

# Study examines victim cooperation in cases of intimate partner sexual assault

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Sexual assault incidents that involve intimate partners feature unique factors that affect a victim's willingness to cooperate with police, including the relationship between the suspect and victim and law enforcement practices in investigating these crimes, according to a recent study.

Recent national estimates suggest that 1 in 10 women experience sexual assault by an intimate partner. Victim cooperation is a key factor in processing these cases through the [criminal justice](#) system.

"The choice to cooperate with [law enforcement](#) is one of the most important decisions made by victims in the processing of [intimate partner violence](#) (IPV) and sexual assault (SA) cases," said Eryn O'Neal, an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University and the author of the study. "Research overwhelmingly indicates that victim cooperation influences case outcomes in these types of crimes, with desired outcomes being linked to attaining and maintaining cooperation."

O'Neal's study used quantitative data from 160 intimate partner sexual assault cases from the Los Angeles Police Department in 2008. The study found that women were more likely to cooperate in the criminal justice process if they were married to the suspect; if they were in a longer relationship; if they were threatened prior to or during the incident; or if physical evidence was collected or documented.

Conversely, women were less likely to participate in the process if non-

violent tactics were used by the suspect to limit the victim's autonomy or if the victim communicated that she didn't want the suspect arrested.

In addition to the quantitative findings discussed above, O'Neal's qualitative findings suggest additional reasons [intimate partner sexual assault](#) victims refuse to cooperate. Other factors that led to a refusal to cooperate in the investigation were that the victim was no longer interested in continuing with the case or wanted to put the incident behind her; the victim blamed herself or made excuses for the suspect's behavior; the purpose of filing the report was not for prosecution; the victim was involved in a relationship with the suspect; the victim feared retaliation or consequences; or the victim recanted.

The study suggested ways that law enforcement and other professionals in the criminal justice field can increase cooperation by victims in these cases. These include:

- Understanding that relationship and case factors help predict the victim's willingness to cooperate in their case
- Acknowledging relationship-based barriers to cooperation, such as a lack of transportation, denied access to the phone, or the need for financial support from the abuser
- Collecting or documenting evidence from the scene, victim, or suspect despite perpetrator claims of consent
- Actively working toward dismantling rape myth acceptance among officers
- Working with victims to ensure their safety so cooperation decisions do not need to be based solely on fear

"Victim Cooperation in Intimate Partner Sexual Assault Cases: A Mixed Methods Examination" was recently published by *Justice Quarterly* and was funded by a grant from the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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