



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 662 March 2023

Abstract | This study examines experiences of victim-survivors who reported in-person and online sexual harassment and violence perpetrated by someone they met on an online dating platform to the police.

The findings show that respondents were more likely to report in-person than online sexual violence to police (14.7% vs 8.3%). Despite experiencing disproportionate rates of sexual violence, LGB+ women had the lowest rates of reporting and more negative experiences when reporting.

Overall, police are responding appropriately to reports of sexual violence. However, some groups are more likely to have negative experiences, which impacts on their intentions to report to police in future.

Reporting of dating app facilitated sexual violence to the police: Victim-survivor experiences and outcomes

Siobhan Lawler and Hayley Boxall

Introduction

Sexual harassment, aggression and violence victimisation is common among users of dating apps and websites (Wolbers et al. 2022). Recent research has found that within a sample of almost 10,000 people living in Australia who had used a mobile dating app or website in the last five years, nearly three-quarters (72.3%) had been subjected to online sexual harassment, aggression or violence by someone they had connected with through an online dating platform during this period (Wolbers et al. 2022). Behaviours reported by respondents ranged from being continually contacted by someone after they told them they were not interested (47.2%), through to being threatened (18.9%), and having images or videos taken of them without their consent (12.7%). Further, over a third of respondents (34.0%) said they had been subjected to sexual harassment, aggression and violence in the 'real-world' by someone they had met through an online dating platform.

Wolbers and colleagues' (2022) research reinforces the small body of literature which has explored the use of online dating platforms to facilitate sexual harassment and violence. For example, Choi, Wong and Fong's (2018) survey of 600 university students in Hong Kong found that dating app users were over twice as likely as non-users to have been subjected to sexual assault in the last 12 months. Further, in their analysis of case files obtained from an Australian metropolitan forensic medicine service, Rowse, Bolt and Gaya (2020) found that 14 percent of reported sexual assaults involved an offender who the victim-survivor had met on a dating app.

The majority of people who experience sexual assault and harassment in Australia do not report it to police (Australian Human Rights Commission 2012; Heywood et al. 2022). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), only 13 percent ($n=86,000$) of the 639,000 women who were sexually assaulted by a male perpetrator in the last 12 months reported the incident to police during the same period. Reasons for not reporting sexual violence to the police have been well documented in research, including victim-survivor fears that they will not be taken seriously or will not be believed by the police, as well as feelings of shame, fear and humiliation associated with their victimisation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021; Orchowski et al. 2022; Weiss 2011). Some groups, such as LGB+ communities, disproportionately experience sexual violence yet are also less likely to report it to police due to a lack of trust, fear of the consequences of reporting, or because they do not expect to be treated fairly or respectfully (Miles-Johnson 2013).

Many of the barriers to reporting sexual violence described above are likely to be exacerbated in situations where the incident was facilitated by technology such as dating apps and websites. While there is evidence that image-based sexual abuse (IBSA; the non-consensual sharing of intimate images) is increasingly being treated seriously by police, barriers to reporting remain, including gaps in legislation, limited resources for investigation and victim-blaming attitudes among the public and police officers (Henry, Flynn & Powell 2018). Minimising victim-survivors' experiences of online forms of sexual violence, including stalking, harassment and abuse, reflects a 'fixation on corporeal or bodily forms of harm, as opposed to harms that are structural, social, emotional or psychological' (Powell & Henry 2018: 301). In other words, the police and others are likely to view physical harms as more serious than non-physical harms.

There are ongoing debates in Australia and internationally about the justice needs of victim-survivors of sexual violence and whether criminal justice systems and processes are equipped to meet these often-diverse needs. Research examining the views and attitudes of victim-survivors who do make a formal report is essential for informing these debates, as well as improving police responses to victim-survivors of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) who choose to engage with the criminal justice system. Improving police responses to victim-survivors of dating app and technology-facilitated sexual violence is an important policy goal for several reasons, including the current absence of alternative justice pathways available in Australia (eg restorative justice), the role of police agencies in connecting victim-survivors with support services, and the increasing numbers of people who use dating apps and websites and who may be subjected to abuse on these platforms.

Method

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What proportion of people who experience online and in-person sexual harassment, aggression and violence facilitated by online dating platforms report these experiences to the police?
- Are victim-survivors more likely to report online or in-person sexual violence facilitated by online dating platforms to the police?
- How satisfied are victim-survivors who make a report to the police?

The study draws on the same database used by Wolbers and colleagues (2022) in their examination of the prevalence and nature of online and in-person dating app facilitated sexual violence (DAFSV) among a sample of nearly 10,000 people living in Australia who had used a mobile dating app or website in the last five years. These data were collected via an online survey conducted by Roy Morgan Research Solutions between 23 June and 9 August 2021 using their Single Source panel and panels managed by PureProfile and Dynata. The survey was sent to members of these online panels aged 18 years and over.

Proportional quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to recruit respondents. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by sex, age and usual place of residence, derived from data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The Single Source survey, which is recruited through a rigorous cluster-sampled, face-to-face survey approach, was conducted first and was used to calibrate the quotas for the external panels to account for age- and gender-related propensity for having used an online dating platform in the last five years. What this means is that the sample reflects the spread of people living in Australia (18 years and over) who use online dating platforms.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their sociodemographic characteristics, their experiences of online and in-person DAFSV, and their reporting behaviours (see Table 1). For a complete copy of the survey tool, and information about how the survey was developed, please see Wolbers and colleagues (2022).

The overall completion rate for the survey—the proportion of total invitations ($n=185,840$) sent to panel members that resulted in completed surveys—was 5.4 percent ($n=9,987$). However, 75.5 percent of respondents who opened the invitation, passed the screening process and read the consent form went on to complete the survey.

Sample characteristics

Approximately half of the final sample identified as male (50%, $n=4,992$) and half as female (49.3%, $n=4,924$), with less than one percent identifying as non-binary (0.7%, $n=71$). The majority of respondents identified as heterosexual (heterosexual men: 42%, $n=4,014$; heterosexual women: 40.2%, $n=4,194$) and 16.2 percent ($n=1,613$) self-identified as LGB+ (LGB+ men: 7.2%, $n=719$; LGB+ women: 8.4%, $n=839$). The largest proportion of participants were 25–34 years old (34.8%, $n=3,471$) with 78 percent of the sample under 44 years old.

