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Abstract | Anonymous reporting tools for sexual assault contribute to gathering intelligence, reducing crime, increasing reporting and supporting survivors. This article examines victim-survivors' knowledge of and experiences using alternative reporting options, drawing on data collected from a broader study of alternative reporting options for sexual assault. Focus groups with victim-survivors and interviews with support service staff reveal that survivors and support staff are unclear about how authorities use data from alternative reporting tools but can identify preferred designs for a form. Victim-survivors in particular strongly support having an alternative reporting option available.

Alternative reporting options for sexual assault: Perspectives of victim-survivors

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Introduction

In recent years, reports of sexual violence to policing jurisdictions around Australia have increased 30 percent (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). In New South Wales alone, sexual assaults recorded by police jumped 65 percent between March 2020 and March 2021 (Fitzgerald 2021). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found a 13 percent increase in police-recorded victims across Australia in 2021 (ABS 2022). Despite the trends in policing data indicating increases in sexual assault reporting, sexual assault remains significantly under-reported. The 2016 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2017), for instance, shows nine out of 10 female victim-survivors subjected to sexual assault by a male perpetrator did not report the most recent incident to police (87%). A substantial body of feminist research has investigated the challenges associated with formally reporting sexual assault to criminal justice agencies that contribute to consistently low reporting rates nationally and internationally. To address the problem of under-reporting, policing jurisdictions in Australia and overseas have begun developing alternative reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors.

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Anonymous and confidential reporting options refer to written-response interviews that take the form of a self-administered survey (Hope et al. 2013). These informal reports do not constitute an official statement but have the potential to support intelligence gathering and crime mapping. In Australia, anonymous informal reporting options are available in New South Wales (the Sexual Assault Reporting Option, or SARO), Queensland (the Alternative Reporting Option, or ARO) and the Australian Capital Territory (for non-recent sexual assault). Victoria does not have any informal reporting options directly associated with police, but in 2012 the Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA) website tool was developed by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. The purpose of SARA was to provide victim-survivors with the opportunity to disclose their experience, be heard, access services and prevent further harm to others. De-identified SARA reports were also provided to police for gathering intelligence (Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault 2018).

Anonymous reporting tools or platforms are important mechanisms for gathering intelligence, reducing crime rates, increasing reporting and connecting victim-survivors to support services (Heydon & Powell 2018). To date, however, little research has examined the efficacy of anonymous reporting options for the police, victim support services and victim-survivors. In this article, we examine victim-survivors' knowledge of and experiences using alternative reporting options, drawing on data collected from a broader study investigating the purpose, use and potential of anonymous and confidential reporting options for victim-survivors of sexual assault. Specifically, we draw on data collected from focus groups with victim-survivors located across Australia, supplemented with data from interviews with support service workers who also participated in the broader research project. Police participants were also interviewed for this project and their contributions are documented in the main report (Heydon et al. 2023) and forthcoming publications. Given the dearth of knowledge and evaluations of alternative sexual assault reporting options, as well as the increased numbers of victim-survivors seeking alternative platforms to disclose their experiences, the research provides much-needed insights into alternative reporting options from the perspective of Australian victim-survivors.

The first section of the article presents a brief overview of literature on traditional and alternative reporting of sexual assault. The second section describes the aims and method of the current study, and the third section presents the key findings of the research together with a discussion of their implications. The article concludes with recommendations for practice and policymaking.

Literature review

The under-reporting of sexual offences is a significant criminal justice issue. There are complex and valid reasons why victim-survivors choose not to report, including shame and humiliation, fear of police, and retaliation from the perpetrator (Heenan & Murray 2006; Jordan 2008; Rich & Seffrin 2012). Victim-survivors often report negative encounters with police and the criminal justice system, which some scholars describe as a 'secondary victimisation' (Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Taylor & Gassner 2010) or a 'second rape' (Spencer et al. 2018). Rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes shape victim-survivors' perspectives and actions, leading them to downplay their experience as 'not serious enough' to report, or they may blame themselves (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). Barriers to formal reporting can be particularly salient for certain groups who have had previous negative or violent experiences with the police and who lack access to services, such as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender) communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, sex workers, those living in rural areas, people with disabilities, and people in prison (see, for example, Mitra-Kahn, Newbigin & Hardefeldt 2016; Mortimer, Powell & Sandy 2019; Taylor & Gassner 2010).

