

# Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police

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## Abstract

One in four women will experience sexual assault in their lifetime. Although less than 5% of sexual assaults are reported to law enforcement, one in five cases reported to police are deemed baseless (by police) and therefore coded as “unfounded.” Police officers are in a unique position to act as gatekeepers for justice in sexual assault cases, given their responsibility to investigate sexual assault reports. However, high rates of unfounded sexual assaults reveal that dismissing sexual violence has become common practice amongst the police. Much of the research on unfounded sexual assault is based on police perceptions of the sexual assault, as indicated in police reports. Women’s perspectives about their experiences with police are not represented in research. This qualitative study explored women’s experiences when their sexual assault report was disbelieved by the police. Data collection included open-ended and semi-structured interviews with 23 sexual assault survivors. Interviews covered four areas including the sexual assault, the experience with the police, the experience of not being believed, and the impact on their health and well-being. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and entered into NVIVO for analysis. Data

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were analyzed using Colaizzi's analytic method, resulting in the identification of four themes, including, (a) vulnerability, (b) drug and alcohol use during the assault, (c) police insensitivity, and (d) police process. The women in this study who experienced a sexual assault and reported the assault to police were hopeful that police would help them and justice would be served. Instead, these women were faced with insensitivity, blaming questions, lack of investigation, and lack of follow-up from the police, all of which contributed to not being believed by the institutions designed to protect them. The findings from this research demonstrate that police officers must gain a deeper understanding of trauma and sensitive communication with survivors of sexual assault.

### **Keywords**

sexual assault, adult victims, reporting/disclosure, support seeking

### **Introduction**

Sexual assault is defined as any unwanted sexual contact, including sexual grabbing, kissing, fondling, and rape (Criminal Code of Canada—Section 271—Sexual Assault, 2018). It is a gendered crime that is disproportionately perpetrated by males against females (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2015) and predicated on power and control (Gravelin et al., 2019). The prevalence of sexual violence varies globally. In North America, one in four women will experience sexual assault, rape, or attempted rape in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). Despite the high prevalence of sexual assault, it remains one of the most underreported crimes to law enforcement, with less than 5% of sexual assaults reported to authorities (Ministry of the Status of Women, 2015; Perreault, 2015). Women cite numerous reasons for lack of reporting to police, including shame, not wanting to get in trouble, fear of disbelief from law enforcement, and the use of substances at the time of the assault (Spencer et al., 2017). Among women who do report their sexual assaults, a high percentage are deemed by police to be false or baseless and therefore coded as “unfounded” (Johnson, 2017). Unfounded differs from unsubstantiated in that unsubstantiated refers to a failure to prove that a sexual assault occurred, while unfounded claims essentially consider the report as a lie (Rotenberg, 2017).

In 2017, the *Globe and Mail* published a report identifying exceptionally high rates of sexual assault cases being coded as “unfounded” by the police. Findings from Canadian national policing data indicate that one in five cases (i.e., 20%) of sexual assault reports to police are deemed baseless (Doolittle

et al., 2017). However, the high rates of unfounded are inconsistent with findings from a meta-analysis of seven studies of confirmed false reports of sexual assault to police (Ferguson & Malouff, 2016). They reported that the rate of false reports was approximately 5% (0.52 [95% CI .030, .089], which is considerably lower than the Canadian average for unfounded sexual assault classifications. Sexual assault appears to be coded as unfounded with relative regularity and seems to be ubiquitous within law enforcement discourse. High rates of unfounded sexual assaults reveal that dismissing sexual violence has become common practice amongst police in Canada (Balkissoon, 2017). In addition, it reveals the problematic nature and mishandling of thousands of women who reported their sexual assault and how this may further contribute to secondary victimization (Venema, 2016), distrust in legal institutions (Quinlan, 2016), trauma, (Haskell & Randall, 2019), and adverse health outcomes (Conroy & Scassa, 2016).

In response to the exceptionally high rates of unfounded cases, the classification of “unfounded” was removed from the Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics (UCRS) in 2018 (The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2018). Despite the positive change in removing the classification, caution is required in assuming that the underlying issues associated with unbounding (e.g., not being believed) have been resolved. As societal myths favor the belief that many women lie about the assault (Weiser, 2017) and that rape only occurs to women who choose to live risky or chaotic lifestyles (Women’s Law Project, 2013), removing the code does not translate to changed beliefs. The widespread societal myths impact police response and investigation of sexual assault (Women’s Law Project, 2013). According to Statistics Canada, between 2009 and 2015, less than half (43%) of sexual assault reports to police resulted in charges (Conroy & Scassa, 2016; Rotenberg, 2017) and in the United States, only 4.6% of sexual assault reports lead to an arrest (RAINN, 2020). Given that the role of law enforcement is to serve and protect citizens, a failure to deliver justice for sexual assault survivors has resulted in considerable public interest.

