

2018

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### Recommended Citation

Lizarraga, Viviana and Terry, April (2018) "Sexual Violence in Rural Places: Policy Implication for First-Responding Law Enforcement Officers," *Academic Leadership Journal in Student Research*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/aljsr/vol5/iss1/5>

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# Sexual Violence in Rural Places: Policy Implication for First-Responding Law Enforcement Officers

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## **Abstract**

Sexual violence is a public health issue impacting many Americans, with girls and women disproportionately victimized. While sexual offenses remain underreported, media has recently spotlighted high-profile cases. However, understanding sexual assaults in rural areas remains absent in mainstream conversation. Studies show rural communities are not smaller versions of their urban neighbors as they harbor old-fashioned values, maintain secrecy, and rely on informal social controls that influence how citizens respond to sexual violence, including law enforcement. Yet, existing literature on law enforcement responses to sexual violence are mostly centralized in urban areas with a focus on the investigative process, ignoring rural dynamics and the impact first-responding law enforcement officers have on survivor perceptions

of policing practices. As such, the current review summarizes the impact law enforcement has on sexual violence survivors, focusing on rural policing, and ending with an all-encompassing policy to better serve both law enforcement and sexual violence survivors.

*Keywords:* sexual violence, rural, law enforcement, policy

## **Sexual Violence in Rural Places: Policy Implication for First-Responding Law Enforcement Officers**

Sexual violence is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of sexual acts including sexual assault and rape amongst youth and adults (RAINN, 2020). Approximately one in two women have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime (Pina et al., 2009) with nearly one-half reporting their victimization prior to the age of 18 (Rennison, 2001; Saar et al., 2015). Sexual violence is also a pervasive problem disproportionately affecting college-aged women in the United States (Stoll et al., 2017; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Yet, sexual assaults remain mostly unreported; when survivors do report, research finds law enforcement responses can significantly impact the process (Morabito et al., 2017; Venema et al., 2020). Responses from both formal (e.g., law enforcement) and informal (e.g., family and friends) disclosures may vary based on local (rural versus urban) and the broader culture. Over the past few years, the media has spotlighted sexual assaults and rape due to high-profile cases (e.g., Harvey Weinstein), garnering some attention for the systemic sexual harassment and abuse endured by many.

With media outlets granting airtime to a previously silenced epidemic, individuals have come together to form groups such as “It’s on Us,” “Time’s Up,” and to reconvene attention to Tarana Burke’s “Me too” movement through the #MeToo campaign (Lathan et al., 2019). Yet, just as these movements have shown, most attention has focused on media glamorized cases, and despite mainstream conversations on sexual assault (Ben-Asher, 2019; Franssen, 2020), local and broader sexualized culture, which perpetuates an altered sense of *real* sexual assault, may remain unchanged (Terry, 2018). Specifically, rural communities are known for their anonymity, privacy from others, and reliance on informal control mechanisms (Terry, 2020; Websdale, 1998). At times, these same communities take on a “mind your own business” mentality (Edwards et al., 2015) where knowing one’s neighbor makes rural citizens more likely to side with perpetrators than survivors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009). Most research has focused on sexual violence in urbanized areas, neglecting awareness of unique differences in rural communities (Terry, 2018). This paper spotlights sexual violence in rural communities,

focusing on barriers to reporting, and proposing a much-needed policy geared primarily for first-responding law enforcement.

### **Sexual Violence Prevalence**

Every year, more than 430,000 sexually motivated victimizations occur in the U.S. (RAINN, 2020; Venema et al., 2020). Approximately 17-25% of women and 1-3% of men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006). Most survivors of sexual assault are under 30 years-of-age, but individuals between the ages of 18 and 34 have the highest risk of being victimized (Papalia et al., 2017; RAINN, 2020). When further studying survivors and perpetrators, it is believed around 19.5% of sexual assaults are committed by a stranger, leaving around 80% of cases involving parties who are familiar with each other (Loannou et al., 2017; RAINN, 2020) in small communities, both parties, as well as law enforcement actors, likely have pre-existing relationships.

