theme related to COVID was the overall concerns practitioners expressed in regard to their ability to provide services to survivors. The pandemic placed a most significant toll on survivors of sexual violence because they were combatting two pandemics, while the rest of society only combatted one. Respondents discussed the mental health toll on individuals. As previously noted, sexual victimization can affect a survivor's mental health from that event alone. However, when discussing the additional tolls exacted by the COVID pandemic, respondents understood that the mental health field was greatly underserved and would be less available to society as a whole. As one of the practitioners indicated, there was a constant concern about the distinct ways that the pandemic would interact with sexual victimization:

*I think COVID increased depression, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, disconnection, and all of that. I think it exacerbated symptoms and some more issues. [Respondent 8]*

In addition, another respondent talked about the burnout many were feeling. Not just survivors, but those that work with survivors who were all trying to maintain a healthy work-life balance. These are her words below:

*I hear it from other people too- just the amount of fatigue they are feeling, and burnout. So many times I have heard; 'I'm so tired I can't get through the day. [Respondent 1]*

The practitioners indicated that many survivors were affected during the pandemic in more than one way. Survivors were not only battling the COVID pandemic, but they were battling a pandemic hidden behind closed doors. Survivors were on double-duty fighting a battle that was very taboo, and not readily addressed by many members of society. There was an overwhelming response practitioners expressed regarding survivors' fears combined below is a respondents words describing their concerns:

*COVID impacted people's sense of safety as a whole. Which happened with victims, its Heartbreaking... So, I have seen the significant impact that COVID has placed on survivors of sexual violence. So, their sense of safety has been impacted, and it is traumatizing. A traumatizing event can trigger this area of feeling unsafe. They have already had a history of uncertainty. [Respondent 8]*

It wasn't just their sense of safety in regards to sexual violence. Many survivors, just like the rest of the world were concerned with contracting COVID. Practitioners spoke on how survivors were reluctant to come in person and seek help because of the widespread virus. Below are two practitioners' responses on the matter:

*You know my concern was that they weren't going to look for help when they needed it out of fear for their own safety, just because of COVID. You have safety concerns when you talk abuse sexual violence in general, but you know, maybe not wanting to go to an emergency room because they're full of COVID cases. [Respondent 2]*

*Clients telling me, 'I am triggered by people coming into my home, and I don't know if they have COVID or will hurt me. [Respondent 8]*

The practitioner continued to speak on the worries of survivors through the lens of trying to battle what was happening in a world due to COVID, and where they were already trying to find a new normal despite their victimization. Imagine having to combat these two different obstacles at the same time, while also being limited to how one can exercise forms of self-care or self-expression because of a fear of harm.

There were also concerns about survivors being unable to disclose the abuse. Simultaneously there were also concerns practitioners had for survivors having a place to escape to for safety. One specific practitioner expressed these concerns during the interview:

*People did not have a chance to escape their abusers and tell someone that they were not safe... People weren't necessarily, you know, working at their place of business. They were working from home, so they never had that outlet to escape and say help, and that has been in my opinion the worst part of COVID. [Respondent 5]*

Practitioners understood that many survivors were working from home, participating in classes online, or simply living with their abuser. The quick get-away or safety plans established

with these practitioners were no longer accessible because things were closed unless otherwise labeled as essential to the rest of the world.

### ***Children and COVID Obstacles***

While there were many concerns about the overall stability of children and their physical, mental, and academic well-being during the COVID pandemic, there was an overwhelming concern from practitioners as well. Practitioners mentioned that many children depend on childcare and school attendance for safety and to meet their basic needs of food and shelter during the day. However, those safety measures were no longer in place with the stay-at-home ordinances. Prior to the pandemic, some children found safety in their childcare settings. If there was abuse in the home, children often disclosed this to a trusted adult, or it was sometimes discovered by the staff. Whether discovered by another party or disclosed by the child, many workers and volunteers in these childcare settings would make the reports, generating the start of an investigation for child survivors. They feared these children were now more consistently at home with their offenders and may have felt unsafe to disclose the abuse they experienced.

The trusted adults who were previously available and were educated on how to notice the signs of child abuse were no longer there to observe a change in the child's behaviors or to hear a child accidental or purposeful disclosure. Due to their absence, those reports were no longer being made. Therefore, investigations were put to a screeching halt. Below are two of the respondents' concerns regarding COVID related to children:

*So, March 2020, that was a huge worry that children were in lockdown at home with possibly their perpetrators. [Respondent 4]*

*Our numbers were very low, not just interviews but reports because kids did not have an outside source to go to. It was scary for us if something (an investigation) was happening. People would ask, oh, your numbers are down. That's great! We were like, No, it's not great because it's still happening. We don't know about it. [Respondent 10]*

The respondents' statement in reference to child survivors mentioned that during the surge of COVID they were not in a position to stop services. They were essential workers and needed to be in the field as well as available to support any disclosure that came in. Below are a respondent's thoughts on the chaos, there was a discovery that hit national news and had her even more concerned for children:

*I will say one good thing that these videos outlets have become such a wide thing with zoom and teams that that teacher witnessed the poor little girl getting sexually assaulted over video. She was able to help that little girl, but you don't know how long it had been going on behind closed doors, and the little girl couldn't say anything until she had to. Incidents happened while school was going on, and the camera was just at the right angle. [Respondent 5]*

This practitioner verbalized her concern about the news and how much it troubled her. This was an eye-opener because it demonstrated how many more children were at risk of being victimized yet undiscovered because their offenders were careful to ensure cameras were turned off. These offenders often took other measures to avoid being caught. Practitioners also mentioned some clients were not able to access the internet, nor did they have devices to use to reach out for help.

