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# The Lived Experience of U.S. Law Enforcement Officers and the Challenges They Face While Investigating Sexual Assault Victim Reports

Ariekan Josephs-Greene  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Ariekan Josephs-Greene

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2025

Abstract

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Investigating Sexual Assault Victim Reports

by

Ariekan Josephs-Greene

MPA, Columbia Southern University, 2020

BS, Columbia Southern University, 2018

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Criminal Justice

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## Abstract

Sexual assault is a pervasively dangerous crime affecting persons of all ages, races, and genders, both in the United States and globally. Essential in the safeguarding of American citizens, U.S. law enforcement officers are among the first responders on scene to investigate reports of sexual assault claims. However, echoed in previous research are the sentiments of victim-survivors who experienced negative encounters with officers who exhibited an implicit lack of victim-centered training and were dismissive in their investigative approach. Consequently, this gap in the literature requires exploration; therefore, this study focuses on the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers and the challenges they face while investigating sexual assault victim reports. Max Weber's construct of social action theory is a framework of four ideal types (instrumentally rational, value rational, affective, and traditional) used in assessing and analyzing factors that influence a person's actions through their choices within an organization. This study is a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study conducted by collecting data from individual interviews with ten LEOs, participants possessing a minimum of 5 years of experience as sexual assault responders. The data collected was analyzed using Microsoft Word, NVivo, and thematic analysis. The study shows that social and occupational factors, including limited access to mental health services, have a significant impact on officers. It is recommended that law enforcement agencies increase their diligence in providing mandatory, trauma-informed training. This empowers community partnerships to promote access to mental health resources by implementing necessary organizational programs, thereby encouraging positive social change.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	2
Problem Statement.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Question(s) .....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Nature of the Study.....	8
Definitions.....	9
Assumptions .....	10
Scope and Delimitations .....	11
Limitations .....	12
Significance.....	12
Summary .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	14
Introduction .....	14
Literature Search Strategy.....	15
Theoretical Foundation.....	15

Literature Review Related to Key Variables.....	19
The Pervasive Culture of Criminal Sexual Assault .....	19
Officers Responding to Reports of Sexual Assault Allegations.....	20
Challenges of Initiating Investigations.....	22
Challenges with Interviewees During the Investigation Process.....	26
Unfavorable Outcomes of Police Involvement while Gathering Evidence .....	28
Complications of Decision-Making in Sexual Assault Investigations .....	33
Organizational & Occupational Barriers Affecting the Policing of SA.....	36
Psychological Challenges Affecting Sexual Assault Investigators. ....	40
Efforts Made to Improve Victim Services .....	44
Summary and Conclusion .....	49
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	51
Introduction .....	51
Research Design and Rationale .....	52
Role of the Researcher .....	54
Methodology .....	55
Participant Selection Logic.....	55
Instrumentation .....	56
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	57
Data Analysis Plan .....	58
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	59
Credibility.....	59

Transferability.....	59
Dependability.....	60
Confirmability.....	60
Ethical Procedures .....	61
Summary .....	61
Chapter 4: Results.....	63
Introduction .....	63
Setting .....	63
Demographics.....	65
Data Collection.....	66
Data Analysis .....	68
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	70
Results.....	73
Training Oversight.....	74
Challenges Associated with Victim Engagement.....	75
The Effects Of Social Challenges On Law Enforcement Officers .....	77
Occupational Challenges.....	78
Mental Health .....	81
Summary .....	83
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations .....	85
Introduction .....	85
Interpretation of Findings.....	87

Training Oversight.....	87
Challenges with Victim Engagement.....	89
Occupational and Social Challenges.....	90
Mental Health .....	91
Limitations of the Study.....	92
Recommendations.....	92
Implications.....	94
Conclusion.....	94
References.....	96
Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	118
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer .....	120

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics .....65

Table 2. Subsequent Codes and Themes from the Raw Data .....70

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) in the United States are uniquely positioned to be advocates and justice-seekers for victim-survivors of criminal sexual assault. However, prior research demonstrates that in recent years, the challenges they face while devoting their professional efforts to combating sexual assault and investigating claimant reports have become more egregious (Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Morabito et al., 2021). Ostracized by the media for shortcomings detected in their responsive efforts, victim-survivors lodged claims against officers, citing permeating issues of negative correspondence, which further contribute to their maltreatment during service encounters (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Therefore, concerning the issues of victim engagement and safety, police agencies and the officers therein are being critically reviewed for inadequacies surrounding their application of procedural justice, thus magnifying all interactions made between officers and victim-survivors of sexual assault.

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sexual assault is a severe form of unwarranted intimate contact among nonconsenting individuals, with the offender often being dangerous and relentless. A quarterly report from research statisticians at NCVS showed that the population remains at risk of experiencing sexual assault victimization, as rates previously reported at 16.5% in 2021 have increased, reaching a peak of 23.5% in 2022 (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). Ultimately, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is responsible for the analytical measurement of criminal prevalence and victimization in the United States. As the nation's primary statistical

system for victimization surveys, the NCVS is part of the BJS. Its role is to collect information on nonfatal violent crimes involving victims aged 12 and older. This data is made available nationwide to the public by the U.S. Census Bureau.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the topic and a detailed description of the study's purpose. Additionally, I outline the context regarding the significance of the research phenomenon and why it was necessary to analyze the challenges surrounding law enforcement officers who investigate sexual assault claimant reports. Each additional rationale presented includes a brief synopsis of the study's background, research questions, and the study's nature. I also discuss the theoretical framework and the significance of this research, further underscoring its depth and feasibility.

### **Background**

Sexual assault is a pervasive criminal offense, known to cause chronic psychological trauma in victim-survivors, most of whom are triggered by the influence of uncertainty and distrust towards the initial response of service providers attempting to ensure their safety. Research indicates that despite law enforcement officers' robust efforts to support citizens, people from various communities still question the competency and training of those tasked with providing trauma-informed responses (Lorenz et al., 2019; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Therefore, to improve the treatment and services provided to citizens in crises, community-based stakeholders founded multidisciplinary Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs), thus creating a more positive and practical approach for victim-survivors; even so, officers are being accused of falling short of society's expectations due to their inept execution of procedural justice

(Wegrzyn et al., 2024). Furthermore, the sparsity of acknowledgment and explorations into this social phenomenon contributes to an even greater gap in the matter, as the potential issues of vicarious trauma pose a significant concern for officers responding to sexual assault investigations.

Police officers are usually the first and sometimes the only form of legal aid that survivors encounter after being victimized; by extending their support, tools, and resources to victims who have survived such a crime, their act of servitude is vital for stabilization in the communities they serve. According to various research, law enforcement officers often faced numerous challenges in their response to providing security and justice for sexual assault victims, especially when attempting to work with culpable witnesses in gathering the evidence necessary to ensure that the perpetrator faces legal ramifications for their actions (Crivatu et al., 2023; White & McMillan, 2021). However, with only 34% of cases reported by claimants to officials in 2019, there have been fewer opportunities to bridge the distrust gap between officers and victim-survivors (Morgan & Truman, 2020). This led to societal beliefs that law enforcement officials were more inclined to treat victims similarly to perpetrators, disregarding the need to arrest the offenders on the victims' behalf. However, prosecutorial justice can result in a lengthy, tumultuous process. As a result, officers are constantly chastised by the public for receiving subpar duty complaints from sexual assault victims they once helped and are more prone to use rape myth ideologies for perceptive guidance as to who they believe are the real victims of crimes (Davies et al., 2022).

The practices officers use in investigations are crucial in the collaboration of victim engagement and case outcomes. However, many victims refused help from LEOs due to being intimidated by the coercion of their abusers, such acts strengthen the divide among citizens, and the efforts of community policing. Furthermore, the majority faults the oversight of police actions as the impending cause of cases being classified as “unfounded,” regardless of police citations stating negligent behaviors such as a lack of victim cooperation, high-risk behaviors, and unsubstantiated evidence as a pivotal role in case determination (Lorenz, 2019; Meeker et al., 2020; O’Neal & Hayes, 2020). The complexity of investigations and the processing times of most cases are also contributors to the vast decline in the underreporting of sexual assault offenses. Additionally, it is documented that 30% of sexual assault claims are reported annually in the United States, with 5% resulting in an arrest and approximately 3% ending in felony convictions (Fansher & Walsh, 2023). For these reasons, the speculative numerical factors debated in numerous studies pose significant challenges for investigators and contribute to the ongoing dissatisfaction of victims, despite improvements in enhancing victim safety and services.

Trained in crisis response and emergency management, officers are predisposed to develop burnout and mental health disorders due to the continuous exposure to witnessing catastrophic events. Consequently, these perpetual demands aligned with their organizational duties placed them at risk of incurring emotional and psychological stress while interacting with victim-survivors in situationally heightened environments (Hansen et al., 2020). Studies showed that the rate at which officers are developing new

psychological dispositions is alarming, as they become more prone to sensitivity, hyperactivity, and expressing their emotions; mental health disorders such as depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideations are now being perceived as job hazards” (Singletary, 2023). According to Craddock and Telesco (2023), the development of maladaptive coping mechanisms within studies is underway, with similar reports from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) stating that law enforcement officers are 54% more likely to die from suicide than any other occupation (Volanti & Seege, 2021).

Appointed as guardians and pillars of protection for the people of society, officers rarely disclose the extent of the challenges they face with sexual assault investigations; still, the unexplained perspective of their experiences contributes to distrust in community policing (Mourtgos et al, 2020). This oversight is attributed to society focusing on the badge and forgetting the person behind it. Dedicated to fulfilling the obligations of their duties, they are frequently preoccupied with the concerns of victim safety and occupational demands, masking the impact of the psychological warfare they fight within. To foster a positive attitude and drive transformative change, the criminal justice system continually implements new training measures to help officers become better trauma responders, thereby bridging the gap in community policing. Consequently, the influence of social controversy has led to the demand that officers be responsive and tactful, even when faced with intolerable challenges as trauma responders in a work culture that struggles to receive support from mental health professionals (Morabito et al., 2021). In this study, I explored the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers to

address a gap in the literature by assessing the possible challenges they face when conducting sexual assault investigations.

### **Problem Statement**

Law enforcement officers in the United States are trained to provide optimal service responses to victim-survivors of sexual assault, yet, in recent years, the challenges they have encountered while investigating claimant reports appear to be capricious. In this study, I addressed various occupational and social challenges that influence the duty performance of law enforcement officers who investigate sexual assault reports. Debated in previous studies is the dismissive behavior of sexual assault investigators during victim engagement, which seems to be a point of contention for complainants (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022b); with very little information on researchers analyzing the problem from the viewpoint of officers, this research was necessary to bridge the gap in the development and implementation of unified community policing approaches. In this study, I employed a phenomenological qualitative analysis, utilizing theoretical tools and frameworks to guide the assessment. Finally, I explored the shared experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers who respond to and investigate sexual assault victim reports by seeking an informed understanding of how the challenges affect their duty obligations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

I conducted this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers and the occupational and social challenges they face when investigating sexual assault victims' reports. By examining the

current research gap, I evaluated the findings for validity and significance to inform organizational administrators and policymakers about the severity of the problem. Understandably, officers often refrain from divulging information about the occupational challenges they encountered in social spheres; however, I was committed to unearthing the knowledge of police experiences through the understanding and development of shared optimal solutions that can potentially influence the likelihood of officers' and victims' safety during sexual assault service calls. The results of this study can serve society, as the discovery has the potential to promote and facilitate better training practices, helping to resolve future conflicts and fostering trusting community-policing partnerships.

### **Research Question(s)**

I answered the following research questions in this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are some of the challenges law enforcement officers face/endure when engaging and interacting with Sexual Assault Victims?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do the challenges associated with the investigative process impact law enforcement officers' ability to interact with sexual assault victims?

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **The Application of the Framework to Study**

Max Weber's (1921) construct of social action theory (SAT) suggests that people (law enforcement officers) are guided by principles that inform their actions in social

spheres; often shaped by experience and practice, human behavior is influenced by personal and organizational values. Weber's theoretical concept further holds that social structure is interdependent and interacts with internal and external factors to influence social action. Exploring social action promotes understanding, which can be achieved through the analysis of a descriptive process. This analysis enables the assessment of human actions and reveals how they potentially impact social change. By revealing the challenges U.S. officers face and the occupational and social factors that influence their behavior on duty, this research's findings can significantly inform administrators and lawmakers on countermeasures to alleviate tension between police and citizens.

### **Nature of the Study**

A descriptive-phenomenological approach was well-suited to the inquiry of this qualitative study. Notably, this concept served as a guide for the researcher in conducting a direct exploratory into the lived experiences of law enforcement officers across the United States, who are willing to share their subjective experiences of the occupational and social challenges they have endured as sexual assault responders and investigators. Essential to this research was the employment of a descriptive method; descriptive phenomenological studies are cognizant of a person's rich and "pure" subjective experiences, focusing on feelings, behaviors, and actions arising from their interactions with social phenomena involving other people (Giorgi, 2009). This method allows the researcher to primarily focus on the underpinnings of the structural integrity necessary to understand the phenomenon's depth, elements, and origins.

Additionally, the process of exploring the “essence” of phenomena in the social and health sciences is carried out through the application of descriptive methods and the conscious documentation of first-person accounts via interviews, which significantly diminishes issues of “trustworthiness” in research (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). Also beneficial in neutralizing biases and preconceptions in this qualitative study was the use of Max Weber’s framework and approach to developing the (1921) social action theory, thereby reducing the likelihood of assumptions through “bracketing,” as the analysis can only be formed after receiving information from respondents (Aragona, 2018). Inquiry into social cognition in human actions and behavior, guided by semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, enabled the researcher, as an independent observer, to extract viable data from the research participants. This approach further encourages a more conscious, in-depth analysis of the social phenomenon under investigation by developing themes. By seeking the perspectives of U.S. law enforcement officers who have faced challenges in responding to claimant reports, the research can provide lawmakers and criminal justice administrators with valuable insights to amend policies and practices within the criminal justice system.

### **Definitions**

*Law enforcement officer:* A sworn officer of the law who performs many dutiful functions of servitude and protection to the public and communities they serve (Craddock & Telesco, 2022).

*Rape Myth acceptance:* A specific set of beliefs or stereotypes that governs the dismissal of an offender's actions, then choosing to focus on the behavior of the victim as an instigator of the criminal act (Lathan et al., 2023; Venema, 2019).

*Revictimization:* The act of causing further mental or physical trauma to someone already experiencing victimization (Campbell, 2019; O'Neal & Hayes, 2020).

