



# Sexual Victimization and Disclosure to the Police

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## Introduction

Nearly 22 million women in the United States have been victims of sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (Center for Disease Control, 2011). Sexual assault is becoming a more prevalent topic in the media, yet reporting forcible rape to police has reduced. In the 1970s, 50% of forcible rapes were reported, whereas in 2008 only 26% of forcible rapes were reported (Lonsway and Archambault, 2012).

Literature investigating the reason for this decline is extremely limited. Ahrens et al. (2007) distinguish between survivors who consciously decide to seek help, and those whose disclosures were initiated by others. To date, only one study has analyzed the reasons why survivors choose not to disclose to police. This study concluded that survivors felt their experience didn't meet the cultural stereotype of "real rape" (Lonsway and Archambault, 2012).

## Current Study

The present study will help to fill this gap in the literature by exploring survivors' reasons for disclosing and non-disclosing their assaults to police.

## Method

### Participants

Nearly 300 sexual assault narratives collected by the *Voices and Faces Project* were used for the current study. The *Voices and Faces Project* is a national network for survivors of sexual assault.

### Measures

Participants completed an on-line survey that contained 27 open-ended questions that asked them about their sexual assault and recovery experiences. The current study focused on questions about survivors' police engagement:

*Were the police ever called? If not, why not?*

### Analysis Procedures

An inductive qualitative analysis procedures similar to Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1998) was used to identify survivors' reasons for disclosing or not disclosing to the police. The resulting codebook was used by two independent coders who used a consensus approach to assign final codes ( $\kappa=0.8$ ).

## Results

### Reasons for Non-Disclosure

Survivors described 6 main reasons for not the police:

**1) Internal Self-blame/Guilt:** Survivors felt they were to blame or were too ashamed to contact the police.

*"I did not feel like I could tell anyone about what happened to me. I felt ashamed and scared."*

**2) Feared Police Reactions:** Survivors feared that there was insufficient evidence to have a case and/or felt the police would not respond to their situation appropriately (e.g., felt police would not believe them).

*"When I reported the molestation I experienced as a teenager, the police asked offensive questions and didn't provide the skills or resources someone dealing with sensitive information should understand."*

**3) Feared Legal Consequences:** Survivors expressed fear of negative outcomes in the aftermath of reporting the assault, relating to the self or perpetrator (e.g., facing trial, deportation)

*"I knew screaming or calling the police would destroy his life and his business. I could not do that to him."*

**4) Feared Perpetrator Retaliation:** Perpetrator threatened survivor or instilled some form of fear, preventing survivor from contacting the police.

*"My attacker threatened me by telling me that my father wouldn't love me if he found out about it."*

**5) Advised Against Reporting:** Survivors were encouraged or advised by friends or family not to reach out to the police.

*"I was told by my roommate and best friend at the time to tell no one what happened that night."*

**6) Did Not Define:** At the time of assault, survivors did not realize the event was considered rape or sexual assault.

*"At the time I did not think I had been raped because I knew the guy and I liked him."*

### Reasons for Disclosure

Survivors described 3 main reasons for contacting the police:

**1) Seeking Justice:** Survivors independently contacted the police and or willingly engaged in prosecution (e.g., expressed that they did not want the perpetrator to assault anyone else).