The practitioner's main concern was the safety of the children, in addition to contracting or spreading this potentially life-threatening virus. It took some resilience, creativity, and grant writing, but these practitioners were exemplary at overcoming the many hurdles they faced when serving survivors and continuing to protect them from the spread of COVID. These were truly unprecedented times, but the resilience these practitioners demonstrated was unmatched when finding ways to continue supporting survivors.

### ***Concerns Related to College Students***

College students were a special population. These students were split between being stuck at home and managing classes online, or being far away from home and combating life

away from home while transitioning to adulthood. Because of the adulthood transition, there are many things that are done on campus that are not talked about at home that was expressed by practitioners. One respondent who works with college students understood the toll it took on students who wanted to process things they were not ready to disclose to their families. However, these students were still living with their families and had a fear of a session being overheard. These are her words below:

*Many students going back home didn't have their places. We often tried to help our clients have safety when they wanted to talk about things their families did not necessarily support or know about. So I had clients going into closets to meet with me, getting in their car, and going to the local library or parking lot, whatever they needed to do. And it was kind of scary then and took many adjustments. [Respondent 11]*

There was also distrust in support groups for college students. When attending the virtual sessions, it didn't have the same structure as it did when being held face-to-face. While the concerns of client-counselors were fading, there was still a wider concern for practitioners who not only worked with survivors but were still dealing with the threat of COVID and the nationwide ordinance. It wasn't just the support groups but COVID affected tele-health as a whole which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***Tele-therapy***

Prior to the pandemic, practitioners were meeting with clients on either a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Many of the sessions were then postponed in mid-March due to the pandemic. Practitioners and clients had to go almost a month without sessions being held, because the virtual options were not something that was widely implemented in the Human/Health service community. The engagement participation was low, and many clients were canceling sessions or feeling like they were not helping.

Tele-therapy was not a tool that was often used in counseling services, especially related to sexual victimization. However, it was a tool that needed to be used during COVID. Many practitioners expressed the barriers that COVID created during the stay-at-home ordinance. Respondents talked about how they felt the clients they worked with were not as expressive as they were when in session face-to-face. Specifically, counselors talked about their sessions being hindered because clients didn't feel it was safe to talk, as someone could be listening to their sessions. For new clients, practitioners expressed not being able to build a rapport with their clients since they were having difficulty building the same level of trust they would have back when working with clients in person, as expressed in a counselor's words below:

*I'll say, like face-to-face interactions. I know we also do, like telehealth and zoom and things like that, but many times, especially when my clients, they don't like that experience. It changes their engagement participation. It changes like you know the body language. So I think the virtual affects people. COVID has created from a virtual standpoint, in that it affects people the way they, like, go through our course and our sessions. [Respondent 6]*

There were concerns about being unable to read body language during tele therapy or pick up on tones and signs of distress. Practitioners felt that once that sense of safety for the survivors was compromised, so was the ability to trust; this includes clients with whom these practitioners have already built trust.

### ***Practitioners' Resilience to Overcome Obstacles***

Although many guidelines have been lifted and practitioners are more easily accessible now, many of these respondents mentioned how this pandemic has been a true learning curve for them and their organizations. Not only was their resilience apparent during the data collection, but it was also indicated they will persevere for their clients despite any obstacles that may arise in the future.



All around the world there were declarations of "being stronger together" in an effort to encourage families to stay at home for safety. On the other hand, practitioners and advocates for children were still working on awareness and promotions for finding safety measures to prevent children from being sexually abused. The respondents of this study talked about their tireless work in finding ways to reach young survivors because school was no longer in session.

The client service center changed the hours of operation to accommodate the survivors' disclosures and sessions. Practitioners talked about being the first in line to get vaccinated in order to help prevent the spread of COVID when supporting survivors. There were also adjustments made to office spacing and sanitizing to protect clients and staff.

For organizations that were not compatible with telehealth services, these practitioners worked to make them compatible. Organizations worked on policy changes and guideline updates to ensure the availability to serve clients and survivors in many ways. Federal grants were written to provide the clients they were serving access to Wi-Fi, as well as devices for teletherapy. Caregivers also worked to ensure privacy so that virtual sessions could remain comfortable and confidential. Advocates and allies spoke with schools to make it mandatory for children to leave their cameras on during remote school hours. A child practitioner mentions trying to find ways to send out safety messages:

*We just wanted to reach out to them to tell them whom to go to if things were happening, making sure they knew there were still people they could trust, usually teachers. Also trying to put safety messages on social media providing numbers for hotlines, and telling the children to call other people or even leaving a letter in the mailbox. [Respondent 8]*

Safety measures were thoroughly exercised by wearing masks and social distancing for investigation, advocacy, necessity distributions, and counseling sessions. The rooms available for forensic investigations were sterilized per COVID guidelines, while still maintaining an inviting environment for child survivors. The furniture was moved six feet apart to abide by the

guidelines and individually-wrapped snacks were provided to the children. The grounding tools and toys that were originally communal were now take-home toys and grounding tools for survivors to use when implementing coping skills. While prior to the pandemic there would be multiple parties in the room to support and investigate disclosures, only the forensic investigators were now allowed in the room with the client. All other parties of the investigation had to watch the interview remotely from their homes or their desk to reduce the spread of the virus.