The deficiencies of formal reporting have led to a shift towards informal reporting options. Internationally, there has been significant growth in the development and use of informal reporting options, including in social media spaces (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020) and digital applications (Liu 2018), and institutional reporting mechanisms associated with the military, universities and the police. For example, since 2005, the US Department of Defense has provided confidential and unrestricted informal options for reporting sexual offences between military personnel (Carson & Carson 2018; Friedman 2007; Rosenstein et al. 2018). Also in the United States, 76 percent of colleges and universities offer confidential reporting options for victim-survivors, with 75 percent of institutions providing completely anonymous reporting options (Richards 2019). Informal reporting options are also starting to be used in Australian universities. In addition to the anonymous and informal options outlined earlier, which are hosted by police and sexual assault services, some Australian universities now host informal reporting options for victim-survivors, witnesses and first responders.

To date, little scholarly attention has been paid to the efficacy of anonymous and informal sexual assault reporting options. Despite their growing use, we identified only three studies examining the impact of alternative reporting on victim-survivors. In the first study, Heffron et al. (2014) spoke to sexual assault nurse examiners, who mentioned that many victim-survivors in crisis do not feel emotionally or physically ready to make a formal report to the police, and therefore it was vital that they had alternative options to record their experience, to seek out a supportive community, and to get help and information. In the second study, Loney-Howes, Heydon and O'Neill (2022) analysed summary level data derived from reports made to a digital reporting tool operated by an Australian rape crisis centre. Their analysis suggests that informal reporting options could offer a positive and timely alternative for victim-survivors. They also found that reports were sufficiently detailed to support the police in crime mapping and intelligence gathering. In the third study, Obada-Obieh, Spagnolo and Beznosov (2020) noted that victim-survivors have concerns about the privacy and security of the data they might share using a third-party reporting platform, especially regarding the traceability of information shared and their anonymity. Victim-survivors in this study also raised concerns about the misuse of personal information by third parties and not having access to support when completing an online form.

The current study

This study was the first of its kind to examine anonymous sexual assault reporting options associated with and administered by law enforcement or victim support services. The research aimed to investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms. (We also documented the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping and how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police. For this aspect of the research, see Heydon et al. 2023.)

The research was guided by the following overarching research question: What is the purpose, use and potential of alternative sexual assault reporting options? This question was supported by the following sub-questions:

- Why do victim-survivors use alternative reporting options?
- What are the experiences of victim-survivors who use alternative reporting options?
- Do victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report to police after using the alternative reporting option?

Method

The research design was underscored by a feminist methodology (see Hesse-Biber 2007), centring the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors of sexual violence gathered through focus groups, alongside interviews with support service workers. Ethics approval for focus groups and interviews was sought from and granted by RMIT University and the University of Wollongong human research ethics committees. Five focus groups were held with 21 sexual violence victim-survivors. Focus groups are a commonly used method for evaluating and planning services (see, for example, Smith, Scammon & Beck 1995). They are qualitatively different to individual interviews because they allow discussion between group members and differences of opinion or inconsistencies between participants to be explored, leading to more nuanced understandings. When a supportive group environment is fostered, focus groups are an effective method for encouraging participants to discuss sensitive topics, particularly as members hear experiences that are similar to theirs and feel a sense of 'safety in numbers' (Frith 2000; Kitzinger 1994). Discussion between group members also allows the researchers to better understand what language and frameworks participants use to describe their experiences (Kitzinger 1994).

Participants were recruited via fliers shared on social media, as well as by our partner organisations and their key contacts. Recruitment criteria required that participants: were over 18 years old, had experienced sexual violence as an adult, were currently residing in Australia, and were comfortable participating in an online focus group with other people to discuss alternative reporting options. The recruitment flier included a link to our project website, where potential participants could read more about the project and focus groups and could express interest in participating through an email link. When we received an expression of interest, we emailed potential participants the participant information sheet and some questions to clarify their eligibility to participate. Once a participant was deemed eligible, and they confirmed their interest after reading the information sheet, we sent them a link to a site where they could elect their preferred focus group date and time.

All 21 participants identified as female, except for one, who identified as female/genderqueer. Participants were aged between 22 and 51, with eight participants identifying as heterosexual, 11 identifying as bisexual, pansexual or queer, and two choosing not to disclose their sexuality. The majority of participants (*n*=16) identified as Caucasian, White, Anglo, Irish or European. Three participants identified their ethnicity as Black, one as Tamil Malaysian and one as biracial.