Police officers are in a unique position to act as gatekeepers for justice in sexual assault cases, given their responsibility to investigate sexual assault reports (Shaw et al., 2017). Despite the role of police officers to investigate and present evidence to a prosecutor (Venema, 2016), research suggests that police officers often make decisions about the truthfulness of sexual assault reports prior to a thorough investigation (Maddox et al., 2012). Shaw et al. (2017) found that increased victim blame by police during the investigation of sexual assault resulted in fewer investigative steps and decreased the likelihood of the case proceeding to prosecution. Feminist research has explored the ongoing and pervasive systemic bias in institutional responses to sexual

violence and established unequivocally that sexual violence is facilitated by victim-blaming, rape culture, and silence (Friedman & Valenti, 2009; Harding, 2015). The negative response from police officers following a sexual assault disclosure is a risk factor for increased psychopathology among survivors of sexual assault (Dworkin et al., 2019). Social reactions following sexual assault disclosure are perceived by survivors in numerous ways and are contingent on their expectations, their level of comfort, and the long-term impact of the reaction (Dworkin et al., 2018). Overall, much of the research literature on unfounded sexual assault is based on police perceptions of the sexual assault, as indicated in police reports (O'Neal et al., 2014). Women's voices and perspectives about their experiences with police are not represented in research. Such information would broaden our understanding of women's experience with reporting sexual assaults that were unfounded/not believed by police. Having an improved understanding from women's perspectives may assist police to better understand the experience and clinical presentation of trauma. As such, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore women's experiences when their sexual assault was disbelieved by the police.

## Method

Qualitative research informed by feminist principles and respect for those who have experienced assault was used to explore the lived experiences of women who have had their sexual assault cases deemed as unfounded or not believed by police. Descriptive phenomenology was chosen based on the inherent assumption that knowledge is embedded in experience. As such, phenomenological inquiry seeks to describe, interpret, and understand the meaning attributed to lived experience (Patton, 1990; Van Manen, 1990).

Participants who self-identified that their sexual assault was not believed by the police were assessed for eligibility. Participants meeting the following inclusion criteria were eligible to participate: (a) English-speaking female, (b) had experienced a sexual assault and reported it to the police, (c) self-reported that the sexual assault was unfounded or not believed by the police, and (d) ability to participate in interviews in the city or surrounding district of the study. Participants were excluded from the research if (a) police laid charges and the perpetrator was taken to court, (b) the survivor of the sexual assault did not wish to pursue charges, (c) the survivor self-identified an unconfirmed sexual assault (e.g., felt something happened but was unclear of events or memories), and/or (d) the survivor was unable to provide consent to the research.

## *Recruitment*

Recruitment for this research occurred between April 13, 2019 and July 21, 2019. Participant recruitment used three strategies including: (a) engagement with community service providers to share research information with clients, (b) advertisement via posters in various organizations that serve women and social media advertising through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram used to publicize the research opportunity and invite individuals to contact the research team. The posters and social media advertising asked the following questions: (a) Have you reported a sexual assault to the police, but you were not believed? (b) Would you like an opportunity to tell your story? (c) Would you like to offer suggestions for change? The majority of research participants contacted the research team to participate after seeing the Facebook advertisement. A research assistant screened prospective participants over the phone for inclusion to ensure participants were eligible for the research.

## *Data Collection*

Data collection included one to two face-to-face ( $n = 21$ ) or telephone interviews ( $n = 2$ ) with sexual assault survivors. Two members of the research team were present throughout all interviews. At the outset of the meeting, participants were rescreened for inclusion in the research. Upon confirmation of eligibility, the researcher provided an information letter about the purpose of the research, risks of participation, confidentiality, the voluntary nature of the study, and the right to withdraw at any time. This information letter was verbally reviewed with participants, and consent to participate and be audio-recorded was subsequently signed before initiation of the interview.

Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, and included questions in four distinct areas. Participants were asked questions related to their sexual assault (i.e., In as much detail as you are comfortable sharing, can you tell me about the sexual assault?); their experience with the police (i.e., What do you recall about your interaction with the police when you were making a report that you were sexually assaulted?); the experience of not being believed by the police (i.e., When you learned that your sexual assault case was deemed unfounded or not believed, how did this impact you?); and lastly, the impact of the sexual assault experience on their health and well-being (Do you feel that the disbelief about the sexual assault from the police affected your health and well-being in any way? Please explain.). In addition to the interviews, a demographic questionnaire was completed. The demographic data included questions regarding the characteristics of the participant, the perpetrator, the assault, and interactions with the police.

The average length of the interviews was 53 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following each interview, participants were provided with a \$50 honorarium as a token of appreciation for their time and with a list of support services available in the community and the district. Two participants required a break during the interview due to the emotional magnitude of the discussion, with support provided by counselors in the agency where the interviews took place. Following the counselor's intervention, both participants requested to continue.

## **Data Analysis**

Transcripts were entered into NVIVO version 11 for analysis. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step analytic method. This approach included an extensive review of transcribed data by all members of the research team. Subsequently, three researchers (JMO, KM, AM), completed the remaining steps of the analysis including extraction of significant phrases, a constant comparative method, and a comprehensive thematic description of the accounts of participants. The remaining two members of the research team (LC and AH) reviewed all themes and the data collected within each theme to verify the findings. Discussion occurred between all members of the research team to ensure the interpretation of findings was accurately analyzed; no changes to the initial thematic analysis were deemed necessary. Before finalizing the data, participants were offered a two-week timeframe to review the thematic findings as a means of verifying the data or expanding on the findings. None of the participants provided additional feedback to the analysis.