Prior to COVID, practitioners would go to the homes in order to meet with their clients. Now, these practitioners are finding new ways to continue to meet the needs of each individual during the pandemic. In the field, practitioners were still serving clients by conducting drop-off trips, leaving things outside of their client's home, and providing clients with a safety check at the threshold of the client's door. The practices that practitioners put in place were significant in supporting survivors during a very vulnerable time for the world as a whole. They were also specific to the needs of their clients and the problems they were facing. The same manner of support was shown to clients battling reluctance on reporting victimizations due to victim attrition. This will be discussed in the following section.

### **Theme 3. Victim Attrition**

There is a disproportion between the reported victimizations of sexual offense and convictions of offender who are actors of these offenses. For every 100 rapes or attempted rapes reported only 19 of these reports will lead to an arrest, and one case will end in a guilty verdict (Morabito, 2019). Respondents talked about their client's reluctance to report victimizations to law enforcement as well as clients experience through the criminal justice system that caused reluctance. This section will discuss these matters in the following subtopics: (1) making report to law enforcement, (2) the criminal justice system, and (3) victims remorse.

### ***Making Report to Law Enforcement***

According to Morabito out of every 100 rapes, only 19 survivors will report their victimization to the police. This is meant to be the first step of the criminal justice system, yet respondents discussed the reluctance to even start the process because of this step. There were concerns about whether police officers have sound judgment. This causes hesitancy by survivors to talk to police officers, as it can be intimidating. The respondents talked about how law enforcement's interview questions for survivors can deter a survivor from reporting:

*I think the way that questioning is handled is sometimes tough. I know there is a method to the way the questions detectives ask, and there is a way to how they investigate. If someone came in and robbed my house, I would not be questioned on why I didn't have my alarm system on or why I have such nice things. I won't be blamed for someone breaking into my house. But, with sexual assault, there are questions that lead to victim-blaming. [Respondent 13]*

For a person that has difficulty coping with the events that happened prior to reporting to police, this process can be very triggering. As previously mentioned, many survivors deal with self-blame, and the questions officers tend to ask at the beginning of an investigation can be similar to the questions survivors ask themselves. These questions tend to revolve around how these survivors question themselves on how could they have prevented the victimization from occurring.

It also makes a difference if the survivors have had any history with police or if a loved one has. Practitioners discussed the present issues with Black Lives Matter and how people of color feel unsafe around police officers after being pulled over. For victims of sexual abuse who are quite vulnerable now, there is more hesitancy about the support of officers. For people of color, there has been a history of the divide between the two, making them more reluctant to report unless they feel it is a dire situation. Ultimately, survivors of color, will instead, downplay the assault, and therefore, fewer reports are being made, specifically from this population.

Once the initial report is made it is then followed by additional questions from a detective. For a victim to start with an initial report, done by a patrol officer, and then a follow-up interview with a detective can add discouragement to this already triggering process. One of the advocates that work with law enforcement talked about the intensity of survivors having to retell the offense to police officials:

*Sometimes there's more than one (interview), which can be pretty intensive, and in my experience, a lot of the clients that I have worked with, you know, are emotional afterward and not quite sure how to take some of the questions. [Respondent 2]*

Practitioners that worked directly with survivors who chose to go through the criminal justice system discussed their roles in re-grounding survivors after the interviews, and working with them to mentally prepare them as much as possible for the questions. Unfortunately, it is not always successful in preparing the survivors for what happens in the room with the detectives.

After the interviews are conducted by the detectives, then the victim has to wait to see if charges will be pressed against the offender. The waiting period victims face to see if the States Attorney is able to pick up the case, is based on the evidence that is collected during the law enforcement investigation. This time can vary due to the back log of forensic kits, the depth of the investigation, and the number of people that need to be questioned.

There are times when the forensic test comes back not in the favor of survivors and law enforcement advises survivors there was not enough evidence for the state to pick up the case. On the other side, there are times when the forensic results will prove the events happened and the state will pick up the case. These are just the steps before the court proceedings begin, which can add more time to determine if the case will go to trial.

### ***The Court Proceedings***

A court proceeding can be very intimidating for any person that has to attend. And even more so intimidating for a person who is already in a vulnerable state. Not only can it be intimidating but it can be lengthy. Local advocates expressed the local timeframe of reporting to sentencing, on average, is 2-3 years. Many survivors who choose to go through the criminal justice system have to endure the anticipation of the unknowing of a verdict or plea deal for the acts that were committed against them. Victim attrition can cause many victims, who have been sexually assaulted, to walk away from the court proceedings if they choose to go through them at all (Beichner, 2021).