Focus groups were run on Zoom using a password-protected link available only to focus group participants and the research team. Each focus group was run by two researchers, with safety measures in place to enhance the wellbeing of participants (see Heydon et al. 2023 for details). Focus groups ran for two hours, and participants were provided a $100 voucher to compensate them for their time. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by OutScribe Transcription. The research team then de-identified the transcripts and gave participants a pseudonym, then thematically coded the transcripts using NVivo 12 software (Braun & Clarke 2006). The coding scheme was developed taking into consideration the research questions and dividing an initial coding scheme into three high-level codes—experiences, impacts and reflections—with sub-codes under each of these three codes. Due to the interpretive nature of the coding scheme and the small sample used to generate initial insights into an under-explored topic, we used double-coding to ensure we were conceptually engaging with the data in a similar way, and to agree on ways to interpret the data if any discrepancies arose (O'Connor & Joffe 2020).

In addition to focus groups with victim-survivors, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant staff in sexual assault support services (*n*=14). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a reciprocal engagement with a pre-determined set of thematic questions between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman 2012). Questions were open-ended with prompts to assist both the interviewer and interviewee to explore a particular idea, phenomenon or experience in depth (Bryman 2012). Interviews were determined to be the most appropriate method for collecting data from support workers, because they could be open and honest about their experiences and views. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Interviews ran for 60 minutes and covered a range of questions about the participant's organisational engagement with anonymous reporting of sexual assault. The interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim by OutScribe Transcription. The research team then de-identified the transcripts and assigned a codename to each participant according to their role within their organisation. Interviews were coded using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) using NVivo 12 software. The coding scheme was developed taking into consideration our research questions, and three researchers coded two interviews to ensure they were interpreting the data similarly. Sub-codes were then developed based on the common themes that emerged in each primary code.

In both the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked about their use of alternative reporting options, the reporting process and their impressions of or responses to specific forms currently in use or formerly in use in Australia or overseas. This included the SARO form used by the NSW Police Force and the SARA form formerly used in Victoria and hosted by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault.

Results and discussion

Why do victim-survivors use alternative reporting options?

Drawing on focus group discussions with 21 victim-survivors and 14 semi-structured interviews with support service workers, we identified five key reasons why victim-survivors of sexual violence use, or may prefer to use, alternative reporting options:

- because of fear or intimidation associated with formal reporting;
- to regain power and control;
- to document their experiences;
- to protect the community; and
- to gain access to support services.

Fear or intimidation of formal reporting

In our focus groups with victim-survivors, only two out of 21 participants had used an alternative reporting option, both having used the SARO in New South Wales; however, other victim-survivors said that they would have used one if they had known it was available. Of the two participants who had used alternative reporting, Bonnie (FG1) said she used the SARO because she did not want to make a formal police report. She was in a relationship with the person who assaulted her, she understood the 'high level of proof that's required to convict someone of sexual assault' and she knew she would 'need a lot of evidence' and that her case would have been 'complex and difficult to establish'. Bonnie was also having difficulties recognising the experience as sexual assault and she did not want to be questioned by police.

Bonnie said she felt the SARO was a 'safer way' of making some form of report where she felt 'somewhat in control of the situation' and she was 'reassured to know that it wouldn't go any further'. Bonnie said she thought it was a good tool for 'encouraging people who wouldn't necessarily report otherwise because it's a less intimidating way of doing so'. Similarly, Quinn (FG2), who had also used the SARO, said 'the thought of going to the police station is terrifying for most victims, so the fact that you can do something online from the safety of your own home, that's definitely a positive there'.

Regaining power and control

Support workers noted that victim-survivors use alternative reporting options as a means of regaining power and control after being subjected to sexual violence. Support workers felt that alternative reporting options provided victim-survivors an 'in-between' or 'third' option when they wanted to do something but were too scared or not ready to go to police:

> It's more probably when they're in that tussle between, "I feel I should do something, but I don't want to. I'm overwhelmed with the idea of going to police, but it just doesn't feel right to do nothing". It's kind of the third option, or the other option in those scenarios … (Vic support worker 1)

Most focus group participants held poor perceptions of the police, with many having had negative firsthand experiences of formal reporting. There was a common perception among victim-survivors that, once they make a formal report, their case will be out of their hands. Some victim-survivors felt that an informal reporting option would be a way to maintain control over the reporting process. Having more reporting options was seen as an important way victim-survivors could regain some control, power and autonomy:

> … when you're assaulted, like it just takes away all of your autonomy and you're like I don't have any … I have no say in what's happening, everything's been taken away from me, and like you can't even report it on your own terms, it's on the police's terms. And with [an informal reporting] form, at least you can take a miniscule amount of power back and try and be like, at least I can control how to report it. (Maggie FG5)

Documenting experiences

Another important reason victim-survivors were attracted to the idea of an informal reporting option was that it allowed them to tell their story on their own terms, in their own time and in a comfortable space. They compared this to formal reporting, where they thought they would need to finish the police statement in one go, often in an uncomfortable environment, with police officers whom they may not feel safe with.