Four out of five participants lived in a major city at the time of completing the survey (80.2%, $n=8,008$), and the rest were living in regional and remote areas of Australia (19.8%, $n=1,979$). Nearly eight percent (7.8%, $n=778$) of the sample identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Nearly one in three respondents reported having a disability, defined as having a long-term restrictive health condition that impacted on their day-to-day life (29.7%, $n=2,962$). A small proportion of the sample were on a temporary visa at the time of completing the survey (8.4%, $n=835$).

Measures of sexual harassment, aggression and violence facilitated by online dating platforms

Sexual violence is defined here as non-consensual sexual behaviours that aim to coerce, dominate and maintain power inequalities (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut & Johnson 2018). TFSV encompasses behaviours where technology is used to facilitate both online (virtual) and in-person (face-to-face) sexual harms (Henry & Powell 2018). DAFSV comes under this definition, and includes behaviours where online dating platforms are used to facilitate online and in-person sexual harms, including sexual and gender-based harassment, stalking, IBSA, coercion and assault (Henry & Powell 2018; Woerner 2022).

To measure their experiences of being subjected to DAFSV, respondents were asked whether any of the behaviours listed in Table 1 had been perpetrated against them by someone they had met on an online dating platform in the last five years. The majority of the respondents had experienced at least one type of online DAFSV (72.3%, $n=7,224$), and a third of the sample reported experiencing at least one in-person form of DAFSV (34.0%, $n=3,394$) after meeting with someone they met on an online dating platform in the real world. See Wolbers et al. (2022) for a detailed overview of the prevalence and nature of online and in-person DAFSV within the sample.

Table 1: Online and in-person sexual harassment, aggression and violence behaviours

Online DAFSV Online sexual harassment	In-person DAFSV Sexual assault and coercion
Continued to contact the respondent even after they told them they were not interested in having a relationship with them	Pressured the respondent verbally to perform unwanted sexual acts (eg making promises, lying, repeatedly asking or insisting etc)
Sent the respondent an unwanted sexually explicit message	Attempted to engage in a sexual act with the respondent when they could not consent
Sent the respondent an unwanted sexually explicit photo or video of themselves	Used, or threatened to use, physical force to force the respondent to perform unwanted sexual acts
Pressured the respondent to send them a sexually explicit message	Spiked the respondent's drink to try and coerce them into performing a sexual act
Pressured the respondent to send them a sexually explicit photo or video of themselves	Took off their condom during intercourse without the respondent's consent or refused to wear a condom
Pressured the respondent to meet them in person when they did not want to	Lied about their sexual health status (eg whether they had a sexually transmitted disease like herpes)
Insulted the respondent, called them names or used abusive language that made the respondent feel uncomfortable	Took photos or videotaped the respondent engaging in sexual acts without their knowledge or consent
Posted offensive comments about the respondent online that other people could see (eg on their social media accounts)	Loitered around, followed the respondent or showed up inappropriately at their home, school, or workplace
Threatened the respondent in any way	
Threatened to share a sexually explicit image or video of the respondent without their consent	
Took a non-consensual photo or video of the respondent which was sexually explicit in nature (eg via webcam)	
Shared a sexually explicit photo of the respondent with others without their consent	
Pressured the respondent to give them information about their location or their schedule	
Logged into one of the respondent's mobile dating app/website accounts without their permission	

Measures of reporting

Respondents subjected to online and/or in-person DAFSV were asked whether they had disclosed an experience of victimisation to anyone in the last five years. Reporting included both formal reporting (eg to police) and informal reporting (eg to family and friends). Respondents who said they had made a report to the police at least once in the last five years were then asked a series of follow-up questions about their most recent experience reporting online and/or in-person DAFSV. These questions focused on:

- the reporting outcome (ie commencement of an investigation);
- satisfaction with investigation processes;
- perceptions that the police took the incident seriously;
- provision of information about other sexual assault services; and
- intentions to report again.

Analysis

In recognition of previous research that LGB+ communities are more likely than heterosexual persons to experience sexual violence (eg Anderson, Vogels & Turner 2020; Wolbers et al. 2022), the sample was disaggregated by respondent gender and sexual identity. LGB+ respondents were those who said they were not heterosexual (eg lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual). This definition also includes individuals who said they did not know what their sexual identity was (ie questioning).

Statistical relationships between reporting experiences and the gender and sexual identities of respondents were assessed using chi-square tests of association. Because there were multiple respondent groups in the analysis, post-hoc tests of residual differences with a Bonferroni correction were also conducted.

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with the current study that need to be acknowledged. First, the results presented here do not reflect all experiences of reporting to police among respondents, only their most recent experience. Further, respondents were not asked about the specific nature of the sexual offence that they had reported to the police, only whether it occurred online or in person. This means we cannot comment on which offence types are more or less likely to be reported to the police.

Finally, the data for this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected the survey findings in unknown ways. For example, it has been reported that use of mobile dating apps and websites increased during different phases of the pandemic, which could have in turn increased victimisation rates. The pandemic may have also negatively impacted the likelihood of victim-survivors reporting sexual violence to the police, which appeared to be the case for intimate partner violence (Morgan, Boxall & Payne 2022). However, this is simply a hypothesis, as there is no research to the authors' knowledge that has examined the impact of the pandemic on reporting of sexual violence specifically.