### ***Victims Remorse***

According to practitioners, victims rarely find justice through the criminal justice system. Instead, they seek alternative routes or try to cope with the offense alone. The criminal justice system's previous outcomes have pushed respondents to support survivors who choose not to take this route or support survivors who choose to back out when they are in the middle of court proceedings. Below is the reaction of a practitioner regarding her experiences with clients and the criminal justice system:

*I would say it had backfired when a perpetrator and or at that time the defendant was found not guilty. So let's say they were charged with the crime, but the jury found them not guilty; they were set free. That has messed with the victim's emotional state. And you know, of course, they are the criminal justice system and do what they do. But then it falls back on our agency to help that victim and continue therapy or answer questions to help get them through it. [Respondent 4]*

With each respondent that spoke on the reluctance of victim reporting due to victim attrition, they expressed the backfiring of survivors reporting and how it can add additional trauma to a survivor's journey. Therefore many of them were very adamant about preparing each survivor with the resources to support survivors if reporting was the route they chose, or support

them if they chose a different route. Regardless of the route that survivors took and the reason behind the reluctance, survivors of sexual violence are shown to have a strong community to support them through their journey.

#### **Theme 4. Support**

After sexual victimization, it is imperative for survivors to have supporters on whom they can depend. Support is needed in all aspects of life and more so on events that would alter a person's path or purpose. The number of practitioners who expressed the need for survivors to get support after assault resulted in this final theme, which will be drawn into two sub-topics; (1) community support and (2) words of encouragement.

##### ***Community Support***

When practitioners were asked about alternative routes a survivor could take outside the criminal justice system, there was an overwhelming response that went back to encouraging the client to take lead on the path they wanted to take. While only a few practitioners mentioned the civil suit, they understood this route could be triggering for a survivor as well. There was mention of the Rape Crisis Center YWCA Stepping Stones, while others mentioned the Children Advocacy Center specific to child sexual abuse. Respondents understood that criminal justice is "more black and white," whereas the local resource centers were able to meet the clients' needs and follow their steps while providing them with the resources to help them in their journey:

*Every survivor is different, and so is their journey. [Respondent 8]*

While there may be similarities in the acts of sexual victimization, the affects, and the outcomes look different for each survivor. Even for survivors who were victim of re-offenses the trauma and the response are different. Therefore the response after the act is different as well. One respondent spoke of the process and the uniqueness of the journey after the offense:

*Healing looks different for everybody; I don't know that a person heals one way, but instead, it is personal. Individual needs are unique. [Respondent 7]*

These data suggest there is no one journey that will help all survivors. Instead there are many possible paths, some traditional and some non-traditional. Respondents often spoke of how they redirected clients back to support centers for counseling, support groups, and advocacy work outside the justice system. Many survivors don't just lean on practitioners in the community, they also lean on the support of their loved ones.

It was important for these practitioners that survivors have alternative routes to deal with their offense. While community support stood out in the data, two alternative suggestions were made by respondents. First is the increase of women in the process for women who are victims so that they can be more comfortable in reporting. The second is more training on the reporting and justice process from the beginning, which would include a softer report and a sensitive way to handle the cases as well as follow up for the actors of the criminal justice system. In case the offender is not convicted the victims will have some form of justice or closure.

### ***Words of Encouragement***

The load that many practitioners carry when serving survivors can be heavy when advocating for survivors of sexual violence. However, these advocates and allies still wake up every morning and do it. They show their selflessness in showing up and supporting survivors every day they choose to work in this field. While this is a very heavy job, these advocates understand that showing up is not half the battle the client they serve have to endure. And although the data collected for this research are heavy, it is always good to leave on a positive note. The researcher asked respondents to give a word of advice or encouragement to these survivors that have to cope with the harm that has been inflicted on them. These words of encouragement were broken down into four sub-themes: (1) practitioners acknowledging the

harm and pain survivors endure, (2) some words of encouragement included advice on survivors taking the lead on their journey, (3) some practitioners offered advice on the next steps to take after disclosing abuse, and finally (4) other practitioners ended the data collection with a word of hope to survivors.

One of the first things that a survivor needs after disclosing is the support of that listener. With that support comes acknowledgment. Many practitioners may not be able to say they understand what that survivor is going through but they can acknowledge the offense and it is just as strong. These are two respondents' words of encouragement who chose to acknowledge survivors and their journeys are expressed below:

*I let them know how proud I am of them and how strong they are for coming forward and speaking. I acknowledge that it's not easy to do so. I am here to support you, and I know it's tough, but you did awesome. And we are here and very proud of you. [Respondent 4]*

*I always like to end every case with I am sorry that this is how I met you, but I want to thank you for letting me be a part of your care. And trust me to share your story and help you in this difficult time. [Respondent 5]*

*What happened isn't fair, it wasn't your fault, and you're doing the right thing by reaching out. Sometimes it will be harder than others, but some services can help. Please reach out. Whether you feel comfortable going to the police, I would suggest that before going to the police, go to Stepping Stones [a local rape crisis center]. Someplace that will empower you and let you know your rights as a survivor. [Respondent 7]*

Often after acknowledgement many practitioners provided their clients with resources and next steps on healthy routes to take when coping and processing their assault. It is clear there is no specific route for all survivors. Instead there are many routes that survivors take. Here are the words from a few of the practitioners on the next steps:

*Recognize and know what your triggers are. Have a journal for your journey as things are unraveling. You utilize the narrative of the therapeutic approach through the journal. Rewrite your story of understanding for the healing and help recognize that you have internal resiliency and abilities. [Respondent 3]*

*Don't be afraid to ask for help, especially when it comes to your mental health and managing that, because there are people that will 100% help. [Respondent 8]*



*I think number one is making sure they don't feel like it's their fault. I would encourage them to report, but if they choose not to, I will be understanding and recommend counseling to process some of this. I think a therapist working through it with them is very important. [Respondent 9]*

*There is no wrong way to process this. And to take the time to sit back and think about what they need in their healing journey and process. Many ask if they will be okay, and I can't definitively tell them if they will or won't be okay. So I say I know many people who were able to be okay. It may be crappy for a time, and there might be a time when it feels really good, and everything is going well. Then there may be a time when it feels like the bottom falls from under them again. I tell them I have seen people put one foot in front of the other and face the trauma of it and then be able to heal from each part. I instill hope, letting them know to go at their own pace and be okay with whatever process they go through. Showing them how to trust themselves again and not feel betrayed by themselves. [Respondent 11]*

*I would say the biggest thing is getting help at the rape crisis center. I mean just the love, care, and support, and being able to have all the information. Someone who is there to provide them with information and find the answers make processes in whatever they choose to do easier. And trying to find ways to feel empowered because this doesn't define them, and it's not who they are. There are people out there that love and support them no matter what. In reality, I could never promise that it will get better, but I've seen where it really can get better if you are surrounded by the right people and the right support. [Respondent 13]*

To allow survivors to take the lead on their journey can be very empowering. This is a practice that many of the respondents spoke of during the interviews. For a survivor to take the lead it gives the voice back in what they want to do and how they want to do it. It is not leaving them on their journey alone, but allowing them to lead while providing resources during the journey. Here are a few quotes that respondents used when encouraging survivors to take the lead on their journey:

*Listen to yourself and know yourself. What feels right to you and your journey of closure comes from within. Whatever you need to make that feel like closure, and it's not what anybody else needs or what anyone else wants to tell you, is the right thing to do. There is no right thing to do. It's whatever you choose. [Respondent 2]*

*Do what's best for you. I think often; I'm in a position where I know what's best for them, like pushing counseling, pushing them to proceed with prosecution, pushing them to go*

*through trial because I know from previous cases. Still, sometimes I catch myself saying I don't know where they are right now and need to meet them where they are. And if they are not ready for that or have no desire for that realization, they know themselves better than I do. [Respondent 10]*

Finally there are the prominent words of hope to conclude this data collection. The final two quotes are from the last respondents of this research:

*People can and do recover every day, and despite how dark their situation may seem, they can recover. They can get to where they don't think their life is over or ruined because of sexual violence or an experience. [Respondent 1]*

*Reassure them they didn't do anything wrong. Remind them of their worth because it can be empowering. I always let them know that what they are experiencing is valid; it's challenging, but many people, like myself and maybe their loved ones, are there to support them. If they feel like they don't have the support, we can work alongside one another to build that up. [Respondent 12]*

### **Summary of the Findings**

After the analysis of the data, it is clear that there are many justifiable reasons for victims' reluctance to report. After a survivor is victimized there is no specific route to take for the healing journey, there are many. Regardless of the routes it is imperative for survivors to have a support system in place to help them through the journey. This data collection showed the practitioners who work with survivors of sexual violence allow the survivors to lead in deciding on whether they want to go through the criminal justice system or find an alternative route while providing those resources in support. In this data collection there were three areas of practitioner perceptions analyzed: *how COVID-19 impacted victim advocacy, practitioner's perception of victim reluctance, and supporting survivors holistically*. The next chapter will cover the overlaps in data, limitations/recommendations, civic engagement, and final thoughts.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The researcher aimed to gain practitioners' perceptions of why victims of sexual violence are reluctant to report their victimizations, and what is the best alternative route for survivors to take post-assault if they choose not to report traditionally. The three subject areas addressed in this study were: (1) their perceptions regarding victims' reluctant to report sexual victimizations to law enforcement, (2) how the COVID pandemic impacted their victim advocacy, and (3) the support that was expressed to navigate a person's holistic journey post-assault. Although 48 practitioners were sent an email solicitation to participate in the study, only 17 prospective participants responded. Four of the practitioners had not received sexual violence disclosures, so they were not included in this study. The data were gathered from the remaining 13 practitioners. Given that most of the previous literature was gathered from survivors of sexual violence, the researchers gathered data from practitioners to avoid re-traumatization of the victims, which concluded with similar results.

Much of the research gathered was equivalent to previous literature on victims' reluctance. There is still more information to collect regarding COVID. Currently, the COVID pandemic is still an issue that both survivors and practitioners are facing. Therefore, more data can still be collected on the subject at a future time. Respondents were apt to make changes to the community approach of survivor disclosures and therefore there has already been some projects that have been created from the interviews and follow-up with the researchers and respondents. This chapter will discuss the: (1) overlaps with prior studies, (2) limitations/recommendations for future research, (3) civic engagements, and (4) final thoughts.