> In a sense it did feel kind of a relief to have that on the page and you know it's going somewhere, like a database or a record, that's kind of another perspective. It's nice to have it out there a little bit.
>
> … in some ways it did feel a little validating to be asked that in questions and to write down details. (Bonnie FG1)

Community protection

Victim-survivors and support service participants suggested another key reason why victim-survivors use alternative reporting options is as a form of community safety, protecting other people from the perpetrator.

Some victim-survivors in our focus groups also discussed the potential for an alternative reporting option to form a database where repeat offenders could be identified, allowing police to contact survivors only if someone else made a report about the same offender. This would not only protect others but also create 'power in numbers' if criminal charges were laid:

> … a lot of people's experiences or motivations to report is to protect others from experiencing harm. I think that's a really common desire to not have that happen to anyone else … If there was a circle back option, I think I would find that really comforting to know that there was power in numbers almost, that it was actually contributing to something more. (Violet FG1)

Access to support

Finally, victim-survivors use alternative reporting to access support. For example, victim-survivor SARO reports allow victim-survivors to access victim support services and victim recognition payments. When SARA was in operation, support workers made follow-up calls to all reporters who left contact details to see if they wanted further support.

Participants also reflected that victim-survivors used alternative reporting options to inform support workers about their experiences without expressing this directly or verbally. Some victim-survivors used alternative reporting options to formally acknowledge what happened beyond the therapeutic setting, even if they did not plan to take the report further. Using alternative reporting thus made the process much more formal than just talking to a counsellor. For some victim-survivors, 'putting it out there' (Vic support worker 4) gives them closure on what happened and enables them to make decisions about their next steps. One support worker indicated that 'clients had found [SARA] very, very empowering and very, very helpful', especially the 'option of support and acknowledgement, but without pressure to go any further' (Vic support worker 1).

Summary

In summary, while most victim-survivors said that they wanted more options than either reporting to police or doing nothing, they had differing views about how alternative reports should be used, who should host the platform, and what outcomes they desired after submitting an alternative report. Some wanted their experiences to be counted and reflected in sexual assault statistics so that adequate services could be provided, while others wanted it to serve more of a purpose, such as forming a database so repeat offenders could be identified. Some victim-survivors saw alternative reporting as a pathway to making a formal report, yet others wanted the platform to sit completely outside of the criminal justice system. While there were diverse views on what purpose an alternative reporting system should serve and how it should be run, victim-survivors resoundingly agreed that there needed to be alternative pathways for sexual assault victim-survivors to report their experiences, stressing that any alternative reporting option needs to be trauma-informed and well designed.

What are the experiences of victim-survivors who use the alternative reporting option?

As noted above, only two victim-survivors in our focus groups had used an alternative reporting option. In this section, we describe their experiences as well as the expert knowledge and experiences of key stakeholders who recounted to us, second hand, what victim-survivors' experiences were. In addition, as we showed focus group participants the different alternative reporting options, we elicited their views on what it might have been like for them, hypothetically, to complete those forms.

Regarding the two participants who had completed an alternative reporting form, Bonnie (FG1) said that she found writing down her experience somewhat validating, and she was relieved to know her story was recorded in some form. Quinn (FG2), who had also used the SARO, had a more negative experience:

> [The SARO form was] just so brutal and long-winded and yeah, I didn't like it, didn't like it. And then [to] find out that it didn't do anything, I was like "great, why did I do that?"