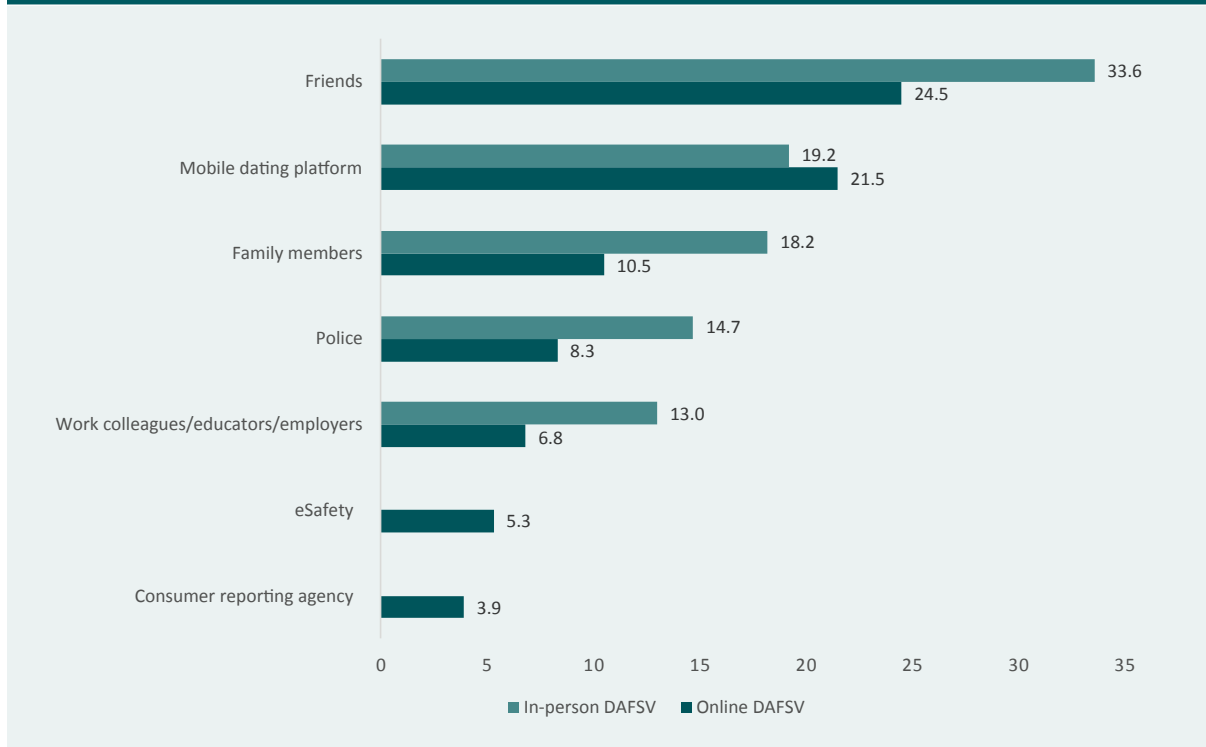
Results

Prevalence of reporting to the police

As outlined in Figure 1 below, nearly half (44.4%, $n=3,208$) of respondents who had been subjected to online DAFSV in the last five years disclosed to at least one source, with one in five (21.6%, $n=1,562$) reporting to multiple sources. A slightly higher proportion of people who experienced in-person DAFSV disclosed to at least one source (56.8%, $n=1,926$) and over a quarter (27.6%, $n=935$) reported the incident to multiple sources.

Reporting to the police was less common than reporting to other entities and individuals. Only one in seven respondents who had been subjected to in-person DAFSV (14.7%, $n=500$), and one in 13 (8.3%, $n=600$) who had been subjected to online DAFSV, said they reported to the police. It was more common for respondents to say they disclosed online (24.5%, $n=1,139$) and in-person DAFSV (33.6%, $n=1,772$) to their friends, to the online dating platform (online DAFSV: 21.5%, $n=1,555$; in-person DAFSV: 19.2%, $n=652$) or to family members (online DAFSV: 10.5%, $n=755$; in-person DAFSV: 18.2%, $n=617$). Only a small proportion of respondents subjected to online DAFSV said they had made a report to the eSafety Commissioner (5.3%, $n=384$) or another reporting agency such as ReportCyber (3.9%, $n=283$).

Figure 1: Reporting of dating app facilitated sexual violence, by type of DAFSV and reporting entity (%)



Note: Respondents who were subjected to in-person DAFSV were not asked questions about reporting to eSafety or consumer reporting agencies
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

The likelihood of reporting online DAFSV to the police appeared to be influenced by the sexual and gender identity of respondents ($\chi^2(5)=77.48, p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.10$). Analysis of the adjusted residuals identified that the proportion of heterosexual men who reported to the police was higher than anticipated (11.0%, $n=283$), and the corresponding proportion of heterosexual women was lower than expected (6.2%, $n=197$; see Table 2). Similar trends were identified for in-person DAFSV ($\chi^2(5)=74.56, p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.15$). Again, analysis of adjusted residuals identified that the proportion of heterosexual men who reported an incident of in-person DAFSV was higher than anticipated (18.1%, $n=202$), and the proportions of heterosexual women (12.0%, $n=172$) and LGB+ women (10.2%, $n=41$) were lower than expected.

Table 2: Prevalence of reporting online and in-person DAFSV to the police, by respondent gender and sexual identity

	Online DAFSV		In-person DAFSV	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Heterosexual men ^a	283	11.0	202	18.1
LGB+ men ^b	42	7.7	43	13.7
Heterosexual women ^c	197	6.2	172	12.0
LGB+ women ^d	46	6.6	41	10.2
Non-binary ^e	8	7.6	8	15.1

a: Denominators include 55 respondents who said they did not know/would rather not say if they had experienced online DAFSV, and 709 respondents who said they did not know if they had experienced in-person DAFSV

b: Denominators include 2 respondents who said they did not know/would rather not say if they had experienced online DAFSV, and 56 respondents who said they did not know if they had experienced in-person DAFSV

c: Denominators include 30 respondents who said they did not know/would rather not say if they had experienced online DAFSV, and 622 respondents who said they did not know if they had experienced in-person DAFSV

d: Denominators include 1 respondent who said they did not know/would rather not say if they had experienced online DAFSV, and 109 respondents who said they did not know if they had experienced in-person DAFSV

e: Denominators include 2 respondents who said they did not know/would rather not say if they had experienced online DAFSV, and 30 respondents who said they did not know if they had experienced in-person DAFSV