## **Results**

### **Sample**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 37 participants that experienced a sexual assault and expressed interest in participating in the study. During the course of the interviews, 13 participants disclosed data that met an exclusion criterion for the research, despite having been screened, and one participant was unable to provide consent (intoxication). As such, 14 women were subsequently excluded from the research and their data was removed from the analysis due to (a) the police laid charges and the perpetrator went to court ( $n = 3$ ), (b) the survivor did not wish to pursue charges ( $n = 6$ ), (c) the survivor self-identified an unconfirmed sexual assault ( $n = 2$ ), (d) the survivor was unable to provide consent to the research ( $n = 1$ ) and (e) the survivor did not report to the police ( $n = 2$ ). The final sample included 23 women who

experienced sexual assault, reported the sexual assault to the police, and no further action was taken by the police to substantiate the report.

The age of participants at the time of interview ranged from 22 to 57 years, with the majority being between 22 and 43 years of age. The majority of participants were single ( $n = 15$ ; 65%), unemployed ( $n = 13$ ; 57%) and reported an annual income of less than \$19,999 ( $n = 16$ ; 69%). The sexual orientation of participants was primarily heterosexual ( $n = 19$ ; 83%). Approximately half of the participants self-identified as being Caucasian ( $n = 12$ ; 52%) or indigenous ( $n = 11$ ; 48%).

The majority of women in the study ( $n = 15$ ; 65%) reported knowing the perpetrator of the assault (intimate partner, family member, friend/acquaintance), while 8 (35%) of the perpetrators were strangers. Drugs and alcohol were a factor in many of the sexual assaults, with 57% ( $n = 13$ ) of perpetrators having consumed alcohol and 39% having used drugs ( $n = 9$ ). Alcohol and drug use was common among survivors, at the time of the assault. Survivors reported the use of alcohol (only;  $n = 8$ ), a combination of alcohol and drugs ( $n = 3$ ) or drugs only ( $n = 1$ ). Three additional participants reported clear memories of the perpetrator forcing them to consume alcohol and/or drugs prior to the assault. In addition, five participants (21.7%) disclosed feeling that they were drugged by the perpetrator prior to being sexually assaulted based on their body's reaction and lack of memory. The participant's response to the perpetrator during the sexual assault varied. Almost half of women indicated that they physically ( $n = 9$ ; 39%) and/or verbally ( $n = 11$ ; 48%) resisted the attack, while half did not verbally or physically resist their perpetrator.

Many women experienced multiple types of sexual victimization across the lifespan, with 74% of women indicating that they had experienced additional sexual assaults that were never reported to the police both before and after the reported sexual assault. The majority of the women identified that they did not receive follow-up from the police (83%; e.g., return call, feedback on investigation, case outcome, community services information), and 100% of women experienced mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], drug and alcohol use).

## Findings

The thematic analysis revealed four themes. These themes included: (a) vulnerability, (b) drug and alcohol use during the assault, (c) police insensitivity, and (d) police process. These themes are explored with direct statements from participants (women). A figure has been added (see Figure 1) to demonstrate the emergence of the police process theme. This theme is presented as an example of the analysis.

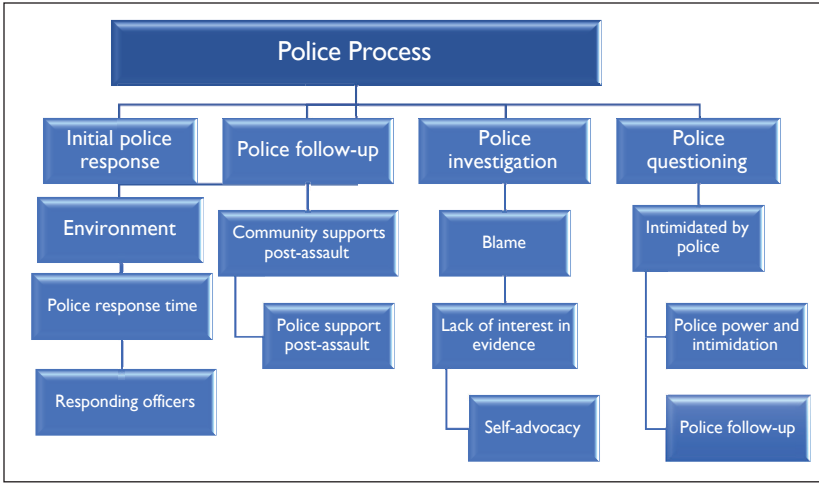


Figure 1. Police process theme.

### Vulnerability

*Early life experiences.* Although not all women experienced the same risk factors in their lives, their histories included numerous vulnerabilities that may have contributed to both their victimization and disbelief from the police. Several women spoke of histories of both physical and sexual abuse as children from family members who should have been protecting them. For some, this early victimization was normalized as they experienced frequent physical injuries, sexual touching, or penetration. One participant spoke of the sexual assault and recalled issues from her childhood, “my issues with sexual assault didn’t start that day; they started when I was 3.” These early adverse experiences lead to trauma and mental health concerns throughout their lives. A participant who was sexually assaulted at the age of 15, which resulted in a pregnancy, disclosed her history and the impact it had on her future:

My dad was extensively abusive, and I say extensively because it was everything that you read in a book was everything that happened to me, myself, my brother and my sister, but I was the oldest, so I got most of it. We were isolated, really isolated. We lived in a really small town. I was severely depressed, and like now, I know that I had gone through a lot of trauma, and I wasn’t dealing with it, it was just resonating inside of me, which fucked me up really bad.