As prevalent as sexual violence may be within the U.S., sexual violence against women remains severely underreported (Johnson, 2017). In fact, it is the most underreported violent crime (Rennison, 2002) with an estimated 32% being formally reported (Planty et al., 2013). The lack of formal reporting is due to several possible reasons. These explanations include fear of retaliation, thinking police will not help, believing the assault was a private matter (Taylor & Gassner, 2010) or not important, and fear of getting the perpetrator in trouble, especially if it was someone the survivor knew (Johnson, 2017; Lathan et al., 2019). In rural places, informal social controls (Carrington, 2007), and the “good ole’ boy network” (Websdale, 1998) may prevent a survivor from speaking publicly; again, a unique aspect of rural culture (Rennison et al., 2013). While rural communities may seek their neighbors for help to prevent public crimes (e.g., vandalism), rural men rely on other male friends, including law enforcement, to maintain the patriarchal status quo, preventing neighbors from acting on behalf of the common good (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009).

Cultural norms and legal proceedings may lead to significant psychological and health problems (Shaw et al., 2017; Thurston et al., 2019). This includes increased symptoms of depression, at times suicidal ideation and behavior (Cochran, 2019; RAINN, 2020), and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Shaw et al., 2017; Venema et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have shown the experience the survivor has with law enforcement and the criminal justice system can also have a significant impact on future reporting and their own well-being (Lorenz et al., 2019). When a survivor reports a negative encounter with law enforcement, they often feel violated, anxious, and blame themselves for the assault (Best & Jun, 2017; Shaw

et al., 2017), resulting in secondary victimization (Jackson et al., 2017; Untied et al., 2018). Since law enforcement officers are typically the first-responders, their actions may provide survivors with the first impression of how the case will proceed. With negative interactions, survivors are hesitant to report future crimes and involve the police (Morabito et al., 2017; Venema et al., 2020).

### **Unique Rural Aspects**

Most disciplines overlook the unique aspects of rural areas. Yet, the studies that do exist, recognize rural communities are not smaller versions of their urban counterparts (Terry & Williams, 2019; Terry, 2020; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2008). Rather, rural communities operate under a distinct cultural value system (Terry, 2020) that welcomes traditional and generational beliefs (Terry & Williams, 2019; DeKeseredy et al., 2007). Residents of rural communities often describe their hometowns as *close-knit* where religious affiliation and family reputation hold access to a much different rural experience than those outside the margins (Terry, 2018; Terry, 2020). Due to the close relationships, individuals are usually more watchful and vigilant of criminal activity and unexpected happenings (Weisheit & Wells, 1996). Police interactions with rural community members tend to be more casual and informal (Liederbach & Frank, 2003) and rural officers are more likely to know the perpetrators, victims, and their families, as well as the history and culture in the area (Weisheit et al., 1994). While this familiarity could lead to strong community bonds, it can also generate discretion in proceeding informally (Weisheit et al., 1994). Small-town police officers are torn between the idea of the “big-city professional” and maintaining close community relations (Falcone et al., 2002). Yet, these close relationships generate concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and stigma associated with receiving certain services in rural areas (Leston et al., 2012; Sexton et al., 2008). Even when survivors are willing to reach out for official support, geographical accessibility is a barrier for rural survivors, with fewer services available (Borders & Booth, 2007) and longer travel times, impeding the process (Logan et al., 2005).

Many times, rural communities rely on informal social controls (Websdale, 1998), without interference of law enforcement (Donnermeyer, 2015). As one example, scholars studying interpersonal violence in rural areas found rural communities are less willing to help survivors as an attempt to mind one’s own business and not disrupt community reputations (Donnermeyer, 2015; Edwards et al., 2015). Formal reporting in rural areas may be perceived by some as *snitching* (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009), as law enforcement officers are typically members of the community, familiar with citizens, engaged in friendships, and even blood-relations, with

those involved (Falcone et al., 2002; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2017). Survivors may believe the perpetrator will not be arrested, due to friendships between the perpetrator and police (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Rennison et al., 2013). Due to these dense social networks, individuals and their rural communities may respond differently to sexual violence than their metro-neighbors (Terry, 2018; Terry & Williams, 2019). This deep collective nature may inhibit intervening, reporting, and even acting ethically by professionals such as law enforcement (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). Few studies exist on the impact of rural policing on sexual assaults; yet, if a survivor decides to take legal action, which is rare in rural communities, they report longer police wait times due to their isolated geographic location (Logan et al., 2005). Additionally, law enforcement may have established friendships or be relatives to the accused party, resulting in less anonymity and more concern for unbiased assistance (Lewis, 2003).