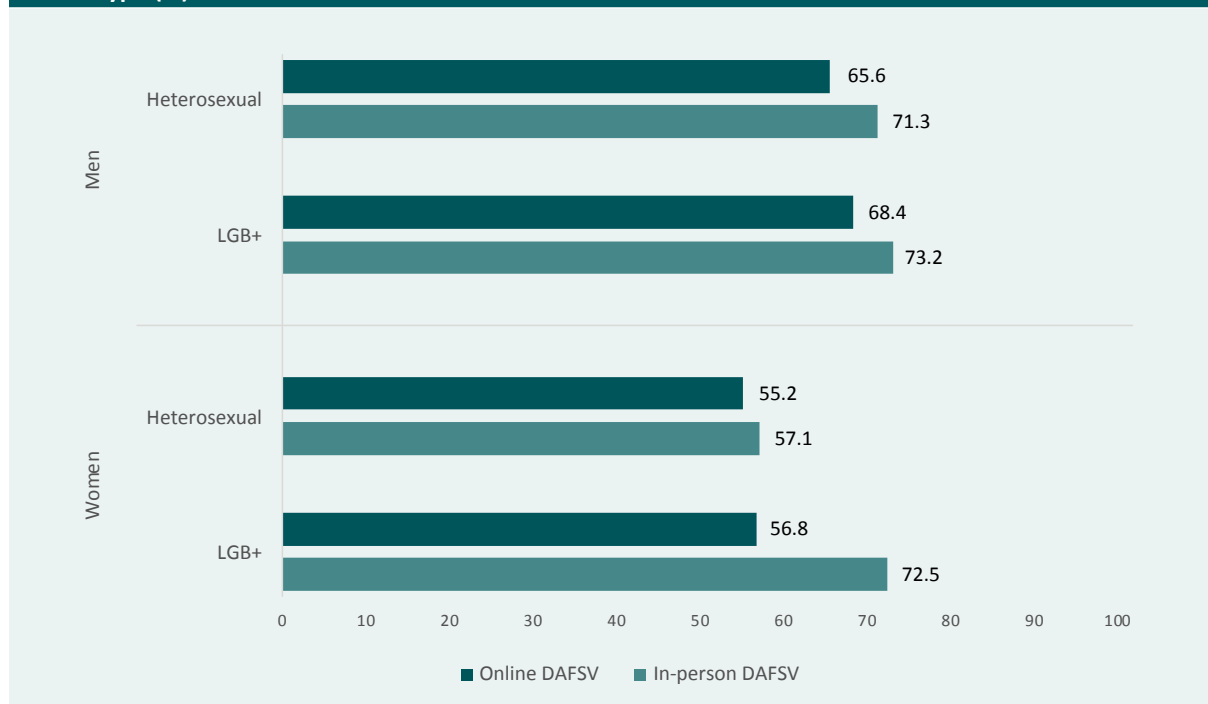
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Experiences of victim-survivors who reported to the police

Reports resulting in an investigation

Approximately two-thirds of respondents said that their most recent report of DAFSV victimisation had been investigated by police (online DAFSV: 61.0%, $n=366$; in-person DAFSV: 66.8%, $n=334$). The likelihood of respondents saying that their report of online DAFSV had been investigated did not differ by the gender or sexual identity of respondents ($\chi^2(3)=6.44$, $p=0.092$; Figure 2). However, there was a relationship between the sexual and gender identity of respondents and police investigation of in-person DAFSV reports. Approximately 70 percent of heterosexual men (71.3%, $n=144$), LGB+ men (73.2%, $n=30$) and LGB+ women (72.5%, $n=29$) said that their report of in-person DAFSV had been investigated by the police. This decreased significantly to 57.1 percent for heterosexual women ($n=96$; $\chi^2(3)=10.11$, $p<0.05$, Cramér's $V=0.15$). Analysis of the adjusted residuals identified that the proportion of reports of in-person DAFSV investigated by police was higher than expected for heterosexual men, and lower than expected for heterosexual women.

Figure 2: Reports of DAFSV investigated by police, by respondent gender and sexual identity and DAFSV type (%)



Note: Sample limited to respondents who had experienced online or in-person DAFSV and reported to the police. Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Satisfaction with police investigation processes and outcomes

Respondents who said their report of online or in-person DAFSV had been investigated by the police were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about the investigation process (where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree). Specifically, they were asked to rate their agreement with the following:

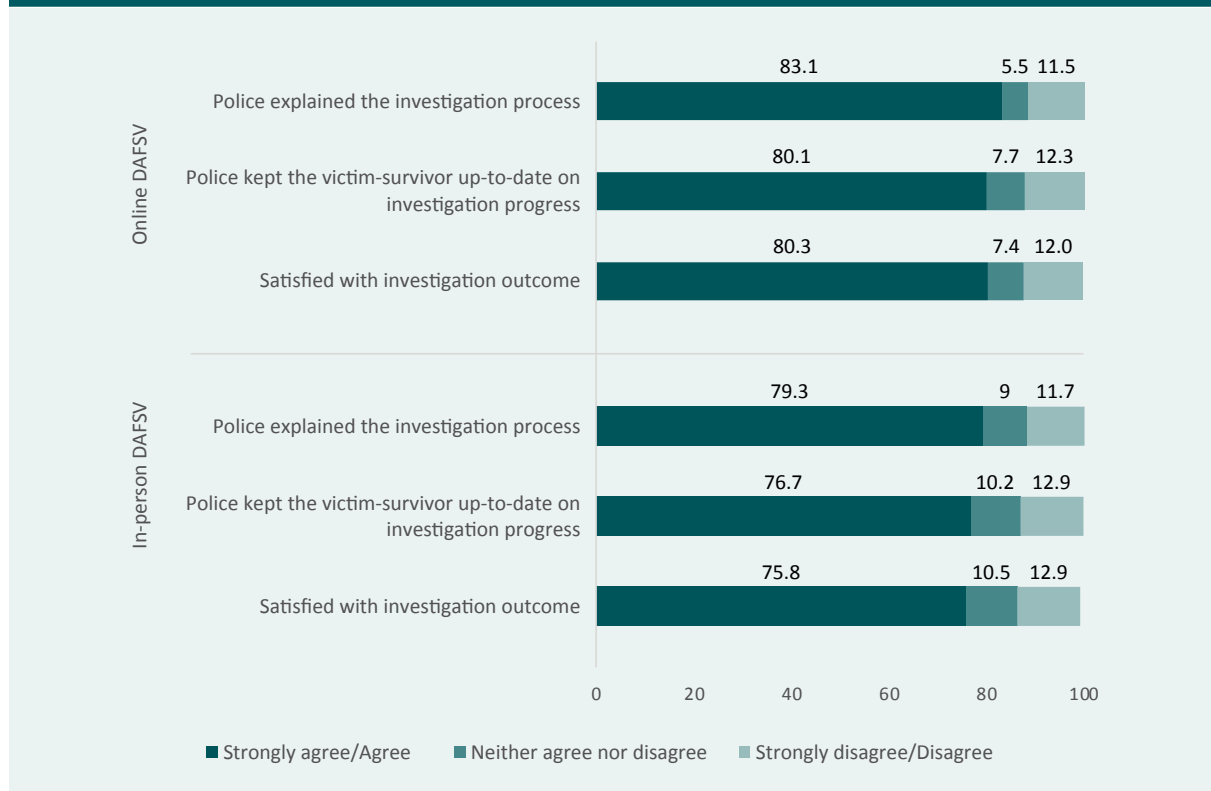
- the police explained the process for investigating the incident to me;
- the police kept me up-to-date on the progress of the investigation; and
- I was satisfied with the outcome of the investigation.