Other participants spoke of situations as children that may have increased their vulnerability, which included a lack of family support, mental health



concerns such as PTSD, depression and anxiety, foster care involvement, and early exposure to drugs and alcohol use and abuse. Maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol or drug use were often used to mitigate pain in their lives. Many used drugs and alcohol on occasion, while others developed addictions that carried forward through the period during which they were sexually assaulted. A victim of human trafficking disclosed the dark period of her life when she was abducted and repeatedly assaulted by numerous men at the age of 15:

I was an intravenous drug user. So, I got on the highway. I was already having sex. I was promiscuous because I was just so whatever, fuck my body. Madam started using me... my body, pimping me out. I was 15, I was already rebelling and everything, so I was like fuck it, I had enough dope on me, and I said ok, let's go. So, we hitchhiked... I was already having sex, running around, going to bars, my life was so busy. I don't remember all the bad things, because there were no really good times.

*Risk factors during the assault.* In addition to childhood adversity, participants in this research had numerous other risk factors at the time of the sexual assault. Some lived with mental health concerns, others were homeless, and many experienced social isolation. In addition, participants spoke of using drugs and alcohol at times, either socially or as a means of coping. Although most participants were not addicted to substances at the time of their sexual assault, the use of drugs and alcohol may have increased their vulnerability due to their engagement in high-risk behaviors. Several participants were involved in unhealthy relationships, many of which were marked by intimate partner violence. Likewise, many participants disclosed being victims of numerous sexual assaults throughout their lifetimes, thereby highlighting the high level of vulnerability due to prior and/or repeated violence among the participants in this sample. "My relationships have been really abusive... .Everybody just wants to take advantage of me." Another woman disclosed repeated exposure to victimization while residing in a homeless shelter:

The other [man] I met by acquaintance, and he was also a client at the [homeless shelter], so then there were a couple [sexual assaults] in between. But the last one, we were actually partners for a bit, and then we broke up, and got back together, then broke up and got back together, it was a cycle. He knew my status [HIV], and he always threatened if you ever leave me, baby, I will go to the police and tell them you didn't tell me.

The vulnerability of participants instilled a sense of "worthlessness" in them that made them believe that others were justified in victimizing them or

in dismissing them altogether. A woman who had a history in the sex trade was violently gang-raped and left tied up on the street. She was very emotional when speaking of the fact that she believed her vulnerability contributed to the dismissal she experienced from strangers who observed her while driving past:

When I got my composure, I guess if you can have any composure when your dignity is ripped from you, and you are left like that for the world to see, [I thought], somebody did this to me and not one person stopped to say are you ok?

It is evident from the reports of participants in this research that despite their strength and resilience to persevere through adversity throughout their lives, they had numerous vulnerabilities that left them exposed to violence and easily dismissed by others.

### *Drug and Alcohol Use During Assault*

Many participants disclosed that the sexual assault occurred at a time when they were consuming alcohol or using drugs such as marijuana. They expressed that they began the evening with the intention of either socializing with a group or casually drinking with the man that eventually perpetrated the sexual assault. Although they did not intend on drinking to the point of intoxication, some identified consuming “a bit” more than they intended, or feeling tired from their use and needing to lie down. Many of the women expressed having impaired senses and decreased control resulting from substance use, and during these times, they were taken advantage of by the perpetrators of the assaults. One participant disclosed her traumatic experience and inability to fight back:

By that time, they [perpetrators] had gotten two beer into me, I knew something really bad was going to happen, and it did. I ended up pinned by my arms across the passenger guys lap while the other one was trying to get my tight jeans off. I was trying to fight and struggle, but you know with two guys holding you down on the seat, what are you going to do right.

*Self-blame.* The willing use of alcohol and drugs was a factor in women feeling at fault for the sexual assault, resulting in self-blame. For some women, drug and alcohol consumption clouded their memories and precipitated feelings of self-blame. One participant who stated that she rarely drinks alcohol described her feelings resulting from her use of alcohol and lack of memory:

To be honest, when I first woke up I didn't even know if what [the perpetrator] was saying was true right like I felt really ashamed when I was walking to [a friend's house], and a part of me thought that I did just get really drunk and acted like a slut I guess.

Other participants described a "script" that ran in their minds about who they were as a person and why they deserved to be assaulted. For example, indigenous women described feeling judged for the color of their skin; others felt targeted due to their lifestyle choices. "You know when you are assaulted, you are told you can't tell right. My inner child kind of came out at the time as well, and fear. Anyways I just said to him [friend], it's my fault... I was drinking." As a result, these women often took responsibility for the sexual assault as they felt they allowed themselves to be in vulnerable positions by using drugs or alcohol.