*Sexual assault:* The unwarranted and non-consensual sexual action of a person, one to another, either by force, intimidation, or coercion (Dworkin et al., 2021).

*Sexual assault investigation:* The process by which police responders and or detectives conduct a thorough assessment by gathering evidence from the complainant to verify if the reported sexual allegations are factual (Markey et al., 2021).

*Victim-survivor:* A person who has endured violent and degrading victimization through the actions of another and survives (Heydon et al., 2023).

### **Assumptions**

A common predisposition to the research topic was formed under the notion that it was unusual to be privy to the shared perspective of law enforcement officers who were usually unwilling to divulge information about their encounters with social and occupational issues in response to their experiences with sexual assault investigations. It was also assumed that law enforcement officers were less inclined to participate as research subjects because citizens might have found more ways to scrutinize their efforts as public servants. These assumptions also led to the belief that the viewpoints of officers were less explored due to society's biased perception of media-instigated reports,

wherefore citing police culpability and dismissive behavior as the reason for negative experiences during victim engagements. Lastly, it was assumed that the participants in this study were volunteers who shared their experiences openly and honestly to aid the research.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Despite the strength of police involvement and willingness to share their experiences in support of research, this study remained voluntary and limited to only those who had experience responding to and investigating sexual assault claims. Although there is an excessive amount of literature on the support and resources that are available to victim-survivors of sexual assault, research into the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers who responded to their service calls was very limited. In this research, transferability represented a significant factor, as it constituted a major component of the study's qualitative exploration. The generalized findings can inform administrators and lawmakers across the United States about the magnitude of challenges faced by sexual assault investigators in various states. The inclusion criteria were not overly restrictive, as the researcher aimed to facilitate and encourage participants in the target population to share their experiences, supporting the research's purpose and the outlined scope. The delimitations listed were primarily intended to strengthen the study's significance and validity. Conducting individual interviews with participating officers aimed to gather rich, in-depth contextual feedback through semi-structured, open-ended questions.

### **Limitations**

Due to the paucity of inquiry related to this research topic, the study focused only on U.S. law enforcement officers who had experience investigating sexual assault claimant reports. Although limitations were present, the generalizability of this research study remained moderate and did not substantially affect the validity and reliability of the findings. All participants recruited for this study were volunteers from various states, purposefully selected for interviews. Another potential limitation was the incorporation of pre-constructed research questions, which limited the range of responses participants could provide. Even though their experience as service responders to victims of sexual assault differed, their shared insight undoubtedly informed the outcome of the research study.

### **Significance**

This study was significant because it aimed to gain insight into an under-researched problem by exploring an understudied segment of the police population. While countless empirical studies examined the pervasive nature of criminal sexual assault and how it impacted victim-survivors, nominal research illustrated the sought-after perspective of law enforcement officers in the United States and the challenges they endured while providing legal and responsive services to victim-survivors. This study has the potential to be impactful and invaluable as the discovery can be used to inform criminal justice administrators of the pervasive issues that affect the efficacy of police officers investigating sexual assault reports. The findings of this research have the potential to mitigate negative risk factors by recommending new training standards and

procedures for officers, thereby encouraging timely responses and fostering positive engagement and interactions with victim-survivors. In conclusion, the results of this study can also inform the Department of Justice (DOJ) and congressional lawmakers about the issues plaguing frontline officers, thereby advising policy reform and the development of new laws that further enhance police and victim safety.

### **Summary**

This study was guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach that sought the shared experiences of law enforcement officers in the United States who had investigated sexual assault claimant reports. Given the limited number of studies incorporating the police perspective, there was a significant need to address the research gap and to seek officers willing to share their views on the problems that arose during victim engagement. Through the exploration of challenges and the factors that complicate the occupational duties of police responders to sexual assault, the research findings created solutions that could assist with the development of a resolution. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the literature that supports the research foundation and structure. Additionally, articles indicative of research evidence will be utilized to demonstrate the extent to which occupational and social challenges impact the effort of officers throughout the various aspects of a sexual assault investigation; thus, conveying the issue of prevalence and how it relies on the presence of trauma to instigate the behavior of U.S. LEOs by way of triggered response.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Law enforcement officers in the United States are often among the first and only forms of legal authority to respond to and investigate reports of sexual assault claims. Nevertheless, in their commitment to providing victim services, sexual assault investigators' intentions are being questioned by citizens of society, who believe their integrity is compromised and their actions disingenuous (Crivatu et al., 2023). Despite public sentiment, officers strive to strengthen community policing and incorporate trauma-informed training practices throughout their interactions with victims. According to Thomas and Kopel (2023), evidence suggests that an estimated 27% of men and 32% of women will fall victim to the crime of sexual assault at some point in their lifetime, thus proving that sex crime investigators are necessary for maintaining human safety.

As the demands of their occupational duties increase, officers work longer shifts to compensate for changes due to their counterparts' resignations. This increased their susceptibility to organizational and social challenges posed by negative and influential factors. While scholars have conducted countless studies giving victims a platform to state their grievances, there are fewer supportive efforts from researchers seeking to understand the viewpoints of officers about the very public controversy surrounding their involvement in sexual assault victim engagements (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022a). Research suggests that, contrary to societal beliefs, officers investigating sexual assault claims are also suffering from vicarious trauma at an alarming rate, having witnessed numerous atrocities and bearing labels imposed on them by society; their susceptibility to

stress-induced incidents has become heightened, resulting in severe psychological trauma (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Discussed in this literature review are the proposed risk factors and challenges that are suspected to be impacting the duty performances of officers and their responsive efforts in victim engagement; as a result, this qualitative research aims to address the gap in the literature by conducting an explorational study on U.S. law enforcement officers and the challenges they face when investigating sexual assault victim reports.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I constructed this literature review after examining numerous scholarly articles on the research topic. The relevant articles were selected to synthesize and organize the sources within the study. Many of the articles depicted in the study were selected from the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. The sources and databases listed (Academic Search Complete, APA PsycINFO, MEDLINE, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Supplemental Index) are included, but not limited to, all used in this collaborative effort. Specific search terms were used in the quest to inform the literature and help with the development of the research, such as *sexual assault, improving police-victim engagement, emotional trauma in rape victims, investigating sexual assault victims, Law enforcement officers responding to sexual assault, and investigating sexual assault victim complaints*.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

I used Max Weber's (1921) social action theory to analyze the challenges LEOs faced when responding to reports of sexual assault. By thoroughly assessing the risk

factors that negatively influenced an officer's responsive approach to victims in a social sphere, the research provided a more informed understanding of the causal reasoning that guided their actions. Weber's SAT postulates that a person's action can be influenced by the perception of other factors in social situations (Burger, 1977). The SAT theory was classified into four ideal types of rationales considered as motives for one's social action: instrumental rational action, value rational action, traditional action, and affective action (Oakley, 1997).

Being allowed to apply concepts from Weber's SATs aids in assessing the conduct of a socially oriented analysis of the contextual responses provided by officers, which is integral to the study. Centered on propositions about officers' perspectives, the researcher employed a layered descriptive-phenomenological approach to uncover the numerous social influences shaping LEOs' actions, communication, and understanding of their experiences. This theoretical concept performed a more comprehensive review of the risk factors found in the conclusion of the study, specifically addressing administrative structures and policies, perceptive communication, and the incorporation of emotional responses associated with action-reaction when interacting with victims of sexual assault. Working to create a more in-depth view of "Verstehen," which means "Empathic Understanding", Weber painted the construct regarding how the social actions of people (officers and victims) in social spheres could affect social change (Bruun, 2016); a deeper analysis of Weber's most valued rationales and how they best described the reasoning behind people's actions can reveal the extent that officers are being affected by the present discord with victim survivors.

Officers are considered influential representatives of the law, hired as satiable peacekeepers working towards the progressive development of the greater good, while influencing positive social change. Weber's interpretation of sociology involved analyzing social actions by first establishing the reason or purpose behind an action; officers relied on their knowledge of social orientation to mediate all social conflicts (Bruun, 2016). Occupationally inclined to perform acts of servitude, officers were often called upon to mitigate community relations; when involved in social spheres, their responsive approach reflected one or more of Weber's four ideal types—value-rational action, instrumental-rational action, traditional action, and affective action (Oakley, 1997; Peukert, 2004). The propositions of the four ideal types presented by Weber were significant in understanding a person's rationality, whether driven by personal values, emotions, purposeful actions, or traditional actions. Effective community policing can only be achieved through partnership, as social action involves more than just the actions of a single person; it is the interdependent influence and consequences of people that result in a social movement.

The dedicated responses of officers to service calls indicated their commitment as legal representatives and their upholding of social justice – this action was considered a value rationale. Their decision to show up and ensure the safety of citizens while risking their own lives presented a clear depiction of moral struggle and internal compromise, otherwise known as rational-instrumental (Munch, 1975). Research suggested that officers' causal relations depend on their emotional stability, especially in situations requiring effective communication and appropriate responses in social settings. If social

factors impulsively influenced them without considering the consequences, this was a clear example of affective actions (Rosenberg, 2013). Finally, officers responding to distressed victims were guided by organizational procedures, and the tradition of upholding police culture and customs was known as “traditional action.” Weber's four ideal types were developed to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning behind human actions. Therefore, his framework can be used to assess the rationale behind the social actions of officers faced with challenges in responding to sexual assault investigation claims.

Weber’s classification of the SAT combined complex and structured interpretive paradigms, introducing numerous motives that guided human actions in social settings. Such a theory provided an array of meaningful rationales, strategically assessing the respondent's viewpoint when explaining cause and effect (Burger, 1977). Additionally, Weber's concepts employed theoretical explanations of human experiences based on the cause-and-effect of human interactions, thereby suggesting that the science of social action was grounded in personal experience and subjective interpretations (Burger, 1977). Although causality does not dictate an outcome, it explains the various factors that influenced an officer's responsive approach to victims during their engagement. Therefore, Weber’s theory posited that assessing social action was crucial for interpreting human behavior in its active and reactive nature, as it sought causal explanations to prevent misinterpretations (Rosenberg, 2016).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables**

Entrusted with the responsibility of providing optimal service responses to victim-survivors of sexual assault, U.S. law enforcement officers are the most conventional representatives to investigate reports of criminal sexual allegations. Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2022a) revealed that complainants were dissatisfied with the negative experiences of victim engagement and the application of trauma-informed service approaches. Even so, the complexity of the investigation process and the frequency with which victims received unfavorable case outcomes have contributed to underreporting and increasing rates of case attrition (Lorenz & Jacobsen, 2021). As an improvement to victim services, police agencies in various jurisdictions expanded their collaborative partnerships to include sexual assault program advocates, with the implementation of numerous multidisciplinary trauma service specialists (Henninger et al., 2020); still, research suggests that citizens continue to publicly denigrate officers, accusing them of occupational incompetence and negligence in the case outcomes of certain victim-survivors (Mourtgos et al., 2021). Consequently, due to dysfunction in police-victim relationships, LEOs are determined to improve their efforts by augmenting their training, refining investigation strategies, and enhancing victim services.

### **The Pervasive Culture of Criminal Sexual Assault**

Sexual assault is a well-known criminal offense and a significant public health concern affecting most civilian populations in the United States and many other countries. As defined by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), sexual assault is the indecent action of a person (s) inflicted on another without consent,

irrespective of age or gender, causing physical, emotional, and psychological harm (Dworkin et al., 2021). According to survey reports from the CDC, violent crimes such as sexual assault and rape have caused widespread destruction in the United States; research suggests that an estimated 1 in 6 women and 1 in 26 men will experience sexual assault at specific periods of their lives (Basile et al., 2022). Once completed, the serially offensive and pervasive effects of such a crime often leave victims and their families irreparably damaged. Fortunately, once reported, it is the responsibility of LEOs to investigate claimants' reports and prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the allegations against a suspect are factual.

### **Officers Responding to Reports of Sexual Assault Allegations**

Trained in emergency preparedness and response, law enforcement officers are the quintessential gatekeepers of society, ensuring public safety and security. After bearing witness to and being subjected to the lewd and lascivious acts of being sexually assaulted, victim-survivors often contact the police to report their victimization, seeking security, safety, and support. Once service calls are disseminated by police emergency telecommunicators, available sex crime investigators near the service location must respond to the service request. If they are unavailable, a patrol officer must respond and investigate the allegation. Research indicates that while investigating reports of sexual assault, officers are often confronted with numerous occupational and social challenges; their integral role is to preserve the integrity of the investigation and use methodical trauma-informed approaches during the crisis period to prioritize the safety of themselves and the victim-survivors (McQueen & Murphy-Oikonen, 2023). According to the

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), officers responding to reports of sexual assault must adhere to the proposed recommendations outlined in the policy guidelines:

- Respond to the location of the emergency
- Ensure the safety of all parties involved
- Summon medical assistance if necessary
- Distinguish and separate witnesses and suspects
- Conduct a preliminary interview
- Collect and process evidence from the crime scene
- Retain documentation of the initial response, engagement, and interaction

(International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2017).

According to Wall (2020), police officers have long been a defense for people in society, viewed as a protective barrier against criminals and a means of addressing emergencies; their efforts to be actively present often shield citizens from the unknown terrors of domestic threats. More specifically, statistics inform that sexual assault is an imminent socio-legal concern, with national rates continuing to peak at new altitudes—sexual criminal assault is now being committed every 68 seconds (Vogt et al., 2022).

With an estimated 52.2 million women and 27.6 million men undergoing sexual violence in some capacity in their lives, police officers in the United States must work tirelessly to protect and uphold human rights in the neighborhoods they are tasked to serve (D’Inverno, 2021). Faced with the challenges of the unknown and providing safety to at-risk victim-survivors, officers sometimes struggle to balance their impulsivity and

heightened fear. Acknowledging the responsibilities of their role, officers are aware that interacting with victim-survivors can result in contentious outcomes; however, their introduction during victim engagement can make victims less guarded and more receptive to the process and the support they will receive from service responders (Grandgenett et al., 2020).

### **Challenges of Initiating Investigations**

According to Fansher and Welsh (2023), sexual assault report claims are critically low; estimated at a mere 30% in the United States, this crime is often significant among those who are the least likely to make a report to law enforcement officials. Having witnessed or undergone sexual assault, it is the complainant's responsibility to contact the legal authorities and report the incident, by which a written report is then generated with a case number attached for easier accessibility of the documentation throughout the investigation process. The contents of the report and the process by which it is obtained are also known as a “preliminary/initial interview”, where investigators retrieve evidential information about the elements of the crime and build a rapport with victim-survivors while learning the details of the location and possible witnesses that were involved (George, 2022). Guided by specific focal concerns in their assessment, officers are only required to make an arrest when culpability is evident, when there are safety concerns, and when legal factors align with the constraints of state laws and statutes within the justice system (Pattavina et al., 2021; Lapsey et al., 2022). After establishing that the information gathered about an incident is indicative of criminal sexual assault, the report is classified as “founded,” and the evidence of the assault is then transferred to

a lead detective/ investigator in the department for a more thorough assessment (Morabito et al., 2019).