## Overlaps with Prior Studies

The first overlap with prior studies is related to COVID and the reluctance of survivors who have experienced sexual violence to seek help post-assault. Practitioners discussed their limitations in serving survivors in their community, which is a global issue for survivors (UN Women, 2020). Globally practitioners faced in-person services placed on hold until they were able to communicate with clients virtually. Shortly after the COVID fatigue that many respondents and clients experienced, they were finding ways to combat the valid emotions they were feeling. Many practitioners had to make changes to the way their organizations ran and policies were in place. This has not only assisted survivors in the tools they need to handle pandemics but it has also opened up new options for survivors who are not ready to talk about their assaults in person (Moyer, 2022).

Practitioners also discussed the significant changes to how they were able to serve and ensure safety for clients who disclosed abuse while COVID-19 guidelines were in place. For instance there were also survivors that feared an invasion of their privacy with going to virtual counseling, so agencies implemented privacy protected tools to ensure the most safest platforms to deliver services to clients (Richter, 2022). Practitioners worked together to make changes to policies ensuring survivors had access to the tools required to continue receiving the same support that was available to them pre-COVID.

Prior studies on victims' reluctance showed some overlap with the data collected for this research. For instance, practitioners discussed the issues related to child sexual assault. One of the primary reasons why practitioners felt that children were reluctant to report was because they knew their offenders. Researchers have found that children of sexual abuse are nine times out of

ten more likely to know their offender (Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012). Because these children typically have a relationship with their offenders, said children often find it safer to endure the abuse as opposed to disclosing it and seeking help. Just as previous literature expresses child survivors' reluctance to report, practitioners in this study provided the same information through a practical lens.

Social media can have a major influence on a person's reluctance to report; this is another concern expressed during this data collection. Many survivors will decide to go forward with reporting based on the reaction of the first person to whom they disclose the offense to (Maier, 2012; McGregor, 2000), or responses they have seen from other survivors via social media platforms (Smith, 2015). For example, if someone uses a social media platform to speak out about their assault, the responses received are often more negative than positive. If another survivor witnesses the negative feedback this, in turn, can influence them to remain silent. Therefore, social media plays a prominent role in silencing many survivors.

Victim attrition is a matter that has been discussed for the last three decades, and is still a prominent issue with victim reluctance (Beichner, 2021). Victim attrition can be dated back to 1978 when it was publicly addressed by Representative Elizabeth Holtzman who discussed the victimization of survivors after they have chosen to go through criminal justice proceedings (Beichner, 2021). Representative Holtzman spoke on how many cases associated with sexual victimizations are first reported, and later less likely to make it through the criminal justice system to charge offenders with the acts they committed. There was reluctance through all stages of the criminal justice process; reporting the victimization to the police and how many clients were deterred from the investigation. Practitioners participating in this study spoke about the self-blame, shame, and doubt many of their clients experienced when reporting to the police.

This information is consistent with the literature of survivors disclosing the events of the offense to multiple police officers and said survivors having to wait before knowing if the case would be picked up by the state's attorney (Spencer 2018). Reluctance due to the length of the process averaging around 2-3 years was another example the researcher collected through this data. And ultimately if the case was seen in the courts it was rare to make it to an offender being sentenced.

Not only was the victim attrition considered a deterrence for survivors of sexual violence, but it was also a deterrence for practitioners and their ability to protect survivors from these negative experiences. The overall concern for these practitioners was the safety and stability of their clients and many practitioners were unable to protect them while going through the criminal justice system. Ultimately, the practitioners believed that it was important to let the survivor dictate whether to call on the formal justice system process or find alternative routes.

### **Limitations/ Recommendations for Future Studies**

Although this study is critical to learning the knowledge and understanding of the practitioners who work with survivors of sexual violence, it is not without limitations. This study identified one limitation; there were only 13 participants who were able to be a part of this data collection. Due to the confidentiality guidelines, related to both practitioner and client, many of the professionals who were contacted could not be associated with this study. Although there were a total of 17 interested respondents, only 13 of them consented and were able to participate in the data collection. Despite the low response rates, it is the researcher's confidence that the respondent's time and experience in the field, the rates of survivors' disclosures, and the knowledge of the community allowed this sample to provide an accurate participant population.

Many of the practitioners in this study have worked with multiple survivors of sexual violence for years, as well as seen the outcomes of reporting to law enforcement or taking alternative routes. They have also worked with others in the community who are advocates and allies and the majority of the respondents gave similar responses on victim reluctance as well as alternative routes. These expressed responses were also in agreement with prior literature and can be a suggestion for future research.

It is suggested that future research continue to explore the possible reasons why victims are reluctant to report. Research should also continue to examine the knowledge, experience, and understanding of the practitioners who work with survivors of sexual assault as such victimizations remain prevalent in society. Unfortunately, sexual violence is one of the most intimate crimes committed against a person, but the process for charging and prosecuting the offenders is still slow. The practitioners that work with these survivors of sexual victimization can provide some of the most accurate and clarifying answers to why they are reluctant to report; practitioners can do this without putting the survivors themselves at risk of being retriggered during the data collection process. The continuance of this research will assist in finding key methods for supporting survivors and implementing a positive change to how we navigate the world of sexual victimization in the criminal justice system, while at the same time, listening to the survivors as they express what they need to find justice. The continuance of this research can also draw a greater population to explore if the findings of this data is accurate with more respondents.