*Drugged.* Some of the participants expressed that they believed they had been drugged by the perpetrator immediately preceding the sexual assault. For some, the perpetrator forcibly injected them with drugs, particularly among those that were victims of human trafficking. For others, they believe the perpetrator drugged them based on the uncharacteristic response to a small amount of alcohol. "I remember getting extremely drunk very fast, I had a high tolerance to alcohol, and at that point, I had two beers, and then I was blackout drunk." Several participants disclosed an atmosphere that did not initially set off any red flags. The women were in a social situation, casually drinking when the perpetrator of the assault offered them a beer or alcoholic beverage. Immediately after consuming a small amount of the drink, women experienced a rapid response that felt as though they were very intoxicated. Several women described the feeling as being "paralyzed." "I felt like I was trying to move, but I couldn't." Women expressed feeling a loss of control over their bodies, an inability to speak coherently, and loss of memory or "fogginess" in their thoughts that left them vulnerable to victimization. A participant who went to a local bar to have a drink recalled her experience of sexual assault and loss of control from being drugged:

They were laughing and joking with me, and I thought I was in a good place, no alarms went off. There were people around and such, and it was a busy parking lot. Anyways they gave me a can of beer, and unbeknownst to me it had date rape drug in it. They put me in the back of the car; I barely remember this part, but I must have been malleable because they put me in the car, and, like my brain was awake, but my body wasn't.

Following this violent sexual assault by multiple perpetrators, this woman was left in an industrial dumpster and did not wake up for 12 hours.

## *Police Insensitivity*

Many described that making a report to the police was challenging due to the shame, vulnerability, and exposure of a disclosure. All of the participants expressed feelings of discomfort with the police and felt that they were burdening them by making a sexual assault report. Women expressed that the police appeared as though they did not want to be there, that their time was being wasted, and the report was an inconvenience to them. One woman expressed her feelings when she reported the assault to the police:

They just seemed like they didn't want to be there; they just didn't care enough. I felt like I was burdening them and wasting their time. It was a really unsettling, upsetting, to be honest, and I can remember saying to them like is something going to happen here? Is he going to be charged? Is he going to go to jail?

Participants described the communication from the police as mechanical, insensitive, lacking empathy, and lacking compassion. "I don't know, I almost felt naked because just the way his demeanor was with me like he showed no compassion at all and I felt like I was being blamed for what happened." Many participants perceived the insensitivity from the police was directly attributed to their background, lifestyle, or risk factors in their lives. Some women were known to the police due to previous criminal history or association with others with criminal histories; others were involved in the sex trade or were a known exotic dancer. Some women were residents of a homeless shelter, others had mental health concerns, and some were using drugs or alcohol. One participant expressed that her background may have contributed to the insensitivity from the police officers:

I feel they [police] have a pre-existing opinion of me, so they are not going to help me, they don't care what happens to me because to them I am just a junky. They don't know anything about what has happened to me or what I have gone through or what I have accomplished or anything. They just know ok drug user affiliated with this person, and so they don't treat me like they would a person who was not a drug addict, I guess.

Women perceived these factors contributed to the insensitivity of the police and their credibility as survivors. This was exemplified in the questions that were asked, the body language, and the dismissive attitude of some of the police officers. One participant stated that she felt the police officers judged her appearance. She stated, maybe they "thought I was too fat and ugly to be raped." Another woman disclosed that having a condom in her purse was used against her because she was prepared for sex and therefore was perceived to

be a willing participant. The response of the police made women question their credibility, for example, "because nobody believes a drug addict." A woman who was sexually assaulted and sodomized in an alley disclosed the insensitivity of the police when she reported the assault to them:

When the police officers came, they had said to me, "Hey, weren't you a stripper?" Because I did do exotic dancing for two years when I was 23–25, and I said yeah. They said, well, ok, so what were you doing in a known drug area at 5 o'clock in the morning? I said I don't know. I was just walking. And they were like hmmm, you were just walking? And I said yeah, and they said, what did you think was going to happen?

The overwhelming message that participants disclosed throughout all interviews is the sense that the police judged them and, therefore, did not believe them. This led to an insensitive approach when participants reported that they had been sexually assaulted. It is this approach by the police and comments made regarding participants' characteristics or behaviors that contributed to the sense that police were lacking sensitivity and compassion for the victims of assault.

### **Police Process**

*Initial police response.* Participants disclosed aspects of the initial response from the police at the time of a sexual assault report. The majority of women made the report to the police in various locations such as a hotel, home, hospital, homeless shelter, or in the back of a police car. Only a few women made their reports directly at the police station and were video recorded. The initial environment and response of the officers were perceived as intimidating. Responding officers were typically two males in uniform that stood while the victim was seated, making their report. The majority of the initial interactions were relatively short in duration, "It seemed pretty short like it seemed like 10 minutes if that." At such a pivotal and traumatic time in the women's lives, most women were surprised at the short duration of the report, often indicating that this felt dismissive. One woman described the feelings that the initial interaction with the police evoked in her, "They were in their uniforms [police officers], it was very intimidating; it wasn't women that's for sure. Two men standing over me right, and in my head, they were very large, and I was very small."

*Police investigation.* Most participants reported the sexual assault to the police in an attempt to seek justice and prevent the victimization of other women. When the report was initiated, participants expected the police to complete a full investigation and eventually charge the perpetrator for their

crime. Contrary to their expectations, women expressed that they quickly felt that they were not being believed and were dismissed by the police, thereby inhibiting an investigation; “they didn't want to hear me, I was just told stop lying, quit making up stories.” Overall, women disclosed that there was a lack of investigation into their assaults. For many, video recording of the victim statement was inhibited as the report did not occur at the police station. Although some officers wrote the report in a notebook, several participants indicated that their report was either not documented in the notebook at all, or the police officer began taking notes and then stopped during the woman's recalling of the events. When documentation was absent, women felt that they were not taken seriously or that they were not being believed. Women perceived that the approach of the officers reflected that police decisions were made regarding the case outcome before the investigation was completed.

