

Sexual assault survivors deserve a gold standard reporting experience

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A world-first report examining alternative ways for victim-survivors to report sexual assault says under-reporting could be reduced if moved away from law enforcement, but it will need greater support to be

sustainable and secure.

Only [13% of women report sexual assaults to police](#) and 50% of victim-survivors seek help from a counseling or specialist support service, but alternative reporting options could help increase these numbers.

The research by RMIT University, University of Wollongong and La Trobe University found a trauma-informed, written interview designed in line with best-practice techniques could help improve outcomes for victim-survivors of [sexual assault](#) who use it. "[Alternative reporting options for sexual assault: Perspectives of victim-survivors](#)" was published by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Lead researcher and RMIT Professor Georgina Heydon said alternative reporting options were anonymous and confidential written response interviews that can be presented as a self-administered survey or form on an app or website.

"Our research shows alternative reporting options are seen as an 'in-between' pathway for victim-survivors who are unsure about making a formal report to police or do not wish to engage with police at all," said Heydon, from RMIT's School of Global, Urban Social Studies.

"These informal reports do not constitute an official statement, but they have the potential to support intelligence gathering and crime mapping.

"They can help give victim-survivors more agency and connect them with appropriate support services.

"There is also evidence victim-survivors who use alternative reporting options do go on to make formal reports."

Distrust of law enforcement a barrier to justice and

support

Current alternative reporting options available in Australia sit directly with police, but Heydon said distrust of [law enforcement](#) was a barrier for many victim-survivors to report incidents, especially in more vulnerable communities.

"There's a lack of confidence that police will handle their cases with sensitivity. Victim-survivors are also reluctant to go through a sexual assault trial due to the way they are treated during the process," she said.

"Victim-blaming attitudes are still persistent in society, meaning victim-survivors may not feel their experience was 'serious enough' to report, or they may blame themselves, creating further barriers to reporting and seeking help.

"There are also many communities who face barriers to approaching the police, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTQIA+ people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

"Due to these issues, we only have an insight into a fraction of the sexual assault experienced in the Australian community, and many are left without support after their experiences."

Data protections need to be considered

The [report](#) found there was a preference to shift alternative reporting options to sexual assault support services, but Heydon said the security of confidential data needs to be considered.

"A rape crisis center, for example, could host an alternative reporting option and send information onto the police for investigation, but these

services are typically underfunded and understaffed," Heydon said.

"Without proper long-term funding, these crisis groups are unlikely to be able to house a secure database of reports.

"Whoever is collecting this data needs to be in a position to protect the security of the data, which could be where blockchain comes in."

Heydon said victim-survivors also need full transparency on how their information is going to be used.

"Data security is paramount, and users need to be given clear information about how their information will be used, who will have access to the information provided, and where it will be stored.

"They also need to have the opportunity to indicate how they want their data to be used."

Room for improvement

Australia has four jurisdictions that offer alternative reporting options, but Heydon said not all alternative reporting options available were trauma-informed or in line with best-practice interviewing.

"Trauma-informed means avoiding harmful structures that replicate trauma or can re-traumatize a person," Heydon said.

"Reporting an assault is extremely difficult, so we want to see a trauma-informed alternative reporting system that gives victim-survivors as much autonomy as possible to tell their story."

Heydon, an expert in the relationships between language, memory and cognition, said the design of the alternative reporting forms needed to be

evaluated to ensure lines of questioning did not contaminate people's memories.

"A lot of people who design these forms don't necessarily have the background or expertise in interviewing," she said.

"A form that has very closed questions such as check boxes—things that constrain people to picking from a list—tend to produce less reliable information than if you ask an open question."

A national alternative reporting scheme

The research team are now consulting with the Commonwealth Government about the potential for a [national alternative reporting scheme](#) and have launched a [survey](#) to better understand the needs of victim-survivors.

"The findings from our research can help ensure future alternative reporting options can give survivors a gold-standard reporting experience and substantially improve their access to support and justice," Heydon said.

More information: Georgina Heydon et al, Alternative reporting options for sexual assault: perspectives of victim-survivors, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* (2023). [DOI: 10.52922/ti77123](https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77123)

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