Future research also should continue to observe the fluctuation in survivors' reluctance to report during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers should examine the influence the pandemic has on said survivors' decision to report and seek assistance post-assault. Both subjects have

caused great anxiety in society and have also crippled many survivors ability to seek resources and assistance. It is difficult to fully examine the anxiety survivors feel when they experience both trauma from sexual as well as from a pandemic currently so it is recommended collect data on the issue at a later time.

Simultaneously practitioners expressed concerns for survivors of sexual violence, which included concerns for their safety. Although sexual violence has already been underrepresented in the criminal justice system and in society, practitioners noted the great contrast between cases addressed and cases that have not been addressed since the start of the pandemic is an issue. Therefore further research is recommended to draw a conclusion on cases that were on hold due to the pandemic.

It is crucial to note that while these resources are available to community members, these organizations are still not being utilized to the extent that they are available before and during the outbreak of Covid. While collecting data, the researcher gained insight specific to COVID and found that resources have not been used as much during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. There for a continuance of this data would answer follow-up questions concerning survivors and the influence of COVID.

This research should also continue highlighting the resilience of the organizations when they are seeking ways to help the community despite the challenges. It is important to promote and raise awareness of these programs, and to emphasize what they do with and for the community to ensure a holistic approach toward justice and resolution.

There is much research on why survivors don't report their victimizations. However, there is little research from the perspective of the practitioners who work closely with said



survivors. There is even less research on how a global pandemic affects victim reporting. Still, future studies can provide a view into the similarities and differences in implementing best practices, and in how organizations have overcome certain obstacles when working with survivors of sexual violence.

### **Civic Engagements**

During the data collection process, there was a consistent declaration that not enough people are aware of the resources available in the community, especially since the beginning of the pandemic. Practitioners expressed the need for more community education on sexual violence as well as more crisis training for those working with victims of sexual violence as a profession. This suggestion was given with the hopes that survivors, when disclosing, begin to develop the support systems needed to successfully navigate a holistic approach to coping with the trauma they have experienced. Practitioners described community support as being imperative to a survivor's journey; this is in addition to allowing the survivors to take the lead on their path to coping with the offense.

The researcher was able to connect with respondents and develop community education crucial to supporting survivors. This education was built to help other organizations have a victim-centered response to sexual violence disclosures. Multiple collaborations have been created since the beginning of this data collection to generate more community-based education in order to support and serve survivors.

After interviews were completed correspondences were made to practitioners that expressed wanting to do more to support survivors on a community level. There was discussion on how many organizations know about the local rape crisis center, YWCA Stepping Stones, but

are not familiar with the tools they use to support survivors. Through the correspondence three different organizations were able to come together to build education and teach responders in the local Emergency Department on how to normalize supporting survivors. In this curriculum these organizations taught on how best practices for supporting survivors, best communications practices for receiving disclosures and the best methods in responding. This education curriculum also debunked the myth related to supporting and caring for survivors in the Emergency Department with the hopes that more medical responders will be comfortable with supporting survivors in their time of need.

Another opportunity that arose was a collaboration with faith-based organizations to train their leaders on proper responses to members who have disclosed to them. Although this project is still a work in progress, it is with great hopes that spiritual leaders will learn how to properly respond to disclosures and bring trained staff to work alongside them so the members of their organization can experience a positive, holistic journey when coping with their trauma.

### **Final Thoughts**

This study examined the victims' reluctance to report their victimization through the Human/Health services community in McLean County, Illinois. The practitioners in this study identified many obstacles that survivors of sexual violence face when attempting to navigate the process of reporting sexual victimization, or of finding closure through an alternative process. There were three major themes that were identified in this data. The three themes included; 1) victim reluctance 2) COVID 3) survivor support. Overall practitioners perceived the justice system process to be two-fold for victims of sexual violence, and said practitioners were able to

provide alternative routes for survivors so they may gain successful and holistic closure after victimization.

All 13 of the practitioners interviewed for this study strongly expressed how important it was to follow the path that the survivors of sexual violence want to navigate. The trauma that follows sexual victimization is a difficult journey to navigate and can cause many negative effects if it is not processed healthily. The practitioners in these Human/Health services communities have expressed their willingness to not only assist survivors of sexual violence by getting them the resources they need, but to also walk alongside them should the survivors choose the justice system route. It was common for practitioners to allow the survivor to lead while they, the practitioners, validated them throughout the journey of choice. While interviewing these practitioners, the support given to sexual assault survivors was evident, as was the persistence needed to continue educating the community on the available resources.

This study also found that many practitioners, when working with survivors of sexual violence, encouraged them to seek assistance to cope with the trauma of sexual victimization. They understood the survivor's reluctance and respected their decisions not to report their victimizations. Many practitioners also encouraged survivors to seek counseling no matter the decisions made on reporting to law enforcement. Practitioners discussed the availability of counseling while working with other counselors in the community, specific to sexual victimizations at the local sexual assault resource center, such as YWCA Stepping Stones.