### **Law Enforcement Responses**

Some survivors report positive experiences with the police, suggesting law enforcement provides emotional support and assistance (Greeson et al., 2016b), while other findings illustrate negative encounters with law enforcement (Greeson et al., 2016b; Morabito et al., 2017; Venema et al., 2020). Even with several positive findings, some studies find survivors do not perceive trained officers to be more open and engaged (Rosenbaum, 1987). When survivors do report being unhappy, findings demonstrate both short and long-term consequences, making improvements to this process crucial.

**Rape Culture.** Law enforcement officers' reactions to sexual assault cases may be due to *rape culture*. Rape culture not only excuses sexual victimization, but also places blame on the survivor (Greeson et al., 2016b). Rape culture can further explain why some hold myths regarding sexual violence. Baldwin-White et al. (2016), defined rape myths as, "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists, creating climate that is hostile to rape victims" (p. 636). Some examples of rape myths include statements such as, "It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped" and "If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control" (Baldwin-White et al., 2016, p. 642). These beliefs have led some investigators to make insensitive statements that ultimately blame the victim (Park et al., 2018). Sadly, officers who possess high endorsement of rape myths are also more likely to dismiss cases as *false reports*. Officers in this category may dismiss false reports in 50-80% of cases when the true rate is less than 10% (Lisak et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2010).

**Victim Reaction.** In addition to rape culture, research has shown law enforcement officers may hold misperceptions regarding responses to trauma and how survivors should behave (Franklin et al., 2020). First-responders may fail to consider behaviors such as restricted affect, emotional numbing, and avoidance behaviors such as eye contact (Ask, 2010). Trauma responses may also include amnesia or fragmented recollection of events (Mason & Lodrick, 2013). If survivors' behavior does not match the prescribed expectations, police may question the credibility of the victim (Campbell & Raja, 2005). Unfortunately, in rural areas, personal reputation leads some to question the believability of reporting parties (Terry, 2018; Terry & Williams, 2019; Terry, 2020). When survivors feel they are not being taken seriously, or that they are being blamed for their victimization, trauma symptoms can be exacerbated (Franklin et al., 2020).

**Ideal Victims.** At times, rape myths paint inaccurate images of *ideal* or *real* victims. A *real* sexual assault is portrayed as an offense demonstrating a great deal of physical violence or resistance involving strangers. Less stereotypical cases, those involving no proof of physical violence and assaults occurring between parties who know one another, unfortunately, are perceived as less believable (Thapar-Bjorkert, & Morgan, 2010). In rural places, most individuals know one another, producing victim-offender relations that are generally non-stranger. Preconceived perceptions can influence the interview process of law enforcement (Lathan et al., 2019; Venema, 2016). Law enforcement tactics may result in survivors feeling interrogated (Greeson et al., 2016b). Once the survivor feels they cannot trust law enforcement, they may perceive betrayal (Lathan et al., 2019) and lose confidence in the system (Johnson, 2017). Survivors are managing their trauma while investigators are concerned with building a case (Jordan, 2001), and as previous studies have shown, most research has focused on the investigation process, not immediate contact with survivors by law enforcement officers.

### **Law Enforcement Training**

Law enforcement generally serve as the first-responders to sexual assault cases but standard detailed training on sexual violence is nearly nonexistent (Greeson et al., 2016b; Venema et al., 2020). Determining a national existence of sexual assault-specific training is difficult (Tidmarsh et al., 2020). Training focus also varies from providing information on laws, decreasing stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes (attitudinal change), improving soft skills (e.g., interviewing tactics) and teaching awareness of trauma reactions. In a recent analysis, Venema et al. (2020) found only 32% of police agencies in North Carolina provided sexual

assault training to their officers. In Illinois, law enforcement only received about 30 minutes of specialized training on sexual assault until recently; at the time, the training only focused on the laws and the crime (Venema et al., 2020). Many staff reported their training did not include information about interacting with survivors experiencing symptoms of trauma such (Venema et al., 2020).