### ***Sources of Conflict During Victim Engagement.***

Sexual assault investigation is often viewed as a type of “emotional work” for officers expected to be professional, imperceptible, and possessing an impenetrable exterior; still, they are faulted when unable to balance their emotions and express contextual compassion to sexual assault victim-survivors (Morabito et al., 2021; Mourtgos et al., 2021). Tasked with the responsibility of responding to victims who are in danger and exhibiting co-occurring behaviors of mental and substance abuse, officers must act quickly to ensure the safety of such victims. According to research conducted by White and McMillan (2021), police officers are the first port of call for SA victims seeking help from the justice system. However, those who have had negative experiences with the police in past encounters can also influence citizens who may have future interactions with officers, therefore casting prejudice, creating doubt, and apprehension. The proximate cause of negative victim engagements is not always clear, with both parties possessing mythical or perceptive explanations and reasoning for their actions, endorsing the belief that expectations and outcomes of sexual assault investigations will always be problematic.

Since being alerted to the steadily increasing rates of case attrition, criminal justice administrators have been diligent in implementing the necessary changes to improve police training. Research by Campbell and Lapsey (2021) indicates that training can be practical in most areas when administered correctly. Although dependent on the

receptiveness of victims who have developed preconceived notions and other negative perceptions of police engagement, providing an opportunity for change is possible. According to O’Neal (2019), certain jurisdictions in the United States are developing additional occupational training to improve the quality of future services. The practice of effective communication, restraint, and emotional control is targeted to minimize the risk of re-victimization drastically; however, despite their efforts to incorporate trauma-informed training practices, the risk of potential implications remains the same.

According to Morabito et al. (2019), research suggests that people in society favor the belief that ineffective police practices are the cause of discord among officers and victim-survivors of sexual assault. Trained to be perceptive of victim behaviors, officers generally exercise discernment to weed out deception. By searching for signs of “abnormalities” (emotional displays, reclusiveness, and inconsistent communication), their efforts aim to refute the possibility of perjury or contradictory claims that may prevent victims from receiving fair and impartial treatment (Morabito et al., 2021). However, despite their efforts to perform their duties in good faith, they labor in vain, as their actions and responses are often misinterpreted, leading to adverse effects, including dissatisfaction among victims. According to research by St. George et al. (2022), understanding the risk factors that contributed to an officer's development of behavioral and conduct irregularities will help minimize rhetoric from a misinformed society, thereby leading to improvements in victim services and police appreciation.

Bishop et al. (2020) stated that communities are outraged and callous toward police involvement during victim engagement due to their overemphasis on credibility

perceptions and the unlikelihood of suspects being charged or convicted for their complicit actions in felonious assaults. A study conducted by Fansher and Walsh (2023) concludes that a mere 5% of sexual assault offenses will end in an arrest, and around 3% will result in a felony conviction. Studies suggest that victim survivors are outraged as they believe such outcomes are attributed to police practices, which are embedded in the law and are considered a double standard (Lorenz et al., 2019). Most citizens are unaware of the procedural requirements for making an arrest or securing a conviction, and that the efforts of victim-survivors significantly influence the outcome of a case through their collaborative efforts and cooperation, as well as the presentation and safeguarding of evidence necessary to ensure prosecution. According to Wentz and Keimig (2019), the complex dynamics of investigations and victim dissatisfaction have caused rapid increases in case discontinuation and withdrawals; victims who once believed in the justice system have witnessed conflictive biases of credibility issues from police and are no longer entrusting their aid to deliver justice.

The battle with victim engagement has been longstanding; in a study conducted by McMillan (2018), officers revealed that they have endured countless deceptions while seeking justice for victims whose disclosures were based on false truths. Expected to interact with victims irrespective of their pre-existing behavioral or mental health issues, officers must carefully assess the situation of getting them to safety and summon the necessary medical providers for care. In the past, victim-survivors have notoriously presented inconsistent statements in their interview report; however, officers must develop ways in which they can successfully navigate through the discomfort of the

victim without causing further trauma (McMillan, 2018). Hardly ever acknowledged or commended for their role as responsive and dependable service providers, they are constantly vilified for their shortcomings and not their positive contributions. These challenging experiences are examples of the exacerbated complications that create a culture of “rape myths” among officers, therefore resulting in the debilitating effects of the negative expectations surrounding victim engagement.

In summary, Saunders et al. (2019) found that the risk of discord among officers and citizens in the communities they are tasked with safeguarding has persisted for far too long, fueling negative social tension. While officers are often villainized for their investigative practices and engagement methods, it is also important to assess all the risk factors when evaluating the reasons for a dissatisfying outcome. Perpetuated by self-regard and a sense of inculpability, victim survivors in society rarely acknowledge their contribution to defiance and distasteful actions during police encounters, resulting in interactions becoming more dangerous and challenging for officers to resolve. As discussed by Maguire and Sondhi (2022), officers are often held accountable for their decisions in the line of duty, regardless of their level of practice or experience, and being distracted on the job can prove costly. In conclusion, contemporary generational shifts are poised to drive positive change in society, propelling both parties in the same direction and encouraging them to put their best foot forward.

### **Challenges with Interviewees During the Investigation Process**

Sexual assault interviews are a stressful process for every victim-survivor or complainant; this process allows victims to present informative details in support of their

claims, and allegations that, without substantial evidence, are detrimental to the development of every sexual assault case. According to Webster and Oxburgh (2022), the availability of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) material and complainants' testimonies are highly regarded evidence in sexual assault case processing; such elements being present in a case increase the chance of the outcome being favorable. In this complex study of police investigators' perspectives on interviewing victims of sexual assault, researchers discovered that most of their challenges came from working with victims whose claims lacked adequate evidence or adequate source credibility, in addition to those who were viewed as vulnerable and easily manipulated (Westera et al., 2023). It is essential to recognize each person's capacity to withstand the stress of being interviewed, as well as the varying desired outcomes of a case for each victim. Once a victim-survivor becomes non-responsive in an interview, investigators must abstain from probing and disengage from the interview process. As every victim reacts differently to trauma, many opt to withdraw from the interview process, no longer desiring to pursue justice.

Tidmarsh (2021) conducted research exploration on the perceptive views of police officers who interview sexual assault victims, further concluding that both children and adult victims of sexual assault are delicate cases that deserve to be investigated by experienced officers. While most crimes were examined to prove the admission of guilt, interviewing claimants of sexual assault requires expert knowledge and skills, as the questions asked were meant to jostle the victim-survivors' memories of the recollection of events that transpired throughout their victimization. When trauma is involved, preparation and effort must be assumed by all service responders, as it is important to

prioritize not only the importance of their interviewees but also themselves in an environment that is safe, relaxed, and reflective of support for everyone present at the time of the interview (Tidmarsh, 2021). In addition, Akca et al. (2021) discussed the harms that often occur when officers lack the skills to implement proper evidence-based practices in interviews; such unfortunate mishaps can jeopardize communication with victims, leading to bouts of skepticism and distrust. Furthermore, most interviewers are inclined to welcome the presence of a victim-advocate when conducting their interviews, as they are expected to be confronted with the emotional highs and lows of victim-survivors whose thoughts may be obscured by the grief of trauma; victim advocates are there to help.

### **Unfavorable Outcomes of Police Involvement while Gathering Evidence**

As legal representatives of the law, officers responding to the service locations of victims who were sexually assaulted often incur an incurable debt. Overwhelmed with the psychological effects of exposure through occupational shared trauma, most officers develop struggles with insomnia and emotional instability, which further complicate their mental health (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). A 12-month study conducted by Ceral et al. (2019) further expounded on the effects of suicide exposure in officers; the study revealed that 95% of the research participants had witnessed atrocities when responding to service calls and were likely to observe an estimated 30 additional suicides during their career, which will forever change their views on life. In addition, behavioral and psychological issues in officers are more prevalent in those with higher risks of exposure,

which causes them to be more susceptible to mental health issues, which decreases job efficacy and contributes to ineffective victim services (Cerel et al., 2019).

According to recent studies, officers were also subjected to the same stereotypes they are accused of inflicting on others; they are often discriminated against because of their age, race, and gender, as victims usually refuse help from persons they are not comfortable with (Queiros et al., 2021). Additionally, being responsible for emergency crises and non-urgent citizen concerns places officers in complex situations. This often results in reprimands, both publicly and administratively, due to accusatory complaints lodged against them by disgruntled citizens and victim-survivors. Officers are sometimes less than enthusiastic during social interactions (Bach et al., 2021). Westera et al. (2023) expressed that officers are often penalized for errors beyond their control and blamed for gathering sparse or invalid evidence when aiding prosecutors, which contributes to the oversight causing delays in sexual assault cases. As a result, this additional factor constitutes another reason why officers are resigning from their positions, making employment attrition the new normal; therefore, with minimal alternatives, police agencies must rely on trained yet inexperienced recruits to fulfill work obligations of investigating claimant reports of sexual assault (Dalton et al., 2022).

Now placed in leadership positions, recruits face the challenges of being new legal authorities; while responding to crime scenes, they strive to maintain professionalism and avoid provoking dissatisfaction from complainants. Coincidentally, this application to voluntarily activate premature officers in leadership positions has only caused more harm to victim-survivors. Vocalizing their grievances concerning police

interactions, Lorenz & Jacobsen (2021) alluded to the fact that victims frequently protested their dissatisfaction against Leos' use of procedural justice. Frustrated with officers' lack of sensitivity throughout the investigative process, victims recall their experiences as less than helpful, with detailed accounts of late response time, lack of procedural instructions, and met with dismissive behaviors; some victims compared their encounters to be dreadful (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022b). As a result of such active barriers, caseloads are piling up as officers struggle to build a rapport with victims who are questioning their ability to provide safety and seek justice on their behalf.

Studies indicated that officers are trained to be vigilant and relentless in tactical pursuits when faced with adversity. However, when this training is applied in the field, and victims become uncomfortable with the extent of procedural justice, they are reprimanded by their superiors (Mourtgos et al., 2021). Research led by Henninger et al. (2020) sought to examine the satisfaction rate of sexual assault responders and the services they provided to victim-survivors, the study concluded of the 460 survey responders that 66.1% of sexual assault victims were satisfied with the response services they received from victim advocates and nurses; however, patrol and investigation officers were among those who received a lesser satisfaction score. Poor policing can be attributed to various factors, such as culture, improper training methods, and biases in the workplace, all of which are detrimental to victim services (Davies et al., 2022). Officers may exhibit signs of harboring preconceived stereotypes; even so, when faced with daily public denigration associated with their profession, they grapple with afflictions that can

lead to incompetence in certain areas of their job. Ultimately, after taking an oath to protect and serve the citizens of the United States, officers only ask for respect in return.

Motivated and inspired to be advocates for people in society, LEOs are trained to focus on situational awareness, effective communication, and de-escalation techniques, driven to prove themselves by exceeding societal expectations. Ricciardelli et al. (2020) advise the need to understand police perceptions during victim interaction, as their balance of occupational roles and responding to victim needs is often translated as the opposite of their intentions, unintentionally creating a portal for the media to exploit their actions and cast judgment. Studies suggest that society expects sexual assault responders to become desensitized to crime as they continue striving for more victim-focused service responses (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022). Still, it is an officer's duty to protect and serve, no matter the cost.

### ***Victim Rights and the Controversial Expectations of Police Involvement***

It is the right of every victim-survivor to inform criminal justice officials of their victimization, seeking safety, medical aid, and protection from those possessing a lesser moral compass. According to research, the reporting of sexual offenses should be prioritized by complainants and LEOs alike; however, sexual assault remains one of the most underreported national and global crimes in society (Hayden et al., 2023). Further exploration of other studies reveals that fear of police and the perpetrator's counterattack are among the leading causes of case attrition; these factors are notoriously influential in deterring victims from filing future reports, providing evidence, or cooperating in the investigation (Lorenz & Jacobson, 2021). After experiencing degradation and biases by

officers whom they perceived to be trained service responders, instinctively, victims became guarded based on the officer's aggravated demeanor, thereby lessening their interactions and expectations, which results in the underreporting of sex crimes.

As noted by Bazelon and Green (2020), laws also serve the purpose of keeping victims informed and acting as a liaison between the justice system and victims. Investigators and prosecutors collaborate to ensure fairness in the preparation for adversarial court processes, seeking justice for the victim. Victims are informed of their rights to privacy and anonymity; this safeguarding process prevents their information from being released to the public, thereby reducing the risk of harassment and intimidation by suspects. This report is known as a “restricted report.” Irrespective of a victim's age, gender, or race, preferential treatment from investigators is prohibited as every victim is to be treated with fairness and respect; usually paradoxical, not always archetypal, they are rarely seen as the “ideal victim” or bearing resemblance to a person that has experienced non-consensual “real rape” (Balfour & White, 2018). Trained to assess a victim's appearance, mannerisms, and characteristics, most officers struggle when confronted with actions that differ from their training, ultimately altering their response to the sudden change (Saxton et al., 2022).

Considering the multifarious faces of trauma, a victim's rights and decisions should be honored with great regard; however, while trained to be proficient in their duties, officers who are also traumatically broken are often unaware of the damage caused by their applications of non-procedural justice approaches. According to McMillan's (2018) research, specific characteristics of police actions during victim

engagement serve as precautionary measures throughout the investigation:

inconsistencies in victims' stories, refusal to conduct recorded interviews, and malicious allegations are usually telltale signs of deception. Additionally, previous research has shown that police involvement is often viewed as risky due to the multiple variables that influence their performance of duty; therefore, victims should refrain from having high expectations and favored outcomes, lest they become disappointed and place blame on officers (Campbell et al., 2021). The safety and concerns of victim-survivors will always be prioritized; their perspectives hold the key to policymakers advising and proposals to create reformative laws for their benefit, thus improving service response time, treatment, and recovery process for victim-survivors.