Furthermore, participants expressed that during the course of the investigation they felt as though they were treated like perpetrators, not victims. They disclosed being “warned” about making false reports and were told that reporting a sexual assault was a “heavy accusation” to make as though police were concerned that their quest for justice could negatively impact the perpetrators' lives. “That's where the question came in, did you do it and just regret it? They were like; it's very serious if you make a false report. I thought well it's very serious that I just got assaulted.”

The lack of investigation was also exhibited through sexual assault reports being transferred numerous times to different police officers or jurisdictions, lack of recommendations to complete rape kits, lack of interviews of others who were present at the time of the assaults, and the absence of evidence collection. One woman who was sexually assaulted and left “hogtied” on the side of a busy street, pleaded with the police and health care staff to investigate:

I was drugged, and I woke up, and I can feel men on me, and I can feel the pain of being ripped apart, but I don't know who they were. Take some tests, right? DNA of some sort. I can still smell the man's sweat on me, so obviously there is something there.

Participants disclosed that they provided the police with numerous points of investigation as if it were necessary for them to produce the evidence to corroborate their claims. Despite urging police to follow-up on the information they provided, they indicated that there were few if any investigative steps taken, leaving them feeling as though they were a burden and unworthy of redress. “They kept not calling me back, and I also told them about witnesses and messages of him apologizing to me and stuff.” One woman urged

the police to investigate and provided them with everything she could to assist in collecting evidence and attaining justice:

He [police officer] kind of looked at me like are you f'n serious? And I didn't have my voice at the time. I didn't know how to explain it properly, I think. And he said, well they can't do much more of an investigation. And I said well, what about the cameras that were outside the bar? He said they were inconclusive because they were too grainy, and it was at night. I said, well, did you see me in the video? He said, yeah, it looked like you were compliant, and you went willingly into the vehicle. I said, did you get the license plate or the description? They said no, it was too grainy and we couldn't make out what happened. So, then I kind of lost faith in the system right there.

The perceived lack of investigation of sexual assaults left women feeling helpless and revictimized by the police and altered their perceptions of justice. However, some women expressed their ability to self-advocate and not accept the disbelief that they were experiencing. They stood up for themselves, they questioned the police response, they identified discrimination, and they helped other women. The powerful words of one woman who felt dismissed by the police articulate strength through adversity:

I want people to know that I'm not some stupid, uneducated, idiot person who had this coming. No, I am not! I am a person. This is my face, this is my name, and this is my story. Listen to me. I am a survivor.

*Police questioning.* All of the participants recalled specific questions that the police asked them regarding the sexual assaults. Although there were likely numerous questions asked, the questions that stood out for participants were the questions that were condescending, blaming, or judgmental. In addition, the approach from the police had an impact on participants. One participant reflected on the questions she was asked and expressed her discomfort with the approach of the officers, "it was more like his tone and the way he asked." Some women expressed feeling blamed for putting themselves in vulnerable positions, not fighting back, or not preventing assaults from occurring in the first place. For example, a woman with HIV was questioned by the police about her health status, and the comments from the police made her feel blamed, "Maybe if you would have told him [about HIV] this wouldn't have happened." Participants recalled negative questions with considerable clarity. These included questions such as, were you doing drugs? How much money did you owe them? What were you wearing? Did you just regret losing your virginity to this guy? or What did you think was going to happen? Several participants spoke of the long-term impact of the insensitive

questions the police asked of them. Some women disclosed that they were interrogated, which led to feelings of guilt when they were the victims. "I felt like it was an interrogation. I'm like oh my God am I the perpetrator? My gut felt like I'm being bullied, well not bullied but re-victimized almost. It was apparent that the expectations for help and support from the police following a traumatic event were unmet and instead replaced with a lack of compassion and secondary victimization.

Although some women were told directly by the police that they did not believe them, others indicated that there was a pivotal moment in the process with the police that led them to believe that the police were dismissing their accounts. For some women, this moment occurred when the police stopped writing things down; for others, it was when a particularly offensive or doubtful question was asked, or a comment was made regarding their character. One woman who was questioned about how she knew that she was being touched with a man's penis disclosed this interaction with police as a pivotal moment where she realized she was not being believed:

I was hurt. It was like why aren't you listening to me, why aren't you hearing what I'm telling you. I mean, he was sitting there fondling my breast while my hand was sliding up and down on his whatever. Like I don't understand why they don't listen? I don't understand why you are pouring your heart and soul out to this guy [police], and all you want is help, and he's like how do you know that's true? How do you know that happened? And I was like because I was fucking there, that's how I know it happened.