Some agencies have worked to increase feelings of preparedness and comfort levels while seeking to impact attitude perceptions. Darwinkel et al. (2013) examined victim-blaming attitudes and negative perceptions regarding case authorization for sexual assaults through a four-week mandatory intensive course for officers specializing in sexual crime investigations. The training provided information on the “whole story” approach to investigative work. The training presented concepts such as grooming and how a victim may find themselves in an unwarranted situation. Participation in this training resulted in perception changes by the law enforcement officers as well as higher confidence levels in believing sexual assault cases would go to prosecution (Darwinkel et al., 2013). Tidmarsh et al. (2019) also compared pre and post-test measures on confidence of skills needed to investigate sexual offenses, for those engaged in specialized training and found changed perceptions post-completion. Specifically, the specially trained officers placed greater importance on empathy, increasing communication, and remaining open-minded (Tidmarsh et al., 2019). Tidmarsh et al. (2019) replicated Darwinkel et al.’s (2013) study and added a 9 to 12-month follow-up to examine the long-term impact of the training. Researchers found the only factor that returned to pre-training levels was the confidence that the case would be prosecuted (Tidmarsh et al., 2019). However, these findings have not been consistent within the literature. Lonsway et al. (2001) engaged two groups of law enforcement officers in sexual offending training, one group for 30 minutes and a second group for 2.5 hours. The results showed that neither training program influenced the officers’ rape myth acceptance although the training did improve practical skills, including interviewing (Lonsway et al., 2001).

Further, Lonsway et al. (2001) engaged officers in one-hour of sexual assault specific training while a second group received four hours. The researchers anticipated those receiving more intensive training would have improvements in interviewing techniques. Officers receiving the lengthier training demonstrated improved assessment techniques during sexual assault interview stimulations (Lonsway et al., 2001). In other studies involving sexual assault specific training, law enforcement participants found the suspect interrogation training most helpful; unfortunately, they reported training on soft skills such as interacting with survivors as least helpful (Venema et al., 2020). Overall, staff reported some improvement in technical abilities but



less so in interpersonal skills. Most studies in the literature focused on training for investigative officers, not patrol officers responding *first* to sexual assaults and rapes.

Specific information regarding the content of trauma-informed trainings have been extremely limited, likely due to the uncommonness in law enforcement agencies. However, Damian et al. (2019) completed a study assessing the perceived usefulness of trauma-informed training in different service sectors in Baltimore City. This nine-month training focused on the understanding of what trauma entails, the impact it has on individuals, and the appropriate behavior when responding to individuals experiencing trauma (Damian et al., 2019). These focal points were aimed to diminish negative attitudes towards individuals experiencing trauma while highlighting the importance of physical, psychological, and emotional safety (Damian et al., 2019).

A similar training protocol in Kentucky evaluated a 40-hour statewide sexual assault investigation training program implemented in 2017 (Campbell et al., 2019). The researchers measured self-reported rape myth acceptance, knowledge of state laws, and awareness of trauma-informed practices in the short and long-term. The findings were indicative of decreased rape myth acceptance, and increased knowledge of state laws and trauma-informed care. These outcomes were maintained long-term (Campbell et al., 2019) and are promising for all law enforcement agencies. In a Norwegian study, officers were presented with video-recorded statements with varying emotional displays, including victims in despair and victims with flat affect, due to trauma responses. Officers rated victims in despair as more credible than those with incongruent emotional affect (Bollingmo et al., 2008). Formal, official training is a must in helping equip first-responder law enforcement personnel with evidence-based practices when responding to traumatic events, including sexual violence (Taylor & Gassner, 2010). This can help survivors feel heard, be taken seriously, and to encourage seeking justice (Lorenz & Maskaly, 2018).