### **Complications of Decision-Making in Sexual Assault Investigations**

Investigators specializing in sex crimes must be proficient in their skills and competent in their duties when tasked with gathering evidence, coding cases, and making clearance decisions. Still, research suggests that even the most decorated and competent investigators cannot ensure the safety of every victim-survivor they once helped, especially when other influential factors complicate their access to resources and case-processing efforts (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020). Victims participating in risk-taking behaviors are predisposed to re-victimization and are less likely to be helped due to obstructive credibility and dependability concerns. Presumed to be involved in prostitution, alcoholism, and substance abuse, victim-survivors bearing this label are classified as a "vulnerable population", ones whose source of income is habitual and who are inclined to develop problematic coping mechanisms; rarely do their cases reach the prosecutorial

stage or end with a conviction (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020). According to Sardina and Ackerman (2022), conflicts presented in victim engagement often interfere with case outcomes and decision-making; misinterpreted as insensitive and judgmental, investigators intending to encourage victim-survivors in sexual assault cases can sometimes trigger adverse social reactions during their interaction.

According to research conducted by Fansher and Welsh (2023), investigators and prosecutors are the central deciding factors in case determinations; with their considerable use of discretion in judgment situations, they must choose who will be formally charged and held accountable in a sexual assault case. While conducting research, Spohn and Tellis (2019) examined the decisions made in sexual assault case investigations led by officers of the Los Angeles police department in 2008; results showed that most cases appeared to have probable cause for an arrest, yet officers did not adhere to policy requirements in arresting offenders of the crime. Trained to detect suspicious and skeptical red flags in investigations, inconsistencies in victim reports can also be an additional factor in causing officers to be hesitant when making decisions on a case. According to Sleath and Bull (2021), research suggests that officers have a legal and moral obligation to thoroughly investigate cases; however, they are often criticized for adhering to operational procedures that can hinder fair and impartial decisions, sometimes resulting in unfavorable outcomes for claimants. Evidence suggests that the primary objective of the justice system is to penalize individuals who violate statutes intended to protect human rights, thereby holding each state accountable for determining

guilt and imposing penalties on those found to have violated the law (Burns & Sinko, 2023).

### ***The Highs and Lows of Victim Cooperation***

Sexual assault case determinations are reliant on the cooperation of capable victim-survivors and their willingness to participate in interviews, testify, and contribute medical evidence to trauma advisors and investigators who can help with the processing and the outcome of their case (Morabito et al., 2019). Likewise, Markey et al. (2021) note the consequences of victims refusing to assist in gathering evidence, which can sometimes delay the judgment of their case, as they are considered “witnesses”; however, this approach can prove more harmful than beneficial. The intrusive nature of an investigation affects a victim’s recovery, most of whom are unprepared and unable to commit to the process of this invasion of privacy when asked to relive and recollect the “dangerously cruel” details of their trauma. Therefore, a comprehensive interview can only be initiated after a victim's needs are met following immediate consensual medical examination and stabilization treatment (Markey et al., 2021). After gathering substantial evidence to validate the claims, the claimant must decide whether to file charges against the assailant or halt the investigation until they are sure of their decision.

Evidence suggests that case considerations are assessed by a variety of legal and extralegal factors; yet, while victims are excellent sources of evidence in sexual assault cases, notably risqué lifestyle choices would cause officers and prosecutors to be skeptical of their credibility in case proceedings (Wentz & Koenig, 2019). In addition, a study by Balluci and Drakes (2021) introduced that the “issue of consent” was also a

crucial determinant in the trajectory of sexual assault case outcomes; while police must gather evidence for prosecutors to prove without a doubt that there were no prior verbal or physical agreements between either party that could suffice as an elected constitutional approval for sexual contact. Research by Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2022), reveals that one in five cases of sexual assault reports will be coded as “unfounded” or baseless by an officer's inability to prove that the assault was non-consensual or because the victim lost the brunt of their presumed evidence due to delayed reporting, these cases will not be pursued beyond the point of the initial victim engagement. Overall, these complex challenges pose significant risks to the safety and services of victims. Still, contrary to popular expectations, a united partnership among police organizations and community leaders can minimize negative risk factors and restore transformative changes.

### **Organizational & Occupational Barriers Affecting the Policing of SA**

Sexual assault investigators are trained to establish good communicative rapport and gather sufficient evidence from complainants in the safest way possible. However, the barriers that further complicate their duty practices are insurmountable. A recent study by Dalton et al. (2022) informed of the extent to which officers are closely monitored by their organizations, as disclosures reveal that the policing of Rape and Serious Sexual Offenses (RASSO) often results in victim dissatisfaction, thus proving that police service practices need to be revised for significant improvements. A systematic review conducted by Pruba and Demou (2019) examines the relationship between organizational stressors and the mental well-being of officers who are routine service providers to victims of sexual assault; the examination concludes that the constant

exposure to victim atrocities, long work hours, and a lack of organizational support were significant influences on their emotional exhaustion. With shared power among administrators and citizens, this complex functionalist-operated justice system is more effective when active community partners work together to alleviate negatively influential factors that hinder the welfare of officers and victims of sexual assault.

Little is known about law enforcement officers' perspectives on the crime of sexual assault, according to the evidence compiled in research, not all officers who opt to assume a role in law enforcement fully understand the concerns and requirements of victim safety (Ricciardelli et al., 2020). Focusing on the efficacy of an officer's employment, society prioritizes economic balance and the preferential treatment of citizens, disregarding ethical considerations and the resolute implications that fuel the subjective motives behind an officer's actions. According to McLean et al. (2020), while officers are taught the characteristics of various crimes and how to profile a suspect, they tend to be less knowledgeable about conflict-resolution skills and the proper use of de-escalation tactics that could mitigate the negative outlook associated with victim engagement. McLean et al. (2020) inform us of the influence that militaristic training has on police trainees, taught to be superior in their actions, they are inculcated to be the standard in their occupation when performing procedural justice. This division between police and citizens is exacerbated by their inability to work cohesively and prevent premature conflicts, regardless of the reasons for their separation; the exclusion of community orientation in their training practices will only hinder their efforts to achieve transformative social change (Sloan & Paoline, 2021).

Currently, officers across the United States are still facing an uphill battle, as the increasingly problematic reports of sexual assault victimization are obvious indicators that the once reliable justice practices are failing and that their afflictions of occupational and social challenges are just the beginning. Responsible for responding to reports of sexual assault and safeguarding victim-survivors, research explains that service calls can create unsettlement for some officers, given the fact that their presence is not always warmly received; their disappointment often intensifies when met with condescending retorts and repulsion from those seeking their assistance (Mourtgos et al., 2021). Irrespective of the restructured improvements of their training programs and the development of effective professional collaborations, the emotional stress and physical strain that accompany their job place their health at risk for severe mental disorders (Dalton et al., 2022). Though these issues are persistent and demoralizing among the ranks of police responding to sexual assault, their recognition provides them the power to overcome and do better. This span of literature further proves that the theory of the “bulletproof cop” was fabricated to cause division; like everyone in society, they, too, are susceptible to societal and adversarial woes.

### ***Occupational Stressors***

According to Eikenberry et al. (2023), occupational and social stress is a daily occurrence for sexual assault investigators assisting victim-survivors in the field; through maladaptive coping strategies, they counter and balance traumatic events while providing optimal service to victim-survivors. In addition, a study by Bishopp et al. (2020) led researchers to assess Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST) for a direct link

between stress-related factors and police misconduct. Supported by the stressors of victim engagement and distrust reinforced through service experiences, police officers must make expeditious decisions when necessary; GST assesses the emotional reactions and consequences of these actions (Bishopp et al., 2020). With violence and danger being significant risk factors in police practice, the influence of occupational stress is unavoidable; thus, having decided that stress is a causal factor in their degenerative efforts and conduct as it relates to work, officers require help in assessing and improving their mental health.

While most officers strive to maintain their job competency, others are burdened by the demands of their duties. Stress and anxiety are well-known risk factors that drastically decrease an officer's morale, often induced by traumatic or irregular changes in their duties. This makes it challenging to maintain composure and professionalism when faced with social challenges (Wolter et al., 2019). According to a meta-analysis study by Syed et al. (2020), mental health complications are more pervasive in police personnel than they are in any other occupation or social society on a global scale. Fighting to mask the symptoms of any psychological disturbances, officers are often discouraged from seeking help. Aware of these characteristics in their peers and subordinates, supervisors must always be aware of any changes in their behaviors, as it is easy for them to develop vicarious trauma symptoms. Bonded by a dutiful oath to help their victims seek justice, officers should be required to undergo periodic psychological evaluations. Such interventive efforts can save lives if they receive adequate peer support

promptly, helping buffer the influence and stigma associated with a negative work culture.

In a research study conducted by Morabito et al. (2021), evidence reveals that sexual assault investigators who are afflicted by secondary victimization are unable to compartmentalize and shelve their feelings and begin to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms when the results of a case fall short of their desired expectations. Officers frustrated with the outcome of the criminal justice process must recognize that their roles have limitations and sometimes feel powerless in their pursuit of justice for victims (Morabito et al., 2019). As seen in most hierarchical police agencies and organizations, this interchangeable, unbalanced trade-off frequently leads to tension and stressful work situations. Occupational stressors of sorts can influence the breakdown of an officer's physical and mental health if coping mechanisms are not administered as a precautionary measure to elude the possibility of a downward spiral. Therefore, indebted to the victims, they vowed to seek justice and fulfill their duty.

### **Psychological Challenges Affecting Sexual Assault Investigators.**

As salient representatives of the law, sexual assault investigators are trained to replicate interventive and preventive solutions during stressful events, all while they, too, are susceptible to struggles of cognitive and emotional disruptions. Research by Parkes et al. (2019a) reveals that officers working with victim-survivors of sexual abuse often suffer from psychological issues that are attributed to them fulfilling routine duty obligations. The constant exposure to traumatic events usually leads to the development of psychological and emotional stress in police responders, and when unable to attain

justice for victim-survivors, they are likely to feel disempowered in their supportive efforts and occupational capabilities (Parkes et al., 2019a). Such emotional imbalance causes officers to feel isolated, altering their moods and behaviors, including their interactions with occupational factors; this further contributes to job stress and burnout, which, in turn, impacts their work and personal lives (Parkes et al., 2019b).

Mental health is a significant concern for law enforcement officials, faced with continuous uncertainty and dangers associated with their jobs, officers have become more tense and reactive in social settings; moreover, compassion fatigue is an additional risk factor, causing them intense struggle when corresponding with victims (Queiros, 2020). According to Craddock and Telesco (2020), the manifestation of stress can induce a barrage of health problems in an officer's life, psychological discrepancies can potentially lead to depressive and suicidal ideations, and it can also be physiological, resulting in severe cardiovascular disease. The development of stressful ideations or disorders is perceived as a derivative of both organizational and occupational influences, with pervasive factors such as unreliable management, inadequate training, frequent crisis response, and being subject to constant criticism from the public; officers can become defensive in social situations (Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Queiros, 2020). As their protective and defensive wall of courage becomes weaker and their mental and emotional health begins to deteriorate, officers become dependent on unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with the effects of depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Cerel et al., 2019). Often reliant on alcohol or prescribed medications to self-regulate, officers are more susceptible to the elements of life when unable to hide their

afflictions; their frustrations are no longer subtle, and with their conduct becoming more frantic, only professional help can save them (Bryant, 2021).

Study suggests that more officers are falling victim to the strongholds of stress and mental health issues, with depression, PTSD, and suicide viewed as “job hazards”; such risk factors are often normalized for having severe and fatal consequences (Singletary, 2023). Research by Violanti and Seege (2021) informs that based on information recovered from the National Occupational Mortality Surveillance Database (NOMS, CDC), law enforcement officers are more at risk of dying by suicide at a 54% rate, unlike any other occupation. Notorious for brandishing police weakness and misconduct as brutish and problematic, Queiros (2020) reveals that the media constantly paints officers as disparagingly flawed individuals, rarely ever expounding on the challenges of their routine occupational duties that pose significant physical and mental health risks. Study suggests that there are numerous wellness services and mental health professionals who are available to assist officers through the development and implementation of supportive coping strategies that could potentially work for them; however, getting them to recognize their need for assistance and the actual benefits of accessing such service providers are almost impossible (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). It is the responsibility of everyone in society to be patient and understanding of LEOs who respond to and handle every service call. Proactive approaches can provide healing for officers struggling with mental health. This form of care does not require specialized training.

### **Consequences of Rape Myth Acceptance in Police Culture.**

Rape myth acceptance has been a constant issue within the ranks of officers, both actively serving and retired; it is the prejudicial thought process of those perpetuating the idea of sexual aggression being the fault of the victim, which exonerates the offender (Newins et al., 2018). The institutionalization of rape myths among investigative officers has a significant impact on their job efficacy. Research by George et al. (2022) reported that the development of rape myths and the occasional standardized training of unqualified sex crime investigators have led to the de-prioritization of reports being investigated and closed due to invalid classification. Furthermore, a recent study by Maiorano et al. (2023) suggests that standard classifications of rape myths are often stereotypical and harmful, causing division among officers and victims alike, and are based on misguided concepts that define “real rape” and “true victim”. This cognitive and behavioral reliance often guides police to willingly offer discretion to an offender without the application of proper procedural evidence, causing secondary victimization to the actual victim.

Research acknowledges that an officer's attitude toward a victim is a sign that their perceptive beliefs are instinctually focused on the victim's actions that may have influenced the crime, noting a person's choice of attire, behavior, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time usually serves as a testament to their claims (Venema, 2019). According to Hine and Murphy (2019), their study reveals that officers' practice of rape myth acceptance is demonstrated in their judgment variations; this determination often falls under the classification of “responsibility” and “authenticity”, which offers clarity of the victim's role in the assault. Such beliefs are contributing factors to why victims often

cite negative interactions with investigators, thus confirming that the perceptible presence of rape myths does affect police responses to sexual assault.

Additionally, studies suggest that the presence of rape myths among officers impedes the development of trust within society; this common barrier is a significant obstruction to the many underreported crimes of sexual assault, thus causing victims to relinquish their beliefs in the justice system (Lathan et al., 2023). The impulsivity of rape myths is second nature to most officers, as a standard practice within their work culture, and causes a decrease in their preparedness in the field, therefore limiting the availability of the efforts and resources intended to assist in victim safety (Garza & Franklin, 2021). As indicated by Grandgenett et al. (2020), officers with valued credence for rape myth ideologies are more likely to respond to victims using adverse social reactions, resulting in the precedence of their beliefs, which leads them to undermine any effort to provide supportive responses. These impending barriers are constantly being devised and fostered in society; however, to mend the divide in their partnerships, officers and community leaders must be willing to communicate effectively through careful mediation to improve victim services.