*Lack of police follow-up.* For the women in this research, the sexual assault was a life-altering experience in their lives. Reaching out to the police for help was a means of healing or closure for something that happened outside of their control. As such, follow-up from the police was of high importance. However, participants consistently disclosed a lack of follow-up from the police. For example, a participant in her 40's who experienced a sexual assault in her teens stated, "they said they would call. Still waiting." This experience was consistent with the majority of women. They spoke of never receiving a call back from the police following their report, not knowing if the perpetrator had been spoken to, and not knowing if an investigation was being completed. This lack of follow-up sent a message that their reports were unimportant and not believable. Some women internalized the lack of follow-up as an indication that they were to blame for the assault:

They kind of took a description and then they said that's a really vague description then they left. They never followed up with me after that. So, I don't know if they just didn't believe me, or if they just didn't care, but they



made me feel like it was my fault because I had previously been an exotic dancer and I had been in a known drug area so I had brought that on myself.

The lack of follow-up was also indicative of the missing aspects of the police investigation from the outset of the report. Some women spoke of jurisdictional issues whereby the assault occurred in one area, and their report was made to police in another precinct. They felt as though their files were moved around numerous times, with no one taking responsibility. Also, lack of incident numbers inhibited women's ability to follow-up on their reports on their own, "I had called once and tried to ask dispatch, and one of the first things they asked me was for the incident report number, and I said that there was none. Nobody called back, and I dropped it." For many women, the lack of follow-up was an indication that their reports of sexual assault had not been believed by the police. This had a dramatic impact on their healing. One participant that disclosed the impact that the lack of follow-up from police had on her life described, "My belief in humanity was diminished, so I just gave up. I said what's the point. Why am I doing this to myself? Why am I having to prove myself? Why do I feel like I'm not being believed?" While speaking of the lack of follow-up, years after the assault, they remained emotional regarding the lack of closure.

Furthermore, participants were not provided with supportive resources in the community, thereby further impacting their healing process. Many women expressed that they felt that because police are responsible for hearing the reports of sexual assault from victims, they should be aware of services to assist women and provide them with access to services and support whether charges are laid or not. Participant indicated that if police offered community resources to them, it would be perceived as an act of compassion and concern for what victims are experiencing emotionally.

## **Discussion**

The women in this study who experienced a sexual assault and reported the assault to the police were hopeful that police would help them and justice would be served. Instead, these women were faced with insensitivity, blaming questions, lack of investigation, and lack of follow-up from the police, all of which contributed to not being believed by the institutions designed to protect them. In the lives of the vulnerable women identified in this research, their reports of sexual victimization were not believed and justice was not served.

The participants in this research were vulnerable throughout their lives. While many of the participants had common vulnerabilities, the sample of women in this research is diverse, thereby reflecting that sexual assault can

happen to anyone. The participants reflected various levels of risk and diversity inclusive of indigenous identity, young age at the time of the assault, a history of child abuse and ongoing victimization, substance use, mental health concerns, sexual orientations, ability, and geographic location, which are consistent with risk factors for sexual assault (Conroy & Cotter, 2017). The first-hand accounts from a diverse representation of survivors of sexual assault provide insight into their needs. However, the vulnerabilities that women experienced are risk factors for victimization (Conroy & Cotter, 2017). The women perceived that it was their vulnerability that made them less credible to the police and, therefore, unworthy of protection and justice.

The views expressed by women in this study are consistent with evidence on rape myth acceptance among police officers. Acceptance of these myths often discredit the victims of sexual assault based on false claims of whom the “real” victims ought to be (Quinlan, 2016). In particular, sexual assault cases viewed as legitimate by police rest on perceptions of the seriousness of the crime as well as the credibility of the victim (Sleath & Bull, 2017; Venema, 2016). Higher perceptions of victim credibility are associated with an increased likelihood of police pressing charges on a perpetrator (Spohn et al., 2014). The women in this research did not fit with the expectations of the “real” victim. The majority of participants had complex lives with numerous vulnerabilities. Drugs and alcohol were a factor in many of the assaults, most of the women knew the perpetrator, and few women physically resisted the attack or sustained physical injury. Understanding these realities for victims of sexual assault is paramount as it may influence police to deconstruct rape myths and respond sensitively throughout a thorough investigation.

The experience of being believed by the police is of critical importance to survivors of sexual assault and their experience with the justice system and path toward healing (Knowles, 2013; Mason & Lodrick, 2013). However, women experienced judgment from police and felt they were treated as perpetrators rather than victims. This was reflected in police questioning about false reporting and asking questions that placed blame on the victim for her lifestyle or behavior. The beliefs of the police are important, given that disbelief leads to inaction and subsequently impedes the police from providing referrals to support services in the community to aid in the healing process post-assault. Evidence suggests that police officers often operate from a culture of skepticism, resulting in victim-blaming in sexual assault cases before the report is even received (McMillan, 2018). McMillan (2018) found that police officers had polarized views of false reporting in sexual assault cases with some who believed false reports were highly common and others who thought they were infrequent. Of particular concern is that some officers believed that as many as 90% of sexual assault allegations are false and

officers make these assumptions based on a tendency toward suspicion and gut instincts consistent with rape myths. It is unlikely that women make false claims of sexual assault as reporting rates are less than 5% (Ministry of the Status of Women, 2015; Perreault, 2015).