### **Summary of Rural Sexual Violence and Response**

Estimates suggested around 20% of women in the U.S. experience sexual violence (Black et al. 2011; Fisher et al., 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006). This percentage is even greater for some groups (e.g., college-aged women) while estimates are likely grossly underreported (Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Taylor & Gassner, 2010). Of the cases that are formally reported, even fewer are prosecuted, at times, due to negative police interactions (Venema et al., 2020). For a variety of reasons, some survivors do not report their assaults, including negative perceptions of law enforcement (Best & Jun, 2017; Shaw et al., 2017).

Standards of an *ideal victim* that thrive under rape culture and misconceptions of trauma responses, create hostile and unaccepting environments for sexual assault survivors (Venema, 2016). In rural areas, law enforcement may operate differently, as rural communities possess their own old-fashioned views, many times, encouraging the silencing of formal reporting (Terry, 2018). Law enforcement officers in rural places must also balance standards of professionalism with maintaining close interpersonal connections with the residents (Falcone et al., 2002; Weisheit et al., 1994). Yet, few law enforcement agencies are fully trained to deal with trauma specific to sexual assault survivors in any geographic location (Venema et al., 2020) and most current studies focus on investigators, rather than officers who first engage with survivors. With increased risks for future revictimization for survivors of sexual violence (Best & Jun, 2017), mandatory law enforcement training is a must, not just for those in advanced investigative positions.

### **Policy Implications**

Although there are many policy implications based on the provided content review, the current paper focuses on one all-encompassing policy, training on trauma-informed approaches for law enforcement first-responders, tailored specifically with unique rural dynamics in-mind. This policy is rooted in evidence and holds strong promise in improving working relationships with survivors of sexual violence, and beyond (Greeson et al., 2016a; Rich, 2019). The goal for this policy is to educate officers on how their actions and behaviors can affect the survivor by providing first-responder officers with the tools to properly assist survivors, on-site. This training would address rural culture, blurred boundaries for professionals, and awareness of trauma responses. Increased knowledge and confidence in responding to sexual assaults may also lead to greater job satisfaction and a reduction in secondary victimization.

### **Law Enforcement Training Priorities**

The research is replete with recommendations for sexual assault specific training for law enforcement. However, training priorities may vary based on individual agency and location (Venema et al., 2020) and should be tailored for all, even across rural locations (Weisheit et al., 1994). First, local, regional, and national law enforcement standards should mandate training specific to sexual assault and rape calls. Further educating law enforcement professionals on the impact of trauma, providing a victim-centered sensitive approach to reporting, can greatly increase working relationships and perceived care and legitimacy of police (Venema, 2016; Venema et al., 2020). Additionally, first-responder law enforcement training on sexual assault

and rape would target the discrepancy between using one's training on detecting deception (Lathan et al., 2019) and responding to the needs of survivors (Lorenz & Maskaly, 2018; Venema et al., 2020), especially in rural places. Training that teaches officers appropriate behavioral cues when assisting sexual assault survivors can increase the reporting rate and strengthen officer-survivor relationships.

Training specific to sexual assault and rape should involve several components. Shaw et al. (2017) stated in order to implement policy change, a behavioral change approach, as opposed to a value change approach, is a must. Thus, rather than attempting to change law enforcement professional's values and beliefs surrounding trauma, staff should be trained based on research (Shaw et al., 2017) and cultural sensitivity. Law enforcement professionals must be provided with evidence-based trauma-informed knowledge (Taylor & Gassner, 2010) including unique aspects of rural living. For example, when victims in rural communities choose to report, they must contend with entrenched close relationships of perpetrators, the community, and system professionals. First-responders' training must consider the dense acquaintanceships that exist within rural areas, including how to maintain professional obligations even when personal relationships are involved. Once this is established, the second component should include training on trauma-informed care, specifically, understanding the diverse responses to trauma, the impact on secondary victims, and how survivors in small communities may respond to trauma differently.

The third component needed in training includes modification to on-site interviewing techniques, especially while working with a recently assaulted survivor. This is especially important as stigma in rural places may be greater than urban locations (Terry, 2018). Responders must ensure confidentiality and privacy of reporting parties. The last component would be training on accurate and objective report writing. These techniques, combined, would improve the officer-survivor experience during a sexual assault conversation (Shaw et al., 2017; Venema, 2016; Venema et al., 2020). The training is further enhanced by continued awareness of rural culture and how rural sexual assaults and reporting practices are different than urban places.