### **Efforts Made to Improve Victim Services**

#### ***Trauma-Informed Practices***

Victims of sexual assault, specifically those suffering from Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), are more likely to experience emotional and mental health issues (Burgess & Holstrom, 1974). Focusing on prevention and safety, LEOs are aware of the unique behaviors exhibited by victims depicting symptoms of RTS. Documented in the

1974 study about RTS conducted by Burgess and Holstrom are the usual reactions of victims, emanating from behavioral evidence of rape or sexual assault trauma. Detailed in two phases (usually acute disorganization or long-term reorganization), the symptoms of RTS are often present during, shortly after, or well beyond the period of victimization. With the general classifications being emotional, behavioral, or physical, officers trained in trauma-informed approaches are more likely to detect the symptoms and effectively assist victims based on their understanding of the associated trauma (Burgess & Holstrom, 1983).

The practice of trauma-informed approaches is a transformative multidisciplinary response created by researchers hoping to mitigate the risk of traumatization from service providers to victims. Campbell et al. (2019) state that this pragmatic construct of appeal is usually evident after careful evaluation of victim-survivor complaints; therefore, they accuse uninformed service providers of careless practices that lead to re-victimization. Rich (2019) explains that the utilization of trauma-informed approaches when interacting with victims of sexual assault is quite beneficial for both parties; intended to unify bonds, this practice is designed to penetrate communication and service barriers, enabling officers to build rapport with victims and enhance trusting partnerships. Officers who display empathy in an occupational context are often unaware of the significance of their actions; viewed as an expression of care, victims of sexual assault respond by rallying behind their communities, using such opportunities to build positive partnerships that dismantle the barriers imposed by negative social influence.

Sexual assault often results in victims suffering from debilitating psychological trauma; therefore, officers participating in victim engagement must be trained and informed of the importance of providing supportive trauma-informed solutions, as the manifestation of mental disorders created by trauma can cripple one's health. Evidence suggests that psychological distress can be the result of both sexual and non-sexual violence; however, the association between self-esteem and sexual violence is uncanny, as a person's self-perception after experiencing non-consensual sexual advancements is often more dejected and sensitive due to the presence of trauma, leaving them in a constant state of perpetuated fear (Schnittker, 2022). Without receiving adequate care for their trauma, victim-survivors may resort to partaking in maladaptive coping strategies as a way of survival, thus limiting their cognitive functions and impairing their mobility. Possessing this knowledge, agencies and administrators, supported by the efficacy of trauma-informed practices, increase awareness and familiarity in better briefing their officers on the more common disorders of depression and anxiety in victims of sexual assault, to improve service responses.

### **Sexual Assault Response Teams & Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners**

Studies reveal that in recent years, representatives sought it best to develop a multidisciplinary approach to combating sexual violence. This collaboration led to the creation of Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs), comprising a diverse range of representatives specializing in various aspects of victim advocacy and trauma management (Koon-Magnin et al., 2023; Wegryzn et al., 2021). SARTs are mainly composed of representatives from organizations that typically assist law enforcement by

prioritizing the needs of sexually assaulted victims; these organizations, rallying together, present a phenomenal team of victim advocates, such as LEOs, prosecutors, and sexual assault nurse examiners, sharing a common goal and working on the victim's behalf. The creation of such specialized task forces prompted the review and amendment of specific policies aimed at protecting the well-being of both officers and victims; however, victims remain adamant that LEOs are not adequately trained to properly execute trauma-informed approaches, which have been proven to be life-changing (Dalton et al., 2022). Understanding that victims who are less apprehensive may become more cooperative when treated with knowledge and respect, SARTs work in tandem with LEOs to mitigate the fear and apprehension that often accompany investigations (Koon-Magnin et al., 2023; Wegryzn et al., 2021).

These interprofessional specialists are employed in every local community; with careful coordination, they are often willing to join forces to relieve the criminal justice system and assume roles and responsibilities that can optimally reduce societal conflicts. Collaborating with service providers and sexual assault victim advocates is a pragmatic approach to providing interventive victim care and resources; however, these comprehensive specialists are not guided by a standardized set of rules, which sometimes creates conflicts of power imbalances (Wegrzyn et al., 2021). Bringing together diverse professionals to problem-solve and create solutions is imperative for the facilitation of victim safety in the communities they love and serve; however, a lack of institutional support deters the facilitation of sexual assault response teams in certain jurisdictions (Coelho et al., 2023). Organization, discipline, and structure are essential to support and

maintain the interdependence of multidisciplinary service providers; without mutual respect and support, their primary function will suffer from poor communication and inadequate performance of duties.

Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs) are trained and experienced medical service professionals capable of providing expert medical care and support for victims of sexual assault while ensuring the safe retrieval of medical evidence for cases being investigated (Coelho et al., 2023). Research also notes that the integration of medically trained forensic nurses in sexual assault collaboration is a victorious feat, proficient in trauma-informed care and treatment; their presence reflects compassionate and caring responses, which alleviates some of the discomfort victims may feel in sexual forensic examinations (Torregosa et al., 2023). Proficient and skilled nurse examiners suited for the position of a forensic nurse are often tasked with the responsibility of being service advisors and caretakers to victims of sexual assault; as SANE representatives, they are trained to withstand severe trauma exposures, effectively engage victims, and manage crises (Torregosa et al., 2023). According to Koon-Magnin et al. (2023), SANE and SARTs collaborate to achieve shared objectives. Although this collaborative effort is not a required practice in every local community, the plans they devise as a unit decrease revictimization among survivors and increase the likelihood of assailants being held accountable for their crimes.

### **Cons of Trauma-Informed Practices.**

Though investigation procedures are meant to be favorable for victim-survivors of sexual assault, standard procedural questions proposed during interviews can potentially

cause re-traumatization. Research by Franklin et al. (2020) informs us of the complications and consequences surrounding the misperceived representation of trauma symptoms and the possibility of officers imposing unfair judgment calls in situations where discretion could have been employed; however, medical examiners sometimes face similar situations. Police officers are trained to be responsive and compassionate when engaging victim-survivors; however, while stabilizing persons involved in catastrophic events, the urgency of their tone and actions may be perceived as indifferent. Supported research conducted by Sweeney et al. (2019) reveals that because of errors in the practice of engagement, survivors and sexual assault investigators alike continue to suffer in silence based on their encounters with service providers lacking empathy and compassion in their responses. As victims become more guarded and less trusting in the nationally revered and resourceful criminal justice system, the need for transformative social change is undeniable, while officers are held responsible for the trajectory of victim engagements when responding to service calls, their occupational challenges remain unimportant and unresolved.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Discussed in the notable findings of the literature review by numerous researchers were some of the daunting challenges that affect law enforcement officers who are deemed as respectable service responders to victims of sexual assault. Data indicate that occupational and societal risk factors predispose officers to a psychological disadvantage. When burdened with the unfortunate ramifications of their duty obligations, they, too, are subjected to vicarious trauma. Still, the actual factors that influence the challenges of

their duty efforts and their aggravated relationship with sexual assault victims are unclear. In the past, lawmakers and criminal justice administrators implemented numerous measures to address challenges affecting officers; however, without continuous, substantial research to address the gaps in the literature, both reformed and new policies become less effective while the problems persist. Continued in chapter 3, the development of the framework is intended for use in finding whether U.S. law enforcement officers responding to sexual assault investigations are subconsciously benefactors in this vicious cycle of secondhand trauma, through witnessing and protecting trauma recipients.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### Introduction

In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers who responded to reports of sexual assault and whose efforts were affected by occupational and social challenges while conducting their investigations. Sexual assault continued to be a pervasive criminal threat; however, the very officers who were entrusted to respond to reports of sexual assault were viewed as suspected contributors to the revictimization of victim-survivors (Lorenz et al., 2019; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, as victim-survivors fight to regain normalcy after victimization, law enforcement officers remain a point of contact in the justice system for them to seek legal aid and protection from their current or future attacks.

This explorative study was necessary to understand the phenomenon further and address speculative concerns about the possible internal and external factors of social and occupational challenges that officers face when conducting sexual assault investigations. In the past, administrators have sought to restructure police training, augment their work resources, and enhance victim services to mitigate the extensive effects it might have on officers and citizens (Dalton et al., 2022). However, a gap remained, as officers continue to struggle with inadequate specialist training, insufficient knowledge of trauma-informed approaches, and a failure to establish trust and build partnerships through community policing (Dalton et al., 2022). The researchers' goal in this study was to identify the occupational and social interferences that challenged law enforcement officers during their investigations into sexual assault allegations and how these interferences affected

the officers' job efficacy when interacting with victim-survivors. Additionally, I explored law enforcement officers' viewpoints and their use of trauma-informed practices among victim-survivors when used in the field.

In the core sections of this chapter, I expound on the significance of the topic under exploration, the population's vulnerability and susceptibility, and the beneficiaries of the data collected. The exploration of the lived experiences and challenges of U.S. law enforcement officers involving sexual assault investigations can potentially help to create solutions, such as amendments to policies and better training practices meant to improve and unite community and police partnerships. This chapter discussed research design, rationale, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis plans. In addition, the researcher has summarized and evaluated the fundamental pillars of qualitative research (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), providing evidence of the study's validity and trustworthiness.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

An in-depth exploration of the topic was necessary to determine the exact challenges affecting law enforcement officers who investigate sexual assault, which have the potential to become increasingly oppressive and controversial. The foundational questions designed to guide this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are some of the challenges law enforcement officers face/endure when engaging and interacting with sexual assault victims?

RQ2: How do the challenges associated with the investigative process impact law enforcement officers' ability to interact with sexual assault victims?

For this study, the researcher employed a descriptive-phenomenological approach, which allowed for flexibility in the researcher's efforts to unearth evidence through the examination of human subjects (see et al., 2023). The descriptive phenomenological design was often used to elicit rich, descriptive feedback from participants about their lived experiences. It was explicitly aimed at understanding the essence and values of a phenomenon, relying solely on data collection and analysis (Giorgi, 2009). Throughout the United States, victim-survivors of sexual assault voiced their uncertainty and qualms with the alleged maltreatment received from officers during sexual assault investigations; therefore, this design further supported the retrieval of descriptive feedback from local and county-level police regarding the occupational and social challenges they faced while on duty. Although it was unclear when the incivility between LEOs and citizens began, the conflict among them was apparent, causing interference in the daily duty obligations of uniformed police responders and detectives who were responsible for conducting sexual assault investigations.

The phenomenological design was most suitable for this study, as it enabled the researcher to delve deeper into understanding the human experience (see Sinfield et al., 2023). Therefore, research questions were developed to support the study's foundation and minimize complications in the study's process and alignment. Qualitative research typically employs interviews as the primary data collection method. For this purpose, 10 semi-structured interview questions were prepared to facilitate individual interviews between the researcher and the study's participants. Another great attribute of using a qualitative methodology was the researcher's role as an instrument for gathering

evidence; this allowed for deeper insight and understanding into participants' exploratory thoughts and most sensitive emotions regarding the topic (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I focused on the occupational and social challenges that affect law enforcement officers' duty obligations and explored potential solutions to enhance their work experiences.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, analyst, and interviewer of this qualitative study, I acknowledged that all information collected and presented would be carefully assessed to ensure its completeness. The influence of community policing and partnerships was recognized as a pivotal factor in social change; therefore, my role as the researcher was expected to be challenging, as one had to set aside preconceived notions to fairly and adequately commit to the research without exhibiting bias. To mitigate bias during the study, I planned to use the bracketing tool as a secondary source of confirmation, ensuring that the entire process was framed around the research questions rather than the researcher's conceptual beliefs. I understood that there was a chance officers might refuse to collaborate and share their perspectives with me, a civilian researcher with less familiarity and experience in their occupation. However, the unique nature of their unknown disposition on the matter kept me encouraged and committed to this study. This research was necessary because the findings would inform society of the personal challenges U.S. Leo's faced while striving to be effective service responders and providers to victims of sexual assault.

I publicized and advertised this study through multiple social media platforms to recruit U.S. police officers who had been first responders to sexual assault victims and were actively working as officers rather than being retired. With little to no experience in law enforcement, I anticipated encountering occupational jargon or phrases among participants that I might not fully understand. However, I request that these concepts be explained, as they contribute to the raw, rich data typically present in research. The researcher's bias did not pose an issue in this study; bracketing and member-checking were employed as preventive measures to maintain positionality, thereby avoiding any misconceptions and personal judgment. Throughout the study, critical reflexivity was also employed as an additional guide to ensure the reliability of the information collected.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

U.S. law enforcement officers were trained responders and investigators of criminal sexual assault allegations; however, the occupational and social factors of an investigation sometimes created challenges that impeded their job efficacy. Although numerous research inquiries had been conducted into the specified topic, researchers commonly used Canada as their study population, while others examined the problem globally. For this research, the participants were U.S. law enforcement officers across the nation (both uniformed responders and specialized detectives) with at least 5 years of experience conducting sexual assault investigations. The initial sample size sought 12 to 15 LEO participants; however, the study concluded with 10 participants aged 18 to 55 years, regardless of gender and ethnic background. Finally, the selection criteria were

designed to ensure that the selected participants were experienced, credible, and able to provide detailed information on the study's topic.

### **Instrumentation**

As the researcher, my role involved using appropriate instrumentation to collect data, a process also applicable to this research document. This study employed semi-structured, open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) to gather information from primary literature and other sources, ensuring alignment with the methodological framework. Also used as a formative developmental tool for the interview questions was a pilot study titled, *Five Pillars: A Framework for Transforming the Police Response to Rape and Sexual Assault*, 2022. The series of interview questions was created to assess the social and occupational factors that caused interferences and restrictions among U.S. law enforcement officers investigating sexual assault reports. The questionnaire, which outlines the 10 interview questions, was reviewed by criminal justice professionals for feedback on content validity and potential risk factors to be addressed prior to the research.

Qualitative methodology is arguably the most suitable for helping researchers explore and extract in-depth information to provide an understanding of a particular topic (Busetto et al., 2020). In addition, using semistructured, open-ended questions in qualitative interviews allowed interviewees to respond in ways that were most comfortable for them, while encouraging genuine interest in communication and the sharing of rich details about the research topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This approach to data collection and instrumentation encouraged researchers to practice confidentiality and

adhere to the principles of beneficence by designing interview questions that were least likely to trigger participants. Participants in this study were interviewed virtually via Zoom audio in environments deemed safe for sharing their views and perspectives on their experiences with the phenomenon in question.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

As the researcher, I facilitated and conducted all aspects of this study, purposefully selecting resourceful participants who met the selection criteria. U.S. law enforcement officers were recruited through social media forums, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as other professional associations that cater exclusively to law enforcement professionals. This form of sampling, known as “purposeful sampling,” allowed me to strategically select participants who could provide rich and insightful accounts of their subjective experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The selected participants were presented with follow-up information regarding the research. They provided a verbal response, serving as informed consent, at the time of the interview, which was audio-recorded as it commenced. Understanding that this project relied solely on volunteers and their efforts, they had the flexibility to choose a schedule that worked best for them and their preferred method of communication: telephone, face-to-face meetings, email, or Zoom calls.