The analysis identified high levels of agreement with the above statements. Four in five respondents whose report was investigated by the police strongly agreed or agreed that:

- the police explained the process for investigating the incident to them (online DAFSV: 83.1%, $n=304$; in-person DAFSV: 79.3%, $n=265$);
- the police kept them up-to-date on the progress of the investigation (online DAFSV: 80.1%, $n=293$; in-person DAFSV: 76.7%, $n=256$); and
- they were satisfied with the outcome of the investigation (online DAFSV: 80.3%, $n=294$; in-person DAFSV: 75.8%, $n=253$).

However, as shown in Figure 3, approximately one in 10 respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with these statements.

Figure 3: Victim-survivor satisfaction with police investigation processes, by type of DAFSV (%)



Note: Sample limited to respondents who made a report to police and said the report had been investigated. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Although the sample sizes were too small to conduct tests of significance, there were some differences across the sample regarding the gender and sexual identity of respondents and their satisfaction with police investigative processes and outcomes that are worth noting (see Table 3). In particular, for both online and in-person forms of DAFSV, a large proportion of heterosexual women reported dissatisfaction with police investigation processes. Further, the proportions of heterosexual and LGB+ women and LGB+ men who said they were not satisfied with the outcome of the investigation were much higher than the proportion of heterosexual men.

	Police explained investigation process		Police kept the victim-survivor up-to-date on investigation progress		Satisfied with investigation outcome	
	Strongly agree/ Agree	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Strongly agree/ Agree	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Strongly agree/ Agree	Strongly disagree/ Disagree
Online DAFSV						
Heterosexual men	85.8	9.3	80.9	10.4	85.2	7.7
LGB+ men	84.6	11.5	84.6	11.5	80.8	11.5
Heterosexual women	75.7	16.8	75.7	15.9	73.8	18.7
LGB+ women	88.0	12.0	76.0	20.0	64.0	24.0
In-person DAFSV						
Heterosexual men	81.9	9.0	79.2	7.6	80.6	9.0
LGB+ men	76.7	16.7	76.7	20.0	70.0	20.0
Heterosexual women	72.9	17.7	72.9	17.7	73.7	17.9
LGB+ women	72.4	10.3	67.9	21.4	57.1	21.4

Note: Sample limited to respondents who made a report to the police and said that the report had been investigated. Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Perceptions that police took the incident seriously

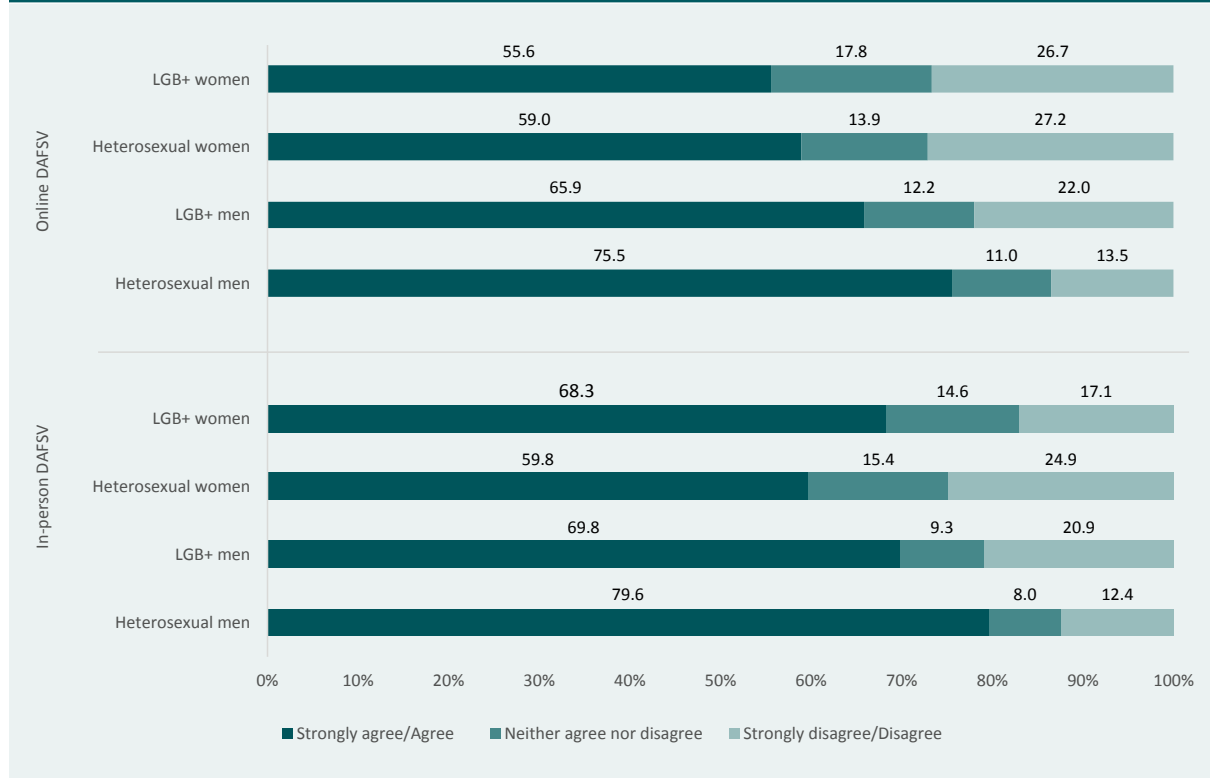
Regardless of whether the police investigated their report of online or in-person DAFSV, respondents were asked whether they believed that the police had taken the incident seriously. Approximately two-thirds of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the police had taken the incident seriously, and this was consistent for both online (68.0%, $n=405$) and in-person DAFSV (71.8%, $n=356$).

However, one in five respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed, meaning that they did not believe the police took the incident seriously (online DAFSV: 19.7%, $n=117$; in-person DAFSV: 17.1%, $n=85$).

Overall, there was a statistically significant relationship between the gender and sexual identity of respondents and perceptions that the police took the incident seriously (online DAFSV: $\chi^2(6)=19.71$, $p<0.01$, Cramér's $V=0.13$; in-person DAFSV: $\chi^2(6)=18.07$, $p<0.01$, Cramér's $V=0.14$).