### **Trauma-Informed Approach**

Trauma-informed training should focus on what trauma is and how it affects an individual both during and after an assault. Law enforcement should become knowledgeable about the subject with up-to-date research (Rich, 2019). Broadly speaking, trauma-informed care means consideration for the impact of traumatic events, such as maltreatment, domestic violence, the

effects of poverty, and unique issues in rural communities, with the goal of incorporating practices that acknowledge the effects of current and intergenerational trauma (Lathan et al., 2019). Specific to sexual assault survivors, law enforcement professionals can create a paradigm shift from a victim-blaming stance of, “What’s wrong with you?” to a “What happened to you?” approach. Studies have found trauma-informed training to be useful in law enforcement agencies (Franklin et al., 2020). Yet, there is a literature gap regarding the effectiveness of the training in rural areas.

Trauma-informed care also involves viewing trauma through an ecological and cultural lens, recognizing context plays a significant role in how individuals perceive and process traumatic events (Rich, 2019). This type of care includes appreciation for the unique challenges raised in rural communities. A strengths-based delivery approach which is grounded in being responsive and emphasizing physical, psychological, and emotional safety for survivors, creating opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment, and avoiding passing judgement is needed (Allen, 2019). In rural communities, family name and reputation carry much weight (Terry & Williams, 2019; Terry, 2020) yet being trauma-informed helps law enforcement work objectively, helping all survivors. This also means anticipating and avoiding responses and practices that are likely to retraumatize individuals (Terry, 2018; Terry, 2020).

Law enforcement agencies should work to create a safe environment. For rural areas, the location and access to services can be a barrier (Terry, 2018). Where offices are available, environmental design should be informed by survivor needs. For example, entrances and exits should be designed to allow for confidentiality and discretion, especially for structures providing a variety of services to both survivors and perpetrators (Terry, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014). Additionally, all law enforcement staff should participate in training focused on cultural sensitivity to trauma, safety, and privacy. A welcoming environment begins at the first call, at the crime scene, or as late as the interview room. Organizations should strive for a welcoming atmosphere for all racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds (SAMHSA, 2014) with intentional awareness of rural stigma.

### **Training in Interview Skills**

Law enforcement agents should utilize the survivor-sensitivity training mentioned above, to properly interview an individual who has been victimized. These approaches address traumatic stress as well as co-occurring disorders that may develop during or after trauma (Lorenz & Maskaly, 2018). Importantly, becoming trauma aware does not stop with the

recognition that trauma affects survivors, instead, this encompasses a broader awareness that traumatic experiences can extend to significant others, family members, first-responders, and other medical professionals, behavioral health workers, broader social networks, and entire communities (SAMHSA, 2014). Mental health stigma is greater in rural areas (Crumb et al., 2019), further creating an atmosphere that is not welcoming for survivors. Professionals working with survivors of sexual violence may experience a personal emotional toll. All staff should be trained to detect secondary trauma and know the available resources (Jackson et al., 2017; Untied et al., 2018). Trauma is a systemic issue, whether a direct survivor or secondary victim, well-rounded care means taking care of all involved, especially knowing suicide rates for law enforcement is higher than the rate of lost lives during the line of duty (O'Hara, 2017; Sisak & Mustian, 2019).

Additionally, Law enforcement should move away from the use of deception tactics (Lathan et al., 2019). In its place, law enforcement should learn to allow survivors to report their incidents without being interrupted (Lathan et al., 2019). Victim-sensitive interview skills would educate law enforcement on displaying a respectful demeanor, paying attention to privacy, and respecting the confidentiality a survivor desires, allowing the survivor to have control (Venema et al., 2020). These skills would not only help improve survivor experiences, but also decrease rape myth acceptances (Westera et al., 2019) and show objective police work rather than an approach swayed by dense rural relations.

### **Training in Report Writing**

The final training component should focus on objective report writing. Without trauma-informed awareness, objective report writing by law enforcement professionals may gravitate towards reducing the credibility of the survivor (Lathan et al., 2019). In a study by Shaw et al. (2017), a review of law enforcement reports on sexual assaults included biased and subjective writing, suggestive of victim-blaming culture. Opinion-free reporting could result in more cases being formally processed (Westera et al., 2019) while also demonstrating for rural survivors that their local police agency will objectively investigate their claims.