A recruitment flyer (Appendix B) was created to detail the study’s topic, purpose, and research questions, as well as to outline the selection criteria and confidentiality concerns for the study population. Upon receiving notifications from participants expressing interest in the research study, I verified their credentials by checking their

professional background on platforms like LinkedIn or their work email as a measure of authenticity. I then scheduled individual interviews based on their preferred method of communication: Zoom conferencing, telephone, or face-to-face. (10) semi-structured open-ended interview questions governed the data collection during the interviews for this study; this method was used to gain in-depth information from the study population when conducting qualitative research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview segments were expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes after participants received their introduction to the study and stated their verbal consent. After each interview, the audio recordings were uploaded to my personal computer and transcribed. If necessary, I also used NVivo software as a secondary source to corroborate the transcriptions.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

After completing data collection, I gathered all interview data and conducted a thematic analysis to examine and interpret participants' responses. Thematic analysis was a commonly used tool, most suited to analyzing descriptive information in qualitative studies (Saldana, 2021). Commonly accessible, this method allowed researchers the flexibility to code either by hand or to use software analysis programs to break down and assess information. During the analysis, I developed and categorized codes and patterns to generate themes, providing significant evidence to answer the research questions. NVivo software was also used as a secondary comparative assessment tool to generate new concepts and ensure alignment across the study, thereby mitigating the risk of potential discrepancies.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Numerous strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, including evaluating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure research quality and secure confidence in the study data. “Credibility” was a significant component in assessing trustworthiness in the research. Verification processes, such as data triangulation, were used to ensure that the study participants had firsthand knowledge and experience of the topic being explored. In this study, the collected data were cross-referenced with information from other studies to ensure consistency and affirm the balance and credibility of the shared data. Informing participants about the confidentiality and anonymity practices used in the study encouraged them to provide accurate responses. They understood that their contributions to understanding societal problems and assisting lawmakers and administrators in making improvements would lead to better outcomes.

### **Transferability**

Transferability referred to the relevance of information to the research audience, with a focus on topic specificity and minimal generalization (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I ensured transferability by continuously overlapping rich contexts related to the topic and by openly inviting participants from the target population across the United States who were willing and ready to share their relatable experiences. As one of the few researchers to inquire about this under-explored phenomenon, I made the descriptive

findings available for interpretation and transferability to those seeking to fill the gap and expand on future studies.

### **Dependability**

Another way to assess the trustworthiness of a study was through its dependability, which ensured consistency and served as a tool to test the accuracy of the study's replication by others. Providing readers with documentation of respondents' responses and a detailed account of the research methods and processes was an alternative way to demonstrate dependability through transparency. By examining the rationale and basis for constructing research questions, an audit trail revealed the resources used to interpret and analyze the data. As the researcher of this study, I was confident that the information presented was reasonable and, in conjunction with the order, necessary to establish the dependability of the study's findings.

### **Confirmability**

Establishing conclusiveness in a study relied on objectivity, which referred to how well the findings aligned with the original concept and the likelihood that confirmability had been achieved without the researcher's bias. Since the topic's conception, I have kept a reflective journal detailing my thoughts and the subjective perceptions I have struggled with. This reflective journal included personal assumptions, brief self-assessments, and reflections that helped me ensure confirmability throughout the study. Finally, I completed my exploration and resolved the issue of confirmability by thoroughly examining my internal and external biases in this research.

## **Ethical Procedures**

Research involving human subjects for data collection requires approval from the university research committee for guidance and oversight before initiating recruitment or interviews with study participants. Therefore, this study did not commence until I received IRB approval, thus complying with the principles of streamlining ethical research. Participants who expressed interest in this study and met the selection criteria were informed of the requirements and issued consent forms as demonstrated in (Appendix C). “Zoom” conferencing, telephone, and face-to-face meetings were used for individual interviews and data collection, upon scheduling with each participant. Subsequently, the audio recordings were transcribed using NVIVO transcription, with Microsoft Word's “transcribe” feature serving as a secondary source of confirmation. This was followed by a thorough thematic analysis and review through manual coding, in addition to NVivo software.

## **Summary**

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers regarding the challenges they faced while investigating sexual assault reports. The findings were deemed incredibly significant to research, as they helped improve efforts to combat sexual assault and promote officer safety. Weber’s SAT served as the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter 3 described the research methods, including the study's guiding questions, the rationale for the chosen design, the procedures for participant selection, and the process for data collection and analysis. We also discussed my role as the researcher, the participants'

rights to confidentiality, the Belmont Report of 1979, the practice of anonymity, and the use of code names as an additional layer of protection. The researcher of this study was not familiar with the participants and began data collection only after receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The major components of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability—were briefly addressed, along with their application in assessing the validity and rigor of the research. Given the possibility of ethical issues arising, reflexivity and member checking of the information provided by participants were employed to mitigate these potential problems. In Chapter 4, I discussed the study's results and provided an analytical review of the validity of the information presented.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

In this qualitative study, I explored the challenges that US law enforcement officers often face when responding to and investigating reports of sexual assault. Nevertheless, while officers were committed to doing their jobs and upholding duty standards, the discord encountered during their responses to service calls—from complainants seeking their help—distressed their engagements (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022a). More importantly, there are numerous accounts of reports suggesting that LEOs were the initiators of negative victim engagements, and even fewer studies seeking to learn of their firsthand experiences on the topic.

I answered the following questions in this study:

RQ1: What are some of the challenges law enforcement officers face/endure when engaging and interacting with Sexual Assault Victims?

RQ2: How do the challenges associated with the investigative process impact law enforcement officers' ability to interact with sexual assault victims?

In this chapter, I highlighted the various elements used to analyze and interpret the results necessary to demonstrate the research's significance: setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

### Setting

To be included in this study, all participants had to be sworn law enforcement officers actively serving in the United States. Whether patrol or investigators, experienced officers who had familiarity interacting and conducting sexual assault

investigations were welcomed as volunteer participants, so long as they were willing to share their experiences. Each participant was allowed to choose the proposed setting options that best suited them. These options included public yet discreet locations, community centers, libraries, and secluded park areas, with informed knowledge and verbal agreement to audio recording. Respondents were also given the option to participate via Zoom or by telephone, allowing them to interview from the comfort of their offices, vehicles, or the safety of their homes. Additionally, they were informed of the study's confidentiality clause, which includes a level of anonymity, providing each participant with a pseudonym (LEO 1-10) to conceal their identity. Having met all the eligibility criteria, regardless of their age and gender, some participants stated that their time served as officers is shared between other facets of policing and is not exclusive to investigating sexual assault.

Interviews were conducted in private settings, as most participants reported being in their vehicles, personal office spaces, or during their lunch breaks when they contacted the researcher on their cellphones. Additionally, as the researcher for this study, I conducted interviews in the safety of my home or within the confines of my vehicle, ensuring I was secluded and undisturbed. One participant chose to communicate via Zoom, while the others contacted the study by phone, and another participant contacted the study in person. They were also re-informed of the study's title and purpose, as well as the need to verbally consent by stating "I consent" on the recording, before I began their interview. Each participant was allowed to answer 10 open-ended questions and one bonus question about their occupation as law enforcement officers and their experiences

responding to and or investigating sexual assault victim claims. While the meeting was conducted via phone and on speaker, the researcher used the sound recorder on their computer to capture the dialogue in its entirety. This was then transcribed from audio to text using Microsoft's transcribe feature and NVivo.

### **Demographics**

As the researcher, my initial goal was to gather information from 12 law enforcement officers throughout the United States; however, after reaching data saturation early in the study, only 10 officers were interviewed. Of the 10 investigators, all were male officers who had served an average of at least 5 years in the police force. The research flyer indicated an entry age limit of 18 years, which most respondents exceeded. Two participants, in their mid-50s, did not exceed the cutoff limit of 55 years old. They provided the most optimal information about the research study during the interview. Additionally, most respondents were from the southern region of the United States and had served in general or broader investigative roles; however, one respondent from the western region, who specialized only in sex crimes, provided more in-depth and knowledgeable information about his experience. This brief description provides general information about participants who have committed to the study after meeting the eligibility requirements and answering the interview questions shown in Appendix A. Table 1 provides more information about their contextual demographics.

#### **Table 1**

##### *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Occupation Title	Time In Service	Gender
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LEO 1	Investigator	10 years	Male
LEO 2	Investigator	7 years	Male
LEO 3	Patrol Sergeant	7 years	Male
LEO 4	Patrol Sergeant	12 years	Male
LEO 5	Investigator	10 years	Male
LEO 6	Detective LT	9 years	Male
LEO 7	Investigator	20 years	Male
LEO 8	Investigator	22 years	Male
LEO 9	Patrol Sergeant	14 years	Male
LEO 10	Investigator	10 years	Male

### **Data Collection**

Upon receiving approval from the University's IRB, I began sharing the constructed research flyer on social media platforms, specifically LinkedIn and Facebook. The criteria for the prospective target population were predetermined, making it easier to commence the recruitment process. I reached out to law enforcement agencies via email and in person to discuss the possibility of sharing my research flyer with their administrators. Administrators and officers who were interested in and welcomed the study's introduction were briefed on its contents and requirements. Ideally, the goal was to recruit 12 law enforcement officers across the United States who have experience responding to and investigating reports of sexual assault victims, of which only 10 were necessary to complete the study.

I employed purposive sampling, specifically targeting respondents from the population who were more likely to provide rich, in-depth responses to the interview questions. Each prospective participant was informed of the study's inclusion criteria for conducting research about active-duty U.S. law enforcement officers with experience in sexual assault investigation who have a minimum of 5 years of experience, regardless of

their gender. Additionally, the significance of the confidentiality clause is explained in detail, along with the flexibility afforded during the interview process. The importance of acknowledging that confirmation as voluntary participants, obtained through verbal consent, is contingent upon their follow-through is also emphasized. Those who were certain of their intent to participate in the study then received consent forms and were scheduled for phone, Zoom calls, or face-to-face interviews. However, through numerous attempts to share the research information and receive responses from qualified participants for interviews, only 10 followed through and provided substantial accounts of their experiences.

Most participants opted for phone interviews, while a single participant chose Zoom, and another chose an in-person interview. This setup enables them to remain within the comfort of their own environment and provide feedback on their experiences at their own pace. Additionally, there were others I initially met in person who preferred to participate at that moment, so we found secluded public areas to speak more privately after presenting them with copies of the consent form. On average, each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes, with the shortest being 10 minutes, as that participant gave concise accounts of his experience with a more rapid speech. The entire interview process began with a professional yet casual welcome to each participant. They were then informed of the interview's commencement and the start of audio recording, accompanied by a brief introduction to the study, and they provided verbal consent. Each participant was asked 10 semi-structured, open-ended questions about their experiences as law enforcement officers while investigating sexual assault victim claims; they, in turn,

responded to their accounts of subsequently fulfilling their duty as respondents, which concluded, and they were thanked for their participation.

### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative study sought to explore the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers and the challenges they faced while investigating sexual assault victim reports. After completing data collection via Zoom, telephone, and face-to-face interviews, the audio recordings of participants' responses were transcribed using Microsoft Word and NVivo. As the researcher, I proofread each document for accuracy and corrected any misrepresented information from the audio relay. Printed copies of each interview response were created, and the codes were organized into themes. Thematic analysis was chosen as the research method to decipher and transform the data into meaningful information accurately. Themes are insightful interpretations that derive from codes into patterns, often summarizing and explaining the core aspects of the information being relayed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Initially, I created a Word document with the 10 questions I asked each participant throughout the interviews. Then, under each question, I documented the relevant responses from each officer, sub-labeling each line as LEO 1-10. Gradually, as I familiarized myself with the raw data, codes began to emerge, lending recognition and meaning to the documented responses. Themes and patterns represented the overarching relationships within the data. As more themes emerged, the categorization increasingly focused on the relevance of information used to provide supportive answers to the research questions. Eventually, I compiled a more structured list of all the challenges

officers mentioned in their interview feedback. From these inductive codes, more constructive themes were developed. Listed in Table 2 are the subsequent codes that were formed and the themes that follow.

**Table 2***Subsequent Codes and Themes from the Raw Data*

Codes	Descriptive Themes	Supporting Themes
Training Oversight (Sexual Assault)	Basic, General training Family/Offender	Shadowing senior LEOs, the availability of competent recruits
Victim Engagement	Deterrence, Officers Facing Racial Disparity, and Gender Biases.	Victims withdrawing initial claims, recurring victims, and impending environmental factors.
Occupational challenges	Exposure to threat and danger, understaffed, overwhelming cases, and caseloads.	Delay with medical processing of cases; Fear of re-traumatizing victims' psychological challenges when responding to child and elderly victims
Social Challenges	Fearful victims, public scrutiny, lack of substantial evidence, and non-reporting	Victims' distrust of LEOs, lack of support from communities in which they work, and misinformed media reporting
Mental Health	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Burnout, Secondary trauma	Unhealthy coping mechanisms, burnout, and sparse mental health check-ins

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**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is one of the most important and determining factors in research; it is where the student researcher expresses confidence and a plausible representation of

their work, using a variety of components to assess all qualitative data retrieved as evidence (credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability).

One of the most crucial steps in the recruitment process was building rapport and trust with law enforcement officers who were inquisitive and sought more information about the study's purpose and goals. Most participants were contacted via LinkedIn or in person before the interviews, allowing me to verify their identities and ensure their credibility as sworn officers. Through professional social media platforms, I met most of the officers by viewing their profiles, which included photos, verbal indications of their employment status, their current career field, and mutual connections. This ensured that the targeted participants were experienced in their field and, if interested, would make credible respondents with rich data to share about the research topic. The participants chosen were all subjected to the same criteria and questions, regardless of their preferred method of communication or the setting in which their interviews were conducted; this strategy helps ensure triangulation in research.