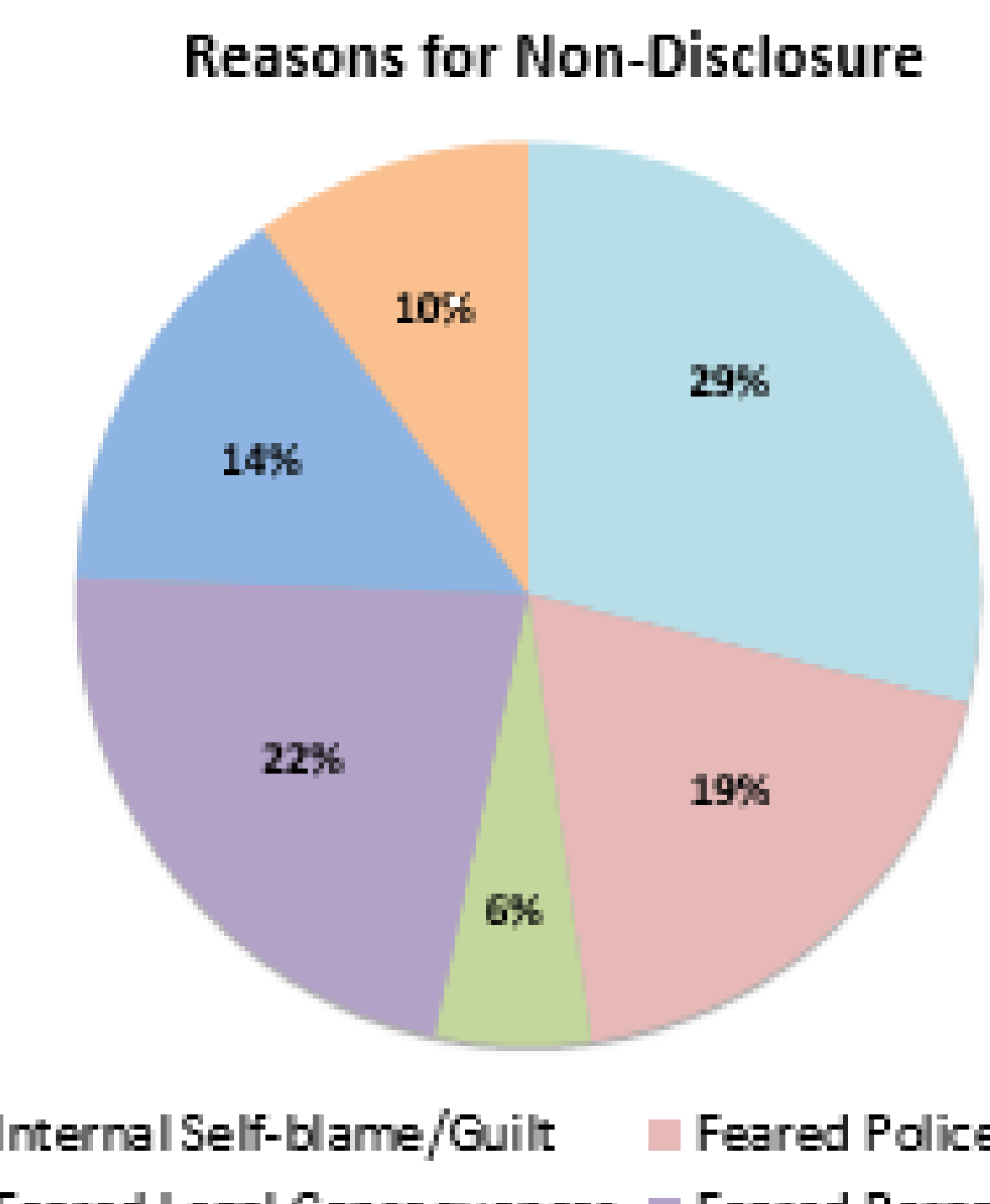
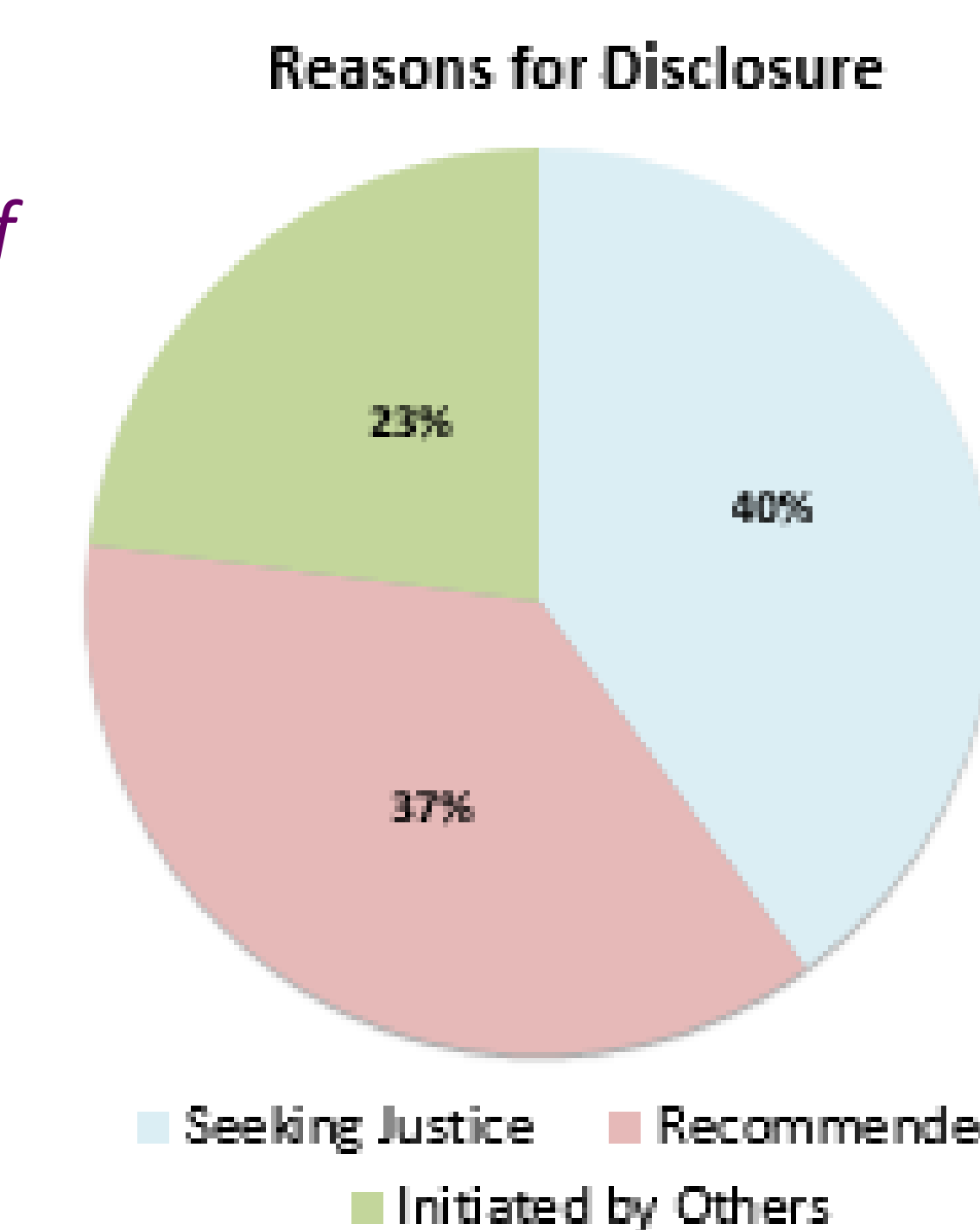
*"Because there was no evidence of my attack, I knew that they would not be able to prosecute, but I decided to go in because I wanted this man on their radar."*

**2) Recommended Disclosure:** Survivors were encouraged or advised by friends or family to reach out to the police, though the survivor ultimately decided for themselves.

*"I called my boyfriend. He told me to call 9-1-1, and that he would be right over."*

**3) Initiated by Others:** Police were notified against survivors' will/without permission (e.g., mandated reporting by a medical professional, survivor was unconscious).

*"The gas station clerk called 911 who sent an ambulance. I don't ever remember being asked if I wanted to report the rape."*



## Conclusion

The current study reveals reasons why survivors reported their assault as well as a number of reasons for non-disclosure. Notably, only 40% of survivors initiated contact without outside input, and nearly half of survivors did not disclose due to a fear of negative outcomes or retaliation. This highlights the need to improve survivors' confidence in the legal system from the point of police interaction to legal prosecution. Altogether, this information can be used to create interventions and best practice measures that better fit the needs of survivors and promote confidence and willingness to engage with the police in the aftermath of an assault. Future research is needed to determine whether initiation by others were welcomed by survivors because this distinction is unclear in the current study.