Training follow-through begins with top-down buy-in to ensure implementation. One strategy for implementation would be to work directly with national agencies such as the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, or the Federal Bureau of Investigation to mandate a national-level training requirement. While executive support may help initiate this process, local stakeholders must also see value to encourage and maintain evidence-based training for all staff, and especially first-responders. Rural culture supports personal

connections, establishing working relationships with local professionals could help in garnering buy-in for the approach. Trauma-informed training should be required for all law enforcement personnel including administrative support staff as they also engage with survivors and especially since “everyone knows everyone’s business” in rural communities. Trauma-informed training should not be a one and done scenario. Rather, strongly implemented protocols require grounded fidelity (Rich, 2019). The training should require at least yearly booster sessions specific to local needs. For example, in rural areas with limited resources and concerns for confidentiality and stigma (Leston et al., 2012; Sexton et al., 2008), law enforcement professionals should receive training on how to implement these approaches for rural survivors and their families.

### **Limitations**

It would be an oversight to assume implementing a policy of systematic trauma-informed training is an easy and smooth process. Garnering buy-in is difficult, especially when it means more time and money. Law enforcement already undergo intensive training ranging from lawful and appropriate policing behavior to how to properly manage equipment (Klinger, 2012). Requesting an additional training component means more cost to a department. At a time with heightened focus on racial oppression in policing, trauma-informed training may not be a priority. Additionally, locating experts to conduct trainings could also be difficult, especially in rural areas. Yet, trauma-informed training should be incorporated within the interview skills and report writing training already being conducted (Rich, 2019; Venema et al., 2020). The effectiveness of this training would be exploratory as previous studies have measured different types of training making generalization difficult. A second, and looming limitation is possible cultural change. As stated earlier, many law enforcement officers already hold misperceptions about rape, stereotypical survivors, and expectations about how survivors respond after an assault. Trauma-informed approaches must span an entire agency; one resistant staff could threaten the effectiveness of the overall implementation.

### **Discussion**

Research has shown that many women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006), and few of those assaults will be formally reported (Planty et al., 2013). Moreover, an even smaller percentage of reported sexual assaults will ever be prosecuted (Venema et al., 2020). Many studies have suggested negative interactions with law enforcement, including disbelief, victim-blaming, and asking

inappropriate questions, may result in survivors avoiding contact with law enforcement (Morabito et al., 2017; Venema et al., 2020). Studies have shown the endorsement of rape myths and *real rape* ideals displayed by law enforcement officers may alter a survivor's perception of law enforcement supporting and assisting them (Baldwin-White et al., 2016). These issues are known to exist everywhere, and unfortunately, rural survivors are burdened with additional barriers as rural communities harbor old-fashioned values supportive of minding one's business and avoiding official reporting (Donnermeyer, 2015; Edwards et al., 2015). Lastly, most previous studies have focused on investigators' training on sexual assault, not first-responding officers responding to sexual assault calls (Shaw et al., 2017). For these reasons, there is great need for additional training in sexual assault and rape, for *all* law enforcement personnel, and especially patrol officers. This training must be place and time specific as rural relationships are different than their urban counterparts, and law enforcement may be perceived as acting unprofessionally due to close insider ties (Terry, 2018; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014).

Unfortunately, most governmental aid and resources are funneled into reactive programs that focus on after-the-fact treatment (Weber & Arrigona, 2015). This paper challenges local, state, and national bodies to reconsider, be proactive, help our law enforcement personnel feel more comfortable supporting sexual assault survivors, especially in closed-off rural locales. By doing so, their actions and demeanor will likely impact the survivor's loved ones, creating a rippling effect of support for both law enforcement officers and survivors. In order to improve training for rural police officers, funding would need to be addressed. It would be beneficial for future researchers to examine how rural police agencies propose increased funding for other fundamental needs. Furthermore, cultural resistance within police departments should also be considered when researching responses to sexual assault calls within rural areas.

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