For establishing trustworthiness in research, proving dependability is equally important. After the initial selection of participants, each received a copy of the consent form detailing the study's purpose and significance, which also outlined the risks and benefits, following any other concerns that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) found necessary to inform them of, such as their right to confidentiality and to withdraw at any time. Each candidate chose a method of communication that was most suitable for them. They were allowed to conduct their interview via Zoom, face-to-face, or over the phone, with audio recording. This allowed the researcher to present integral proof of

dependability. After uploading all the recordings from my phone, which served as the recording device during the interviews, to my computer, they were transcribed and printed using Microsoft Word transcription services. Additionally, after proofreading the documents, the researcher made minor corrections to ensure accuracy during manual coding, resulting in consistent categories and themes throughout the data collection and analysis.

Transferability refers to the generalizability and replicability of research results. The concepts used to select the target population are distinctly defined, and the study's setting can be replicated in other research or scenarios, allowing participants to comfortably share their perspectives and experiences (Burkholder et al., 2020). For this study, purposeful sampling was employed to provide LEOs with experience in sexual assault investigations across the United States, offering them an opportunity to elaborate on the topic and engage in interviews from alternative research settings. If necessary, the same research methods and questions can be utilized in other facets of criminal justice and even in the medical field. This approach focuses on each participant's lived experiences and how daily challenges in their field affect the effectiveness of their duties. This research serves as a blueprint for future study endeavors, encouraging the transferability of various perspectives from citizens within America's workforce and exploring how feedback can be utilized to promote positive social change.

Confirmability in qualitative research is essentially concerned with the transparency of information collected and shared from the target population, rather than the researcher's subjective viewpoints. Throughout this research study, the researcher

prioritized each step with caution, ensuring that all participants received flyers and consent forms and that each verbal consent was captured on audio recordings. After printing copies and manually coding each transcript, direct quotes were used as evidence to further enhance transparency, thereby mitigating biases or preconceptions that often influence researchers. The phone and computer used for recording and storage are both password-protected and encrypted. The notes taken during interviews, along with the physical copies of transcripts, are stored in my library in a secure location.

### **Results**

This descriptive phenomenological study focused on exploring the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers and the challenges they face while investigating sexual assault victim reports. Initially designed to incorporate responses from 12 volunteer participants willing to share their experiences, the study reached saturation after 10 interviews. During our interview sessions, the study participants were asked a series of 10 questions, including an additional bonus question if time permitted. Strengthened by the supportive discourse of thematic analysis, answers to the research questions were conveyed through the patterns and organized meanings expressed in the data, using the participants' direct and paraphrased responses. The results are presented in themes derived from various codes, which were then categorized to address the two research questions.

**RQ1:** What are some of the challenges law enforcement officers face/endure when engaging and interacting with sexual assault victims?

**RQ2:** How do the challenges associated with the investigative process impact law enforcement officers' ability to interact with sexual assault victims?

These research questions were significant as they set the precedent and structural foundation for developing specific interview questions. Used to explore the challenges officers face throughout their investigations with sexual assault victim survivors, the researcher had the opportunity to pose questions to investigators, garnering their honest opinion on the topic in question. All respondents provided verbal consent to participate in the study, which utilized either in-person, Zoom, or telephone interviews. When asked about challenges affecting their duty performance in both occupational and social settings, their responses were recorded and documented, revealing apparent codes that led to the development of various themes.

### **Training Oversight**

According to the themes revealed, most officers receive basic or general training, which is required in every facet of law enforcement. When interviewed and asked about specific training as it relates to responding to or investigating sexual assault claims, officers stated that their only training was when they entered the academy, and significantly less followed being promoted to investigators. In contrast, some officers attested that their agencies encouraged a more in-depth approach and required them to attend semiannual and annual training courses, especially as investigators. LEO 1 expressed as a sexual assault investigator, the training he received ranged from "evidence collection, victim interviewing, and then obviously the subject/offender and witness interviewing." LEO 2's response was that in his agency, "nobody specializes in one thing,

and that was because as investigators they are all responsible for larceny and missing persons,” so he did the occasional one or two classes, remembering one being titled “assessing the situation,” and was made to shadow a sergeant or lieutenant for additional training experience.

When responding to sexual assault, a dispatcher usually radios in the information, and it was expected of an available and experienced officer to respond, preferably a specialized detective, some respondents remarked. However, sometimes they must settle for a patrol officer who was also trained to deal with emergent situations and was less attuned to the sensitive nature of trauma-informed awareness that sexual assault detectives usually possess to make that initial contact. Throughout the interviews, investigators occasionally expounded on the focal point of having experienced well-trained LEOS who are also trauma-informed to report to such calls. When asked about any issues they believed caused negative interactions between the police and victim survivors, LEO 6 stated, “The absence of informed interviewing is what most of his peers are lacking; they seem to believe they can deal with victims of sexual assault the same as they would treat their drug offenders.” Training is essential in policing; it is the starting point for employing capable service personnel to serve as public servants in the communities they love, under a government they can respect and represent.

### **Challenges Associated with Victim Engagement**

While officers engage and interact with sexual assault victims during service calls, they often encounter complex situations that must be navigated before stability and compliance are achieved, respondents revealed. These are some of the recurring themes

that follow: “family and offender deterrence, and gender and racial biases.” Question 4 of the interview asked officers to describe social challenges that hinder their response to victim engagement. LEO 10 spoke of the removal of victims from the initial environment, or scene of crime, where the offender or family members may still be influential factors to the victim and their willingness to cooperate with reporting and further investigations”. LEO 9 also shared their perspective on how they have interacted with victims who prefer female investigators, especially if a male violated them. This causes a delay in victim services because officers must wait for their female counterparts to become available to continue their investigations, or vice versa.

When responding to service calls, officers are often dispatched with adequate information; however, dispatchers can only relay to them the information provided by the complainant, say respondents. Most officers elaborated on their experiences when faced with racial or gender inequality during victim engagement; “LEO 7” stated that he has had similar issues; however, in the line of duty, he could not allow his emotional status to be altered; “my feelings cannot be an issue, I would have to overcome it.” Even though it is an LEO's responsibility to respond, help, and investigate each allegation, they are not always met with the kindest of regards, as some victims have preferences as to who they are most comfortable with; “LEO 5” states that after showing up to a call he was met with “I do not want to talk to a black officer.” However, most agencies focus on an officer's location and proximity to the reported call; therefore, a language barrier may exist, or when a possible victim requests to engage with female officers instead of male officers, their service request is taken into consideration. However, this could mean a

delay in the investigation, as LEOs stated that they understand and continually work to ensure that the victim's needs are met, thereby minimizing the risk of re-traumatization.

### **The Effects of Social Challenges on Law Enforcement Officers**

Social challenges intertwined with their duties pose a significant risk to LEOs as they work to neutralize threats within communities that can disrupt citizens' lives and infringe on their right to freedom. These are some of the themes that interviewees echoed when asked to describe the social challenges that interfere with their response to victim engagement and how these challenges impact them: “case attrition, fearful victims, insufficient evidence, and scrutiny from society and the media.” Social challenges are widespread and interconnected, affecting officers and sexual assault victims alike; however, when LEOs interact with victim-survivors, they are often met with a barrage of factors that often complicate the efficiency of how well they carry out their duty performances. Having interactions with victims who say that they are at an economic disadvantage and under the influence of illicit drugs or alcohol means that, before taking their statement, they must be cleared by medical, as they need to be coherent to be interviewed. As stated by “LEO 1”, “Time allows them to get clarity”—victims are crucial pieces to an investigation.

Most cases fail to go forward due to a lack of evidence, and being under the influence can interfere with their ability to give accurate testimony. Another compelling reason for case delays and the scrutiny officers often faced by society was the duration each of their counterparts within the SART needed to complete their portion of the work with victim-survivors. Unbeknownst to most people, most police agencies have

multidisciplinary teams of professionals within their communities who offer a variety of services to sexual assault victim survivors. These professionals include SANE personnel, victim advocates, and prosecutors, who are activated depending on the severity of the crime and the number of reported cases. As expressed by “LEO 6”, who has experience with victim-survivors being evaluated and admitted, and sometimes for mental health reasons, “it can be a challenge just trying to coordinate with the hospital unit and work with them,” as the interview was conducted in a behavioral unit at the hospital.

### **Occupational Challenges**

Being an officer can be challenging, as they deal with crises of all kinds involving people of all ages; they must navigate insurmountable odds given the nature of their field. Their work hours can prove psychologically dangerous overall if a work-life balance is not established. When asked “what are some of the duty challenges they face when responding to victims of sexual assault, and how it affects their duty performance?” based on their responses and the researcher's analysis of the documents, the themes formed are: (exposure to threat and danger, overwhelming cases, caseloads, and being understaffed). While LEO 10 expresses his satisfaction with being able to do the job he loves, he vocalized the challenges of being the lead investigator. These include the added pressure of time constraints and the possibility of insufficient evidence to proceed with a case against a prosecutor, both of which are necessary to bring justice for the victims. Officers also shared their insights on the internal conflicts they sometimes have with utilizing textbook procedures, as opposed to what they know works well during their interactions

with victims, which sometimes causes them to have issues minimizing rape myths with those who seem to be victims of “true” crimes.

Another officer discussed the hassle of time constraints and the challenges of being in a supervisory position. They also mentioned being interrupted by subordinates seeking directives and information on what to do next while attending to the assigned victim. Additionally, “LEO 1” elaborates on the occupational challenges of reporting to investigate claims lodged by SANE nurses and hospital personnel, who are deemed mandatory reporters, even when the victim seeks only medical aid without involving legal authorities. Whether it involves a child or an adult victim, once a claim is lodged through the proper channels, it must be prioritized and investigated to ensure the victim's safety and, if possible, apprehend the offender. This approach reduces the risk of re-victimization or further endangering others' lives. However, most officers agree that, regardless of who the claimant is, each incident report needs to be handled delicately and appropriately. LEOs are aware and incredibly careful not to revictimize victims, as this is unacceptable and can have dire consequences for how the survivor chooses to move forward and heal.

Additionally, when asked about their experiences, concerns, or discomforts related to the job, officers report that their morale and views sometimes fluctuate, especially when responding to child and elderly victim survivors. Due to the pervasiveness of the crime, they target citizens who are deemed to be most vulnerable; according to LEO 10, he must compartmentalize his feelings, especially being a father; it

was just hard to imagine the severity of the crime and the extent they are willing to go to hurt children. LEO 8 also shared that

all sexual assault cases are equally important; however, when you are dealing with cases involving children, that is tough because you must be the voice for that child. “Sometimes I must question them on more than one occasion, which is stressful; you need to check your feelings and maintain control”.

LEO 1 also stated that throughout investigations, most detectives build a rapport with victim-survivors, acting as their advocates. LEO 1 stated,

“You want justice for them, especially after learning the full extent of what they have gone through. If, in the end, justice is not served, most officers personalize the outcome and blame themselves; that part of the job is tough”.

There are also challenges when working with “perceptive victims,” who are survivors and form preconceived notions and develop rape myths about how officers will view or treat them, if they report being assaulted while wearing specific clothing and being in environments that influenced their victimization. Respondents also mentioned, “that built-up perception can hinder the relationship between the public and law enforcement officials for sure.” Then there is also the perceptive officer, who, as stated by LEO 9, can “misread situations and initially believed that, as a male officer, women are victimized more than males, even though sometimes it is the other way around, as seen in many domestic assault cases.” Most investigators are esteemed advocates of thorough investigations because once you unearth the truth, all preconceived notions and biases are rendered invalid, as the truth is firm and conclusive evidence.

## **Mental Health**

Sexual assault is a heinous and pervasive crime that affects all people everywhere in the world, and although there is immense physical and psychological risk for the victim survivor involved, family members, associates, and police officers who are dutiful trauma responders are often affected by the extent of this vicarious trauma. These are the themes that were generated when asked, 'How does an officer's knowledge of trauma signs inform their response to victims in the field, and what challenges do they face?' (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder-PTSD, burnout, and vicarious trauma) These are their responses; throughout these interviews, officers spoke of their battles to control their thoughts and emotions, and of the things they will always be susceptible to, as part of the job. LEO 5 says that sometimes he struggles with the idea of how some sex offenders are not receiving just punishment, as punishment for them should be harsher. He states that he can be anxious when dispatched to the scene of a call, as seeing child victims is extremely hard, and worse if he encounters a victim with whom he is familiar.

One officer shared that there is an astronomical difference between how the military prioritizes and sets aside resources for their soldiers exhibiting symptoms of PTSD. He states that, as a veteran himself, he knows firsthand how society responds to recognizing this issue; however, “we have done a poor job recognizing it in police officers.” Other officers echo a similar sentiment, as they voiced that “every law enforcement officer is exposed to trauma within their first 3-5 years on the job, and that as officers, they see a lot, and it cannot be erased, so PTSD is very real”. LEOs understand that training and education are paramount because they help refine life-saving

skills and provide the necessary tools for success in the field. However, when there are six investigators in a department, and you are tending to 30-40 cases a month, while dealing with continuous unresolved trauma, it can lead to burnout and agencies being understaffed.

Officers were also asked how they deal with the intensity of the challenges of a sexual assault investigator and what helps them cope; LEO 1 stated that his unit highlights the success of their investigations, and that they also do the occasional check-in on victims with whom they have built a great rapport. He also clarified that he believes officers can benefit from closure in the cases they have worked. Informative updates about the success of a case can mitigate the stress they endure on and off the job. LEO 8 also expressed the closeness of all the service members in his unit and how they were overworked and understaffed; yet they were still expected to fulfill their duties, which would require more officers to complete. He also divulged that his most efficient coping method was to practice trying to leave work at work, and that he had witnessed quite a few of his colleagues becoming alcoholics because of the stressors of the job, who gradually became dependent on alcoholic beverages that were meant to be periodic stress relievers.

When asked how he coped with the stressors of the job, LEO 2 visibly breathe a heavy sigh, "I was not going to say this because I know it is not the right thing to do, but I put it in a box" and you will never believe how much I pray, I pray for strength and wisdom and for the kids that I cannot help to be blessed. LEO 6 attests to attending regular therapy for himself, having a good diet and sleep routine, all of which contribute

to him maintaining a good mental health balance, and that even though he tries to remain mindful, he refuses to allow vicarious trauma to have too much effect on his life. LEO 9 discusses the benefits of attending peer support groups and participating in numerous gym sessions, noting that one of the biggest challenges he sees his peers struggle with as officers is the refusal to admit they are having a tough time. Every officer had the opportunity to respond to a bonus question that asked about the availability of resources within their agency and whether they are comfortable accessing them in the presence of their peers. LEO 6 responds that there are resources available; however, he had negative experiences accessing them in the presence of his peers, so he chooses to utilize therapy outside of work.