Specifically, analysis of the adjusted residuals found that the observed proportion of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed that the police took the incident seriously was higher than anticipated for heterosexual men (online DAFSV: 75.5%, $n=213$; in-person DAFSV: 79.6%, $n=196$), and lower than anticipated for heterosexual women (online DAFSV: 59.0%, $n=115$; in-person DAFSV: 59.8%, $n=101$; Figure 4).

Figure 4: Victim-survivor level of agreement with the statement ‘The police took the incident seriously’, by respondent gender and sexual identity and DAFSV type (%)



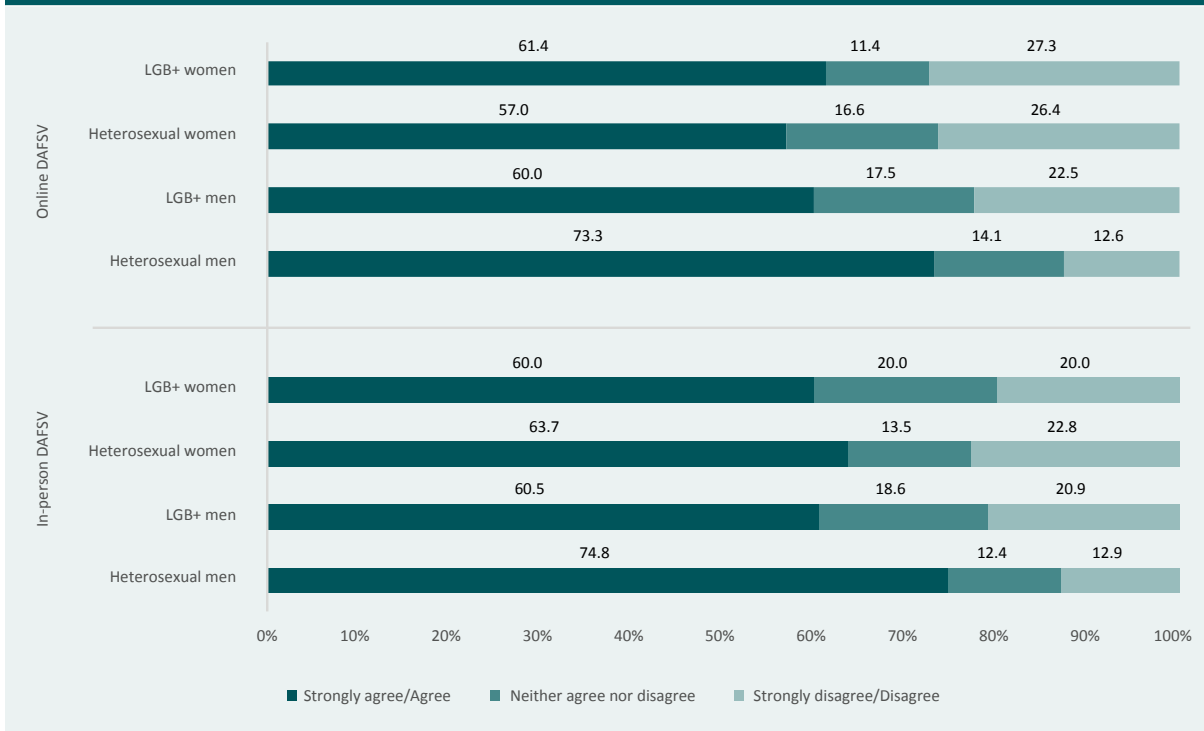
Note: Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Information about support services

Among respondents who reported DAFSV victimisation to the police, two-thirds strongly agreed or agreed that police provided them with information about support services. This was consistent for both online (64.7%, $n=388$) and in-person DAFSV (68.8%, $n=344$). However, again around one in five respondents reported that they were not provided with information about support services after reporting to the police (online DAFSV: 18.7%, $n=112$; in-person DAFSV: 17.2%, $n=86$).

While nearly three-quarters of heterosexual men said the police provided them with information about support services after reporting online DAFSV (73.3%, $n=203$), significantly fewer heterosexual (57.0%, $n=110$) and LGB+ women (61.4%, $n=27$) said the same ($\chi^2(8)=23.6$, $p<0.01$, Cramér's $V=0.14$). However, for in-person DAFSV, there was no relationship between respondents' gender or sexual identity and their likelihood of receiving information about support services after reporting to police ($\chi^2(8)=12$, $p=0.150$, Cramér's $V=0.11$; see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Victim-survivor level of agreement with the statement ‘The police provided me with information about other services that could assist me’, by respondent gender and sexual identity and DAFSV type (%)



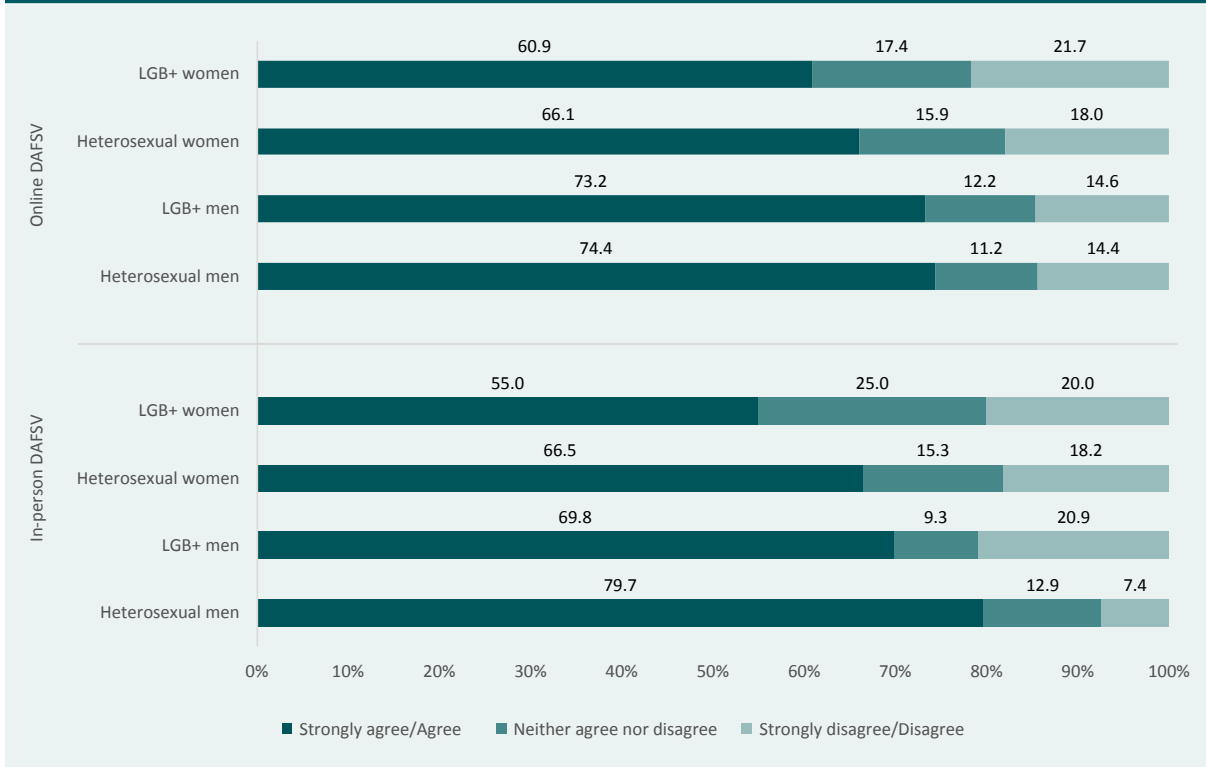
Note: Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Intention to report again