This research had an overall positive amount of data collected to support a community and to determine a holistic approach for survivors. At the same time, it is also important to note that there are still some obstacles survivors of sexual violence will face when pursuing closure

from victimizations. Practitioners provide and the resources that help survivors of sexual violence. This community has a great community-based approach to supporting these individuals, families, and groups affected by sexual violence.

While it has been suggested that the criminal justice system work with practitioners whose focus is sexual victimization, society is still far from providing true justice to survivors. Practitioners who work with survivors of sexual violence have shown that when survivors have a strong support system, they are successfully provided with the tools they need to find closure from the offense. Therefore, it is practical to follow the survivor's lead and to promote counseling and direct support throughout their journey so as to ensure they have a say in how justice is found for them. This includes a say into whether they go through the justice system or through an alternative route.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT



### Participant Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Nastasha Powers, Graduate Student (Dr. Dawn Beichner) from the Illinois State University, School of Criminal Justice. The purpose of this study is to understand the different reasons why victims of intimate crimes choose not to report their offenses to police authorities through the voices of community practitioners.

#### **Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because you are at least 18 years of age or older, and have worked with those in the community that have been victims of an intimate violent crime/crimes. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be contacted to set up an interview. Interviews are available in person or over the phone and will remain confidential. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately one hour. This time will be broken up based on the needs of your availability.

#### **Are any risks expected?**

It is understanding that speaking on the violence of those that you have served can be triggering and cause vicarious trauma. To reduce this risk we will continuously check in with you to make sure you are okay to continue the interview as well as take breaks if needed.

#### **Will your information be protected?**

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. All contact information as well as any recordings, based on your consent, will be placed on a password protected flash drive. To avoid any conflict of interest with community organizations based on practitioner's views, information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. This research can be used for further research to better serve survivors as well as could be used for presentations to educate the community on how to increase the confidence and support of survivors when violent acts have occurred.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

#### **Could your responses be used for other research?**

We will not use any identifiable information from you in future research, but your deidentified information could be used for future research without additional consent from you.

#### **Who will benefit from this study?**

Based on this research we will be able to provide survivors of intimate violence more opportunities of justice. We will be able to pilot plans that will work with many community practitioners to better serve survivors. It is also hopeful that this will be a voice to police and authorities on ways to help survivors gain confidence in reporting crimes to the justice system.

## APPENDIX B: YWCA LETTER OF SUPPORT



YWCA McLean County, inspired by the initiative and subject matter of Nastasha Powers' graduate work research, is endorsing her in her thesis pursuit through the Criminal Justice Sciences Department at Illinois State University.

This research study examines the perception of why survivors of sexual assault are reluctant to report their victimizations. Interviews to be conducted with community agencies could potentially lead to future funding for survivor-centered programming as well as assisting agencies like YWCA Stepping Stones in better serving survivors and helping them to gain closure from their victimizations.

YWCA McLean County supports this endeavor and encourages community partners to respond and participate in interviews with Nastasha with a goal of coordinating a community response for this topic and developing avenues of awareness and funding for the future.

Any questions regarding YWCA McLean County's support of this project can be directed to our Director of Stepping Stones, Anne Taylor, at [ataylor@ywcamclean.org](mailto:ataylor@ywcamclean.org).

We appreciate your perspective, and that of our entire community; only together can we keep moving one step closer to eliminating racism and empowering women.

Sincerely,

Anne Taylor, Director of Stepping Stones, YWCA McLean County

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anne Taylor".

Liz German, President/CEO YWCA McLean County

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Liz German".

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your job/affiliation title?
2. How long have you been in this position?
3. When it comes to your affiliation with the community what specific groups does your organization serve?
4. What made you go into the field?
5. How often do you work with survivors of sexual violence?
6. What was the most recent disclosure you received?
7. How often (estimation) do you get disclosures of those you service being victims of sexual violence?
8. Have you had any survivor disclosure that asked for advice on next steps after an assault?
  - a. What was your response?
9. Have you had any disclosures that have asked you to go with them to the police to report their victimizations?
10. Have you had any one ask you to report their victimization on their behalf?
11. Have you had any survivor disclosures that didn't want to report their offenses to the police?
  - a. What was your response?
  - b. How did you validate the survivor?
12. What is your perception on why some survivors of sexual violence choose not to report their victimizations?
13. Are there specific reasons why survivors that you have worked with did choose to go to the police that you can recall?
14. Based on your knowledge and expertise in this area, are survivors reluctant to report their victimizations because of the police?
  - a. Based on your knowledge/expertise what are the most common reasons that survivors do not report to police?
15. Does your organization often work closely with the police department to serve your clients?
  - a. If so in what capacity?
16. Has your organization ever worked on projects with your police department to serve the community?
17. In your opinion, should there be alternative routes to assist survivors without formally processing their victimizations via the justice system? (Probe to get the respondent to explain these alternatives to formal reporting)
18. Is there any advice you can give to a survivor to find closure —irrespective of whether they reported their victimization to police?
19. Do you find that survivors who do report their victimizations to police have more closure or healing?
  - a. Please explain the reason for your response?

### COVID:

20. Since March of 2020 what were some of the concerns you faced as a practitioner that works with and in the community?
21. What were your concerns regarding survivors of sexual violence
22. What were some of the obstacles that your organization faced in meeting the needs of the clients you service?