Both Bonnie and Quinn expressed similar disappointment and frustration that the SARO did not have further scope beyond collecting their reports, describing it as a 'dead end' and 'high-level census data', rather than something that could hold the perpetrator to account. Support service workers from Victoria expressed similar concerns about the SARA and suggested victim-survivors were confused about what they were actually achieving by submitting a SARA. While SARA was marketed as a reporting tool, support service workers perceived it more as a disclosure tool. This was not clearly communicated to victim-survivors:

> I think that the tool looked like a disclosure tool but some of the questions, or some of the positions around, "That we may share this information", I can't even remember what it said exactly, but the sharing of the information with the police suggest[ed] that it's a reporting tool … And so, again, it's like, "well, do survivors know that?" (Vic support worker 5)

Given that the nature, purpose and use of SARA was unclear, one support worker suggested that SARA operated as 'reporting for the sake of reporting' and that it simplified the processes associated with reporting sexual assault:

> I guess just reporting for the sake of reporting, it's not fair to the victim survivor. They don't know that that's what's happening. They don't understand the system. They don't understand what happens, and we don't often [either]. It's complicated and convoluted. They just think they're telling the right people if you call something reporting. (Vic support worker 3)

Support workers expressed similar concerns about the lack of appropriate responses after a victim-survivor submits a report. As one support worker from Brisbane said, if nothing happens afterwards it could lead victim-survivors to feel further disempowered:

> … the frustration is to feel like you're going to report and nothing will happen, because … what's really traumatic about reporting is the experience, again the lack of control you experienced once when you were assaulted … So, taking the decision to go and tell your story and nothing will come out of that complaint, it's again a reminder for victims that they have no control over this, that there's nothing they can do, and that they better just be silent, they better just be ignored. (Qld support worker 1)

Understanding the nature of the form and potential outcomes is crucial to ensuring victim-survivors are fully informed. Victim-survivors may experience significant emotional distress while filling in alternative reporting forms and must be given clear and concise information about what will happen with their report.

When shown the forms in the focus groups, the other victim-survivors found the SARO form too confronting. For instance, Julia (FG3) had considered making a SARO report but decided not to after finding out 'they don't really do anything with it apart from put it in the system, and then it does nothing, it just sits there'. She also found the questions on the form 'very confronting'.

Many support workers suggested that the language and terminology used in the form can create negative experiences for victim-survivors. For example, one participant suggested that the questions were 'a bit cold' and could make victim-survivors 'feel a little bit like you've done things wrong, you know, or if you didn't attend a hospital or something like that' (NSW support worker 5). In other words, the experience might cause victim-survivors to feel there is a 'correct' process they should have followed after being sexual assaulted, such as attending a hospital or medical practitioner immediately, when in reality few victim-survivors take this path.

Support workers felt the length of SARO might also be challenging for victim-survivors. One suggested that victim-survivors completing the forms would potentially need to 'go away and come back to it multiple times' (Vic support worker 2). The length of the form may ultimately result in victim-survivors not completing it. As a support worker from New South Wales remarked, 'the more steps you put into that process, the higher the chance is that they're not going to make it. They're going to drop off' (NSW support worker 3).

Support workers also described the emotional experiences of victim-survivors completing an alternative reporting form, with some suggesting the SARO form could be 'quite shocking to read' (NSW support worker 5), or that completing the form is 'daunting', 'draining' and 'overwhelming' for victim-survivors (NSW support worker 4; NSW support worker 2; Vic support worker 5). Other support workers described the experience of completing SARO as 'triggering' and 'near impossible for a victim to complete', and that it was more onerous to complete a SARO than an application for victim services (NSW support worker 3). Some were particularly concerned about younger and vulnerable community members filling out the form alone.

To mitigate retraumatisation, some support workers said that they use alternative reporting tools during counselling sessions with victim-survivors. For instance, one support worker said that she often fills out the form on behalf of her clients with their consent, while another said she always does the form with the victim-survivor.

Support workers also indicated that completing alternative reporting forms may provide victim-survivors with some insight into the experience of making a formal report and may help to ease the anxiety or intimidation victim-survivors feel about going to the police. However, victim-survivors also clearly wanted their report to be meaningful in some way and not just sit in a database. As Ruth (FG5) said, 'I need to know that it accomplishes something, that there's a reason I'm doing this.'

Do victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report to police after using the alternative reporting option?

The two victim-survivors in our focus groups who had used an alternative reporting option did not go on to make a formal report to the police afterwards. Nonetheless, during the focus group discussions, some participants thought that alternative reporting may be a pathway to making a formal report, a way to 'dip your toe in' (Aubrey FG2) to the formal reporting process and have more control over when, how and whether to start the formal reporting process.

While our data do not show whether victim-survivors go on to make formal reports to the police after completing informal reports, support workers mentioned examples of police following up (or not following up) on informal reports. For instance, one support worker said it was 'rare' that the police would follow up on the alternative report, while others said that police sought to contact victim-survivors quite frequently when they had located an offender. Two workers thought follow-ups were likely only when a serial offender was identified (NSW support worker 7 & Vic support worker 5). Importantly, following up on alternative reporting can only be possible if victim-survivors choose not to remain anonymous.