Around 70 percent of respondents who reported to the police said they would report to the police again (online DAFSV: 69.0%, $n=414$; in-person DAFSV: 71.6%, $n=358$). While there was no relationship between the gender or sexual identity of respondents and self-reported intentions to report online DAFSV again in the future ($\chi^2(6)=6.04$, $p=0.419$, Cramér’s $V=0.07$), the analysis identified statistically significant differences for in-person DAFSV. Specifically, the number of people who strongly agreed or agreed that they would report again was higher than anticipated for heterosexual men, and lower than anticipated for heterosexual and LGB+ women (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Victim-survivor level of agreement with the statement 'I would report to the police again', by respondent gender and sexual identity and DAFSV type (%)



Note: Non-binary respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size
Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Discussion

These findings make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the experiences of victim-survivors who report DAFSV to the police. In line with research showing victim-survivors are most likely to disclose sexual violence victimisation to informal networks (Dunn, Vail-Smith & Knight 1999), respondents in the current study were more likely to report incidents of online or in-person DAFSV to family, friends or the online dating platform than to police. This reinforces the need for community-based education programs that can assist community members to provide appropriate support to friends and family members who may disclose victimisation experiences to them.

Interestingly, among respondents who did report to police, it was more common that they reported in-person DAFSV than online DAFSV (14.7% vs 8.3% respectively). Further, a higher proportion of respondents who reported in-person DAFSV said that the police took the incident seriously compared to victim-survivors of online DAFSV. This provides further evidence that community members and law enforcement may minimise the harms caused by online sexual violence compared to in-person sexual violence (Powell & Henry 2018).

Around two-thirds of DAFSV incidents reported to police were investigated and in the majority of these situations the investigation process and outcome was viewed positively by victim-survivors. In particular, four in five respondents said the police had explained the investigation process to

them, had kept them up-to-date with the progress of the investigation, and had provided them with information about support services that could assist them. Future research could expand on this study to investigate what information is provided and what services are being recommended by police and accessed by victim-survivors with diverse experiences.

Crucially, regardless of whether their report was investigated, approximately four in five respondents said that the police had treated the incident they reported seriously. The reason this is such an important finding is that, when asked what they want from a criminal or alternative justice response, many victim-survivors say that being listened to, having the incident treated seriously and having its impacts acknowledged is important to them (Daly 2017; Henninger et al. 2020; Powell & Cauchi 2013). This would suggest that in many situations the police are succeeding in achieving these justice goals for victim-survivors of DAFSV.

The findings described above are encouraging, considering the large body of research that has demonstrated the positive impacts of procedurally fair and just processes on people impacted by crime, including sexual violence. This includes mitigating the negative psychological impacts of the crime itself, satisfaction with the outcomes of the report, and intentions to report again (Elliott, Thomas & Ogloff 2014; Murphy & Barkworth 2014). While this study did not examine the factors associated with intentions to report again, it is worth noting that the vast majority of respondents who reported positive experiences with police also expressed intentions to report again.

However, it is important that we do not lose sight of the finding that one in five respondents in the sample had adverse experiences when they reported an incident of DAFSV to the police. Also, one in three respondents said they would not report to the police again if they were revictimised. This means that, for these victim-survivors, the criminal justice system did not meet their response needs. This finding is in line with research showing that some victim-survivors of sexual violence experience secondary victimisation after reporting to police (Lorenz, Kirkner & Ullman 2017). Negative reporting experiences can legitimise and reinforce beliefs that victim-survivors will be blamed, stigmatised or not believed, and that engagement with the criminal justice system can be harmful and retraumatising (Moschella, Potter & Moynihan 2020).

In line with previous research (Henry & Powell 2018), we found that reporting experiences were not consistent across the sample. Heterosexual men not only reported DAFSV to police at higher rates, they were most likely to say that their claim was investigated, that it was taken seriously, and that they would report to police again. In comparison, LGB+ respondents and heterosexual women reported more negative experiences reporting to police, especially after reporting online DAFSV. In particular, it is concerning that over a quarter of LGB+ and heterosexual women who reported online DAFSV felt that police did not take their report seriously. In light of this, it is not surprising that LGB+ and heterosexual women were the least likely to say they would report DAFSV to the police again.

The finding that heterosexual men were more likely to report online DAFSV and have positive experiences dealing with the police could be attributable to differences in the nature of the offences that were being reported by this cohort (Murphy & Barkworth 2014). For example, legislative change in Australia over the past decade has resulted in IBSA being taken more seriously by police (Henry, Flynn & Powell 2018; Flynn & Henry 2021) and previous research has suggested that men are significantly more likely than women to report IBSA victimisation (Powell & Henry 2019).

In contrast, legislative and police responses to gender-based hate speech and harassment are limited (Richardson-Self 2021; Weston-Scheuber 2013) and this form of TFSV is disproportionately experienced by LGB+ persons (Powell & Henry 2019). Future research should examine which types of DAFSV and TFSV are most likely to be reported to police and whether police respond differently depending on the nature of the offences reported.