The lack of thorough investigation of the sexual assault among participants is concerning as police hold considerable power and discretion to gather evidence, lay a charge, and refer to the crown for prosecution (Alderden & Ullman, 2012). Public knowledge of investigative techniques used by police officers in sexual assault cases is largely unknown; however, research suggests that there are considerable inconsistencies in the investigative process (Quinlan, 2016). Often police officers consider issues such as probable cause and reasonable doubt when conducting a sexual assault investigation and use techniques such as “light interrogation” to identify contradictory statements in the report (Venema, 2016), thereby potentially clouding the investigation and blaming the victim.

Unsurprisingly, police officer’s approach to victims, their investigative techniques, and interviewing skills are deemed ineffective by survivors given the limited training available to police officers in interview skills and the impact of trauma on victims (Haskell & Randall, 2019; Venema et al., 2020). Currently, there is considerable variability in police training based upon jurisdiction or geographical location, reflecting uncertainty in the quality of training for police officers (Sleath & Bull, 2017; Venema et al., 2020). Basic training for police officers is relatively short in duration, often spanning from three to nine months (Jewell, 2013) with limited opportunities for specialized training in sexual assault. For example, unique sexual assault interviewer training in Ontario, Canada is only available to a select group of police officers, typically spans nine days, and covers 17 areas, with a noticeable absence of information on trauma-informed interviewing (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, 2011). According to a report from Justice Canada on trauma and sexual assault, all police officers should be trained in victim response to trauma to ensure a sensitive police response that does not inflict further harm on victims of sexual assault (Haskell & Randall, 2019).

Existing training in sexual assault interviewing has resulted in variable levels of effectiveness (Campbell et al., 2019; Venema et al., 2020). Venema et al. (2020) found that police officer’s perceptions of sexual assault interviewer training favored training on interrogation, objective skills and found skills such as interacting with survivors to be only minimally helpful. Conversely, Campbell et al. (2019) found that a 40-hour sexual assault interviewer training program, inclusive of a trauma-informed approach, was effective in improving the short- and long-term perceptions and knowledge

of police officers. However, further research is required to evaluate the perceptions of survivors relative to the police response to sexual assault reports following interviewer training. Also, evaluation of the content and method of delivery of sexual assault interviewer training is required to determine the most effective means of positively influencing police perception and behavior.

## Implications

This study has important implications for practice, policy, and research. The vulnerabilities and experience of trauma among the survivors in this study demonstrate the need for police to better understand the experience and clinical presentation of trauma. The women in this research felt revictimized by the police when they were seeking their support. As such, women's voices may influence the police to respond to their expressed need for compassionate and sensitive communication when a sexual assault report is made. Police officers may learn from these accounts that the questions that they ask when responding to a report of sexual assault can increase harm to women if they are not trauma-informed and sensitive. Furthermore, police services may gain a deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities that exist for women and how these vulnerabilities may be exacerbated when the police disbelieve their sexual assault reports. Thus, women's accounts assist in understanding the experience of the police report and the need for follow-up to preserve trust in the police and potentially mitigate future vulnerability.

Current police training on interviewing sexual assault survivors is lacking. This study explores the problematic nature of interviews and the need for the police to respond with support and commitment to a thorough investigation, regardless of existing vulnerabilities. This research may influence decision-makers in police services to invest in the development of their police officers through trauma-informed interview training aimed at information gathering as opposed to interrogation.

Research is needed to explore the consistency of these findings among unique survivor groups such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, indigenous women, and those from larger urban areas. Understanding the experiences of survivors is an important step in influencing potential improvements in police practices. Further research into the experiences and potential barriers of police officers when responding to sexual assault reports will assist police services to address the challenges that police officers face in the field. Lastly, research is needed to explore direct trauma-informed interventions for police officers to utilize when receiving reports of sexual assault in an effort to improve the disclosure experience of the survivor.

## **Limitations**

Methodological limitations may impact the generalizability of the findings. The women in this research participated from one geographical area in northwestern Ontario, Canada. Thus, the experiences of participants may reflect the limitations inherent within that small geographic area. For example, it is unknown if the police that interviewed women had received any specialized training in sexual assault. Given the size of the communities, it is likely that due to limited resources, police officers lacked specialization. In addition, our research was voluntary and the sample self-identified that the police did not believe their sexual assault reports. The research team could not confirm how the police classified the cases. Also, this sample was selected to explore the experience of not being believed by the police and may not represent all survivors' experiences in reporting sexual assault to authorities. In particular, women who self-identified an unconfirmed sexual assault (unclear events or memories) were excluded from the research. As unclear memories are common among trauma survivors, such women may have unique challenges with reporting and being believed by police and may be an area for future research.

## **Conclusion**

This research provides a unique contribution to the existing sexual assault research as it reports on the first-hand accounts of women who disclosed sexual assault to the police and were disbelieved. The contributions of women's experiences identify the needs of survivors during a sexual assault disclosure and the impact of negative police response on healing and justice. Sexual assault is indiscriminate and it does not align with stereotypical beliefs regarding who victims ought to be. Rape myths need to be deconstructed so that women are taken seriously and acceptance of such myths does not impede police investigation. Police officers are in a unique position to ensure that justice is served and perpetrators of sexual assault are held accountable. Survivors who rely on the police when reporting a sexual assault should not be revictimized while seeking help. Police officers must gain a deeper understanding of trauma and empathic and sensitive communication with survivors of sexual assault.

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