While some victim-survivors wanted a system that flagged repeat perpetrators, as explored earlier, proceeding to a court case and criminal charges was not necessarily the outcome they wanted. Some victim-survivors desired other forms of accountability. Indeed, many victim-survivors saw alternative reporting platforms as an alternative to police reporting altogether, rather than a pathway to making a formal police report. There was a strong desire among focus group participants for alternative mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable outside of the formal justice process. This view was informed by victim-survivors' negative experiences of reporting to the police, and a desire for other options for accountability and justice that are less onerous for victim-survivors. As Josie (FG4) said:

> The justice system is just one path, or the criminal system is one pathway, but it's not what everyone wants … It is a very stressful, emotionally exhausting, long, drawn out process that not everyone wants. Why are there not other options? Why is there just one option or way forward?

Conclusion and recommendations

This article presents the perspectives of sexual assault victim-survivors on how alternative options for reporting might be used. These perspectives are represented directly, as quotes from victim-survivors who participated in focus groups, and indirectly as commentary on reporting processes from support service staff who participated in interviews. In both cases, participants were presented with examples of alternative reporting forms, including the current SARO, run by the NSW Police Force, and the now-discontinued SARA, previously operated by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault in Victoria. Participants were also asked open-ended questions about both alternative reporting options and formal police procedures for making a complaint.

The findings represent valuable new insights into the relatively recent phenomenon of alternative reporting options for sexual assault from the victim-survivor perspective. As alternative reporting is becoming increasingly popular across a range of settings, including university campuses, military bases, public transport and workplaces, it is vital to investigate what victim-survivors think about the option to report their experiences informally.

The findings show that victim-survivors are not all in agreement about some procedural aspects of alternative reporting options. We found that there were conflicting data relating to participants' beliefs about how police use the forms, whether a report needed to be processed by police at all and whether making an informal report was a pathway to making a formal police report. Participants were unclear whether police used the information from alternative reports in investigations and whether police would or should follow up with the reporter. Whereas victim-survivors who had used the SARO seemed to be clear that they did not expect the form to be anything other than a 'dead end', support workers were concerned that victim-survivors would expect more concrete results. Importantly, there were mixed opinions about where any alternative reporting option should be located, or who should host such a scheme. This was apparent from responses from victim-survivors who supported alternative pathways to perpetrator accountability outside the justice system.

However, there was consistency in participants' contributions about the need for an alternative to the formal complaints process, and also about what the form should look like. Participants agreed that it should be trauma-informed and not too long, that it should use clear and non-invasive questions and language, and that it should provide clear options for future contact. In practice, though, the opacity of police and legal procedure meant that the victim-survivors were suspicious or critical of the way that alternative reports might be used by the justice system. Victim-survivors stressed that alternative reporting options must avoid reproducing the problems with formal reporting, such as by removing a victim-survivor's autonomy from the reporting process.

These findings lead to several overarching conclusions, which can usefully contribute to recommendations for improving current reporting options and developing future schemes:

- Victim-survivors of sexual violence, and those who work with them, want alternative reporting options.
- Clear information must be provided to potential users and stakeholders about the role, purpose and use of data collected through the reporting forms, including in investigations and any future contact with police and support services.
- There must be an opportunity for the user to indicate how they want their data to be used.
- Reporting forms must be trauma-informed and designed according to the expressed preferences of victim-survivors.
- Further research is needed to identify the needs of diverse communities that may require access to an alternative reporting option but are not adequately served by mainstream services.
- Extensive user experience testing in a safe and trauma-informed environment must be undertaken before implementing the alternative reporting scheme.
- Users must be given clear explanations of the processes associated with alternative reporting tools, including what the tool can and cannot do and when to expect follow-up contact if requested by the user.

There are significant limitations to our research in that we consulted only a small number of victim-survivors. Our research findings cannot be generalised to all the diverse communities who might require access to an alternative reporting option, and as the fifth recommendation above suggests, further research must be undertaken to identify the needs of those communities not adequately served by mainstream services. This includes communities such as LGBTQ+ people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those with disabilities, those living in institutional care settings, and young people.

This article has presented findings from research with victim-survivors and support services to prioritise the voices of those most affected by reporting schemes. While other findings from our broader research project provide greater detail about the investigative or therapeutic impacts of informal or alternative reporting of sexual violence, we hope that this article will assist policymakers and administrators to respond first and foremost to the needs of victim-survivors when creating alternative reporting pathways.

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