Conclusion

In Australia and internationally, there have been important conversations about how criminal justice systems can be improved to provide a more appropriate response to victim-survivors of sexual violence. Consistent with previous research, the findings from this study highlight the importance of challenging the beliefs of the police, victim-survivors and the community more broadly that online forms of sexual violence are less serious or severe than in-person sexual violence. Not only were victim-survivors of these crimes less likely to report them to the police, they were less satisfied with the response they received when they did.

Further, there is a need to understand in more detail the experiences of LGB+ persons who report sexual violence to the police. The history of police engagement with LGB+ communities has been fraught and the findings from this study demonstrate that we still have a way to go. More research and consultation with LGB+ communities are essential for developing more appropriate policing responses that will in turn increase satisfaction among these communities, as well as re-reporting. Certainly, identifying victim-survivor justice needs and tailoring responses accordingly is critical for improving police responses to DAFSV, TFSV and sexual violence more broadly.

References

URLs correct as at November 2022

- Anderson M, Vogels E & Turner E 2020. *The virtues and downsides of online dating*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/06/the-virtues-and-downsides-of-online-dating/>
- Armstrong EA, Gleckman-Krut M & Johnson L 2018. Silence, power, and inequality: An intersectional approach to sexual violence. *Annual Review of Sociology* 44(1): 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041410>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021. *Sexual violence – Victimisation*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/sexual-violence-victimisation#police-reporting>
- Australian Human Rights Commission 2012. *Working without fear: Results of the 2012 sexual harassment national telephone survey*. Canberra: Australian Human Rights Commission. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/working-without-fear-results-sexual-harassment-national>
- Choi EPH, Wong JYH & Fong DYT 2018. An emerging risk factor of sexual abuse: The use of smartphone dating applications. *Sexual Abuse* 30(4): 343–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063216672168>
- Daly K 2017. Sexual violence and victims' justice interests. In E Zinsstag & M Keenan, *Restorative responses to sexual violence: Legal, social and therapeutic dimensions*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315630595>
- Dunn PC, Vail-Smith K & Knight SM 1999. What date/acquaintance rape victims tell others: A study of college student recipients of disclosure. *Journal of American College Health* 47(5): 213–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448489909595650>
- Elliott I, Thomas S & Ogloff J 2014. Procedural justice in victim-police interactions and victims' recovery from victimisation experiences. *Policing & Society* 24(5): 588–601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2013.784309>
- Flynn A & Henry N 2021. Image-based sexual abuse: An Australian reflection. *Women and Criminal Justice* 31(4): 313–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2019.1646190>
- Henninger AL, Iwasaki M, Carlucci ME & Lating JM 2020. Reporting sexual assault: Survivors' satisfaction with sexual assault response personnel. *Violence Against Women* 26(11): 1362–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219857831>
- Henry N, Flynn A & Powell A 2018. Policing image-based sexual abuse: Stakeholder perspectives. *Police Practice and Research* 19(6): 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1507892>
- Henry N & Powell A 2018. Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 19(2): 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016650189>
- Henry N & Powell A 2016. Sexual violence in the digital age: The scope and limits of criminal law. *Social & Legal Studies* 25(4): 397–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663915624273>
- Heywood W, Myers P, Powell A, Meikle G & Nguyen D 2022. *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*. Melbourne: Social Research Centre. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/publication/2021-nsss-national-report/>
- Lorenz K, Kirkner A & Ullman SE 2019. A qualitative study of sexual assault survivors' post-assault legal system experiences. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 20(3): 263–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2019.1592643>
- Miles-Johnson T 2013. Confidence and trust in police: How sexual identity difference shapes perceptions of police. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 25(2): 685–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2013.12035990>
- Morgan A, Boxall H & Payne J 2022. Reporting to police by intimate partner violence victim-survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Criminology* 55(3): 285–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26338076221094845>

- Moschella EA, Potter SJ & Moynihan MM 2020. Disclosure of sexual violence victimization and anticipated social reactions among lesbian, gay, and bisexual community college students. *Journal of Bisexuality* 20(1): 66–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2020.1715910>
- Murphy K & Barkworth J 2014. Victim willingness to report crime to police: Does procedural justice or outcome matter most? *Victims & Offenders* 9(2): 178–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2013.872744>
- Orchowski LM, Grocott L, Bogen KW, Ilegbusi A, Amstadter AB & Nugent NR 2022. Barriers to reporting sexual violence: A qualitative analysis of #WhyIDidntReport. *Violence Against Women* 28(14): 3530–3553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221092479>
- Powell A & Henry N 2019. Technology-facilitated sexual violence victimization: Results from an online survey of Australian adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34(17): 3637–3665. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516672055>
- Powell A & Henry N 2018. Policing technology-facilitated sexual violence against adult victims: Police and service sector perspectives. *Policing and Society* 28(3): 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2016.1154964>
- Powell MB & Cauchi R 2013. Victims' perceptions of a new model of sexual assault investigation adopted by Victoria Police. *Police Practice and Research* 14(3): 228–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2011.641376>
- Richardson-Self L 2021. *Hate speech against women online: Concepts and countermeasures*. Rowman & Littlefield
- Rowse J, Bolt C & Gaya S 2020. Swipe right: The emergence of dating-app facilitated sexual assault: A descriptive retrospective audit of forensic examination caseload in an Australian metropolitan service. *Forensic Science, Medicine and Pathology* 16(1): 71–77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12024-019-00201-7>
- Weiss KG 2011. Neutralizing sexual victimization: A typology of victims' non-reporting accounts. *Theoretical Criminology* 15(4): 445–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480610391527>
- Weston-Scheuber K 2013. Gender and the prohibition of hate speech. *Queensland University of Technology Law Review* 12(2): 132–150. <https://doi.org/10.5204/qutlr.v12i2.504>
- Woerner J 2022. College students' experiences of dating app facilitated sexual violence and associations with mental health symptoms and well-being. *PsyArXiv*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/y6uka>
- Wolbers H, Boxall H, Long C & Gunnoo A 2022. *Sexual harassment, aggression and violence victimisation among mobile dating app and website users in Australia*. Research Report no. 25. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/rr78740>

Dr Siobhan Lawler is a Senior Research Analyst in the Violence against Women and Children Research Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Dr Hayley Boxall is the Manager of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Violence against Women and Children Research Program.

General editor, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. Note: *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers are peer reviewed. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series, visit the AIC website: www.aic.gov.au

ISSN 1836-2206 ISBN 978 1 922478 88 7 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.52922/ti78887>

©Australian Institute of Criminology 2023

GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

www.aic.gov.au