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers and the challenges they face when investigating sexual assault victim reports. The findings indicate that law enforcement officers must address a wide range of issues daily to ensure that victim-survivors are safe and protected while the appropriate legal authorities investigate their claims. This descriptive research identified several themes from the initial codes developed through thematic data analysis (Training oversight, victim engagement, occupational challenges, social challenges, mental health). Two research questions guided the development of the study blueprint.

RQ1: What are some of the challenges law enforcement officers face/endure when engaging and interacting with Sexual Assault Victims?

RQ2: How do the challenges associated with the investigative process impact law enforcement officers' ability to interact with sexual assault victims?

A significant limitation of the study was the lack of face-to-face interviews; officers were skeptical of meeting a research student, and those who were open to meeting preferred to do so at their place of duty on their time. The lack of impersonal interactions potentially contributed to the lack of in-depth information the researcher could obtain about LEOS's struggles with mental health, if any. In Chapter 5, I will provide a comprehensive review of the findings, focusing on the study's limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Research suggests that occupational and social challenges among law enforcement officers are a significant problem, especially for sexual assault investigators assessing the claimant reports lodged by victim-survivors in the criminal justice system (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022b). As society continues to see an increase in cases of sexual assault allegations, the media claims that officers are a part of the problem rather than the solution; therefore, they are always publicly scrutinized and judged for their efforts in victim engagement (Franklin et al., 2020). In addition, although there are commonly known everyday stressors, such as training oversight, adverse reactions during victim engagement, and societal disapproval of victim case outcomes, there are undoubtedly other challenges that the public is unaware of that impact officers' occasional performance on duty.

I conducted a qualitative descriptive phenomenological explorative study into the lived experiences of U.S. law enforcement officers responding to and investigating sexual assault investigations to learn more about the challenges they are impacted by. As a researcher, I sought to identify the various social and occupational concerns that affect LEOs' performance of duty in the United States. Addressing this research gap could lead to solutions that enhance the efforts of sexual assault investigators and improve effectiveness in victim services. In preparation for this research study, I requested the assistance of volunteer participants who were actively working in the United States as sworn law enforcement officers with five years or more of experience in responding to

and investigating sexual assault reports. There were (10) LEO volunteer participants who were willing to share their perspectives on this phenomenon. Each respondent was informed about the study via LinkedIn, Facebook, or in person after agreeing to the terms. Data were collected methodically through face-to-face interviews, Zoom audio conferences, and telephone calls, which were audio-recorded with each participant's verbal consent.

The respondents' perspectives demonstrated that Max Weber's SAT provides a reliable framework for analyzing the challenges individuals face in social settings, making it a valid theoretical approach. Additionally, Weber's SAT benefited from the use of descriptive phenomenology when exploring such phenomena, as it allows subjects to share descriptive details of their experience when investigating claimant reports and their reasoning for their actions in response to unpredictable situations. Although victim survivors are the passive recipients of an officer's social action, their behaviors are often reactions to circumstances being influenced by internal and external factors that influence social reality. Without the practical application of “*verstehen*” in Weber’s SAT, which means empathic understanding, uninformed thinkers who are not familiar with LEO's perceptive guidance can misinterpret the intention behind their actions. Ultimately, Weber's four ideal types of rationalities (instrumental, value, traditional, and affective action) serve as an interpretive guide to officers' shared inductive experiences, thereby informing society about the organizational and social expectations that influence their work performance in exercising authority and navigating bureaucracy.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

The research findings are significant, with conclusive evidence to show that there are indeed challenges that affect U.S. law enforcement officers when investigating reports of sexual assault victims. The first-hand experience of investigative officers was used to support the study's significance and validity. In contrast, numerous studies have examined various demographics in different countries, while this is the first to explore the challenges faced by U.S. law enforcement officers investigating reports of sexual assault. The study results were gathered from 10 participants through individual interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. The study unveiled the following findings: training oversight for SA investigators, challenges during victim engagement, occupational and social challenges, and inadequate mental health support and resources.

### **Training Oversight**

As stated by the respondents in this study, every law enforcement officer is required to receive both physical and procedural training before being sworn in. This standard ensures the safety of both officers and the public. However, the roles of police officers and investigators can vary widely depending on location, population, and the agencies they serve; therefore, the in-depth, intensive requirements of Sexual Assault Investigation Training Programs (SAITP) are often overlooked and treated superficially (Dalton et al., 2021). Based on the data collected, 60% of the respondents received formal training as it relates to sexual assault; in contrast, the others expressed that their training was informal, thus gaining their experience from shadowing senior officers. While such a method allows agencies to provide timely and sufficient manpower, the risk of activating

officers to address and assess reports who lack the specialized practice of being trauma-informed among a vulnerable victim population can prove detrimental to both parties (Lorenz & Jacobsen, 2021).

According to extant literature, law enforcement officers in alternate geographical locations in the United States are likely to have different training requirements about the steps of standardized procedures they are expected to implement when engaging victims of sexual assault (International Associations of Chiefs of Police, 2018; Mourtgos et al., 2021). Furthermore, most respondents expressed that they were taught to treat victims as humanely as possible and that their training was surface-level and lacking trauma-informed approaches, suggesting that officers are still in need of better training practices to conduct sexual assault investigations adequately.

A patrol sergeant stated that although he responds to incidents regarding sexual assault and conducts preliminary interviews until a specialized detective is assigned the case, he is thankful that he does not have to go beyond the required initial interaction with victims. Nevertheless, studies suggest the critical need for training even though he does not deem himself ready or capable of going beyond “victim response” (O’neal, 2019). Results indicate that officers are aware of what they need to become better service providers; however, the current demands of their duties and limited resources significantly influence the availability of training opportunities. Consistent with other research, this study found that common misperceptions surrounding “a true victim” are standard training practice as officers commonly ascribe to rape myth when there is a lack

of training, potentially contributing to negative interactions and revictimization of survivors (Ricciardelli et al, 2021).

### **Challenges with Victim Engagement**

An emergent theme that was also significant in this study is the everyday challenges of issues that officers faced during their encounters with victim-survivors who sought their help. Proven in research are the usual barriers associated with victim-survivors that affect LEOs' investigative process, such as family involvement, vulnerability of the young and elderly, and the psychological and traumatic effects the nature of the crime has on each victim (Manukrishnan, 2024). While officers work to obtain concise evidentiary information and forge credible partnerships with victim survivors, such feats are often complex due to the potential challenges of conducting investigations; however, society expects LEOs to "protect and serve" in any situation, which affords them limited discretion and understanding of their susceptibility to occupational stress and vicarious trauma (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Other studies have produced findings that officers are partly to blame, accusing them of engaging victims with the absence of trauma-informed approaches, with minimal regard to victim circumstances; such factors typically contribute to poor decision-making, which further leads to case attrition in reporting (Morabito et al., 2019). While officers in this study are firm in their devotion and eager to learn more about victim-centered approaches, they also spoke about their duty to follow procedural laws that do not always align with victim satisfaction. This shows that societal issues will always influence how LEOs' efforts and actions are viewed and perceived.

## **Occupational and Social Challenges**

Respondents revealed that while organizational support is a well-known and echoed mantra, they often feel discouraged when implementing procedural justice as it applies to each case; such action tends to encourage disdain from victim survivors who perceive the involvement of specific principles in their most vulnerable moment to be insensitive and inhumane. According to Weber's SAT, such practice in a person is indicative of "Instrumentally Rational Action," which involves using their position to pursue goals reflective of their organization, regardless of the consequences of their actions (Peukert, 2004). Additionally, the analysis revealed that societal misconceptions pose occupational challenges for officers, as their ability to engage and investigate cases is often met with non-compliance, distrust, reluctance, and fear of the process. This lack of understanding can lead to the propagation of victim engagement, sometimes causing officers to feel disempowered in their roles. Even so, LEOs continue to don their uniforms, understanding that an investigation depends on a victim's credibility and willingness to cooperate, despite their own efforts.

Evidence demonstrates the impact on officers who face continuous exposure to traumatic events, which leads to additional work stress. Due to their victim-centered focus on achieving justice for survivors, LEOs often suppress their better judgment of balancing their own mental health. Moreover, with a vast array of articles expounding on the significance of the detriments of policing in sexual assault cases, only a few can be found on the availability and implementation of resources required to improve the dichotomy of trust between officers and victim-survivor relations. Upon gathering data

from study participants, it was also reported that socio-economic backgrounds, gender, age, and race are all factors in how survivors interact with them, affecting the investigation's progress, which causes them to be even more stressed and vulnerable in high-risk situations. Organizational changes are necessary to sustain excellent work ethics and ensure the availability of mental health resources for officers, just as society's safety is prioritized.

### **Mental Health**

Research suggests that although officers are trained and resilient in their duty role as sexual assault investigators, they sometimes struggle with compartmentalizing and balancing work and real-life situations (Morabito et al., 2021). Driven by their duty to serve, and the occasional reward of seeking and obtaining justice for victims, when subjected to the frequent response and witnessing of traumatic exposure involving pain and death, these vicarious events tend to encourage risky coping behaviors leading to the development of maladaptive outlets such as drinking and gambling (Jones et al., 2019). Considered to be legal aids and service providers, LEOs are always called to the scene of a crime, yet, according to previous research, LEOs investigating sexual assault claims are more at risk of succumbing to burnout and possessing PTSD assessment scores that range higher than their counterparts who are not routinely involved in conducting such investigations (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2023). In addition, the study results indicate that most officers who are aware of inadequacies as it relates to their mental health (Anxiety, depression, insomnia, PTSD) have opted to seek therapeutic guidance through extended

occupational resources. Others who prefer privacy seek counseling outside their organization.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Due to the lack of prior comparable empirical articles on the lived experiences of sexual assault investigators in the U.S., and this study being among the first to explore the topic's relevance, practical limitations were expected. Initially, I was prepared to interview 12 study participants; however, a lack of interest among female participants and scheduling conflicts threatened the study's outcome. However, after conducting 10 interviews, with an overrepresentation of males, data saturation was achieved, and the data provided considerable support for the study's academic rationale. It is also possible that a larger sample population, including all states with adequate female representation, would have allowed for greater insight into how officers of both genders are affected by the discord addressed in the research. Additionally, while most agencies receive standard federal guidance from the DOJ and the IACP, training practices vary by position and rank. This variation made it more challenging to assess the effectiveness of sexual assault training, as responding officers and investigative officers who did not receive similar training were expected to perform similar duties interchangeably.

### **Recommendations**

The literature gap focuses on how challenges from both occupational and social perspectives affect officers' performance in their duties. As a result, the study's findings were remarkable in addressing the problem, thus making a significant contribution to a body of knowledge that desperately needed exploration. It is recommended that future

practitioners take the initiative to explore related topics, aiming to provide society with informed, evidence-based insights into the factors influencing LEOs' behavioral responses and how these could be improved. The results of this research also highlighted the interrelated duties of responding officers and specialized detectives; however, responding officers' training is less formal, and they often make initial contact with victim-survivors. Therefore, additional training should be required of officers dealing with such a vulnerable victim population.

Aware of the challenges affecting sexual assault officers, it is also recommended that other facets of criminal justice be explored for the same reasons, with the intent of improving and facilitating better training practices, thus expanding resources for officers struggling to balance their duties and mental health. Although speculative, future researchers exploring such a population may benefit from collecting data solely through face-to-face interviews, as this approach could allow them to delve into the untapped, in-depth experiences of officers who feel more comfortable sharing information in person. Additionally, this study aims to attract the intuitive and creative minds of scholar-practitioners eager to explore often-overlooked topics that impact the most viable contributors to positive social change. Furthermore, misrepresentation of gatekeepers and the issues they face is crucial, as it is our duty as researchers to thoroughly investigate, identify the problem, and engage in effective collaborations to provide solutions. Ultimately, it can be impactful if similar studies are conducted with a larger sample size, as the findings may raise awareness, prompting criminal justice administrators and

policymakers to review the seriousness of vicarious trauma's impact on police officers, both on and off duty.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the occupational and social challenges faced by U.S. investigative officers and their impact on their work-life balance. This study also includes patrol officers, who are typically the first responders on the scene, interacting with victims and conducting preliminary interviews. While there is no evidence that their inclusion impacted the study's outcome, their perspectives are just as necessary as those of the designated specialized investigators. Furthermore, employing a descriptive phenomenological approach to address the research questions allowed the participants' expressed depths of experience to provide insight into the reliability and validity of the findings. While this study is informative and can provide firsthand accounts from experienced officers, there is still the issue of society adhering to media representations of discord and unsatisfactory engagements from only a victim's viewpoint. Such habitual beliefs often result in public opinion that effectively tarnishes an officer's reputation without providing an opportunity for intervention. Therefore, future research should explore and examine ways in which victim survivors can effectively improve communication with officers assigned to their cases.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study reveal that law enforcement officers in the United States who respond to and investigate sexual assault claims face insurmountable challenges as public servants. Moreover, while most

officers are significantly affected by the lack of trauma-informed training, respondents believe that it potentially contributes to oversight in victim engagement, causing a lack of trust in the justice system, which further leads to inadvertent case attrition. Additionally, it influences their susceptibility to negative and emotional experiences stemming from media scrutiny and occupational discrepancies in the field, as research suggests that first responders are more prone to stress than members of any other occupation in society (Bryant, 2021). Despite the limitations of the study, it is recommended that the findings be used to inform society of the lived experiences of U.S. LEOs who investigate sexual assault to create awareness of their efforts and challenges, as well as those of the victim-survivors, to promote positive social change among neighboring communities, whose goal is to encourage and influence better interactions and improve training practices.

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### Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How long have you been a sexual assault investigator, and can you elaborate on the training you have received regarding sexual assault response?
2. Please describe in simplest terms the steps of standardized procedures that are expected of you as an officer when engaging victim-survivors of sexual assault.
3. What are some occupational challenges that impact your duty performance when responding to victims of sexual assault?
4. Please describe how social challenges can interfere with your response to victim engagement. Ex. If the victim-survivor is homeless, reliant on illicit drugs, or suffers from mental health issues.
5. Have you personally encountered victims who later reported negative disclosures of their interactions with your response to their sexual assault case? If so, are you willing to share your experiences?
6. As a trauma responder, what are some of the signs that are usually present in victim-survivors that help to guide your responses when in the field, and are there challenges when navigating the correct use of trauma response?
7. Have you experienced discomfort on the job that possibly affected your outlook or views on sexual assault in general? For example, within the usual process of investigative practices, how has the victim-survivor response affected your morale and view of the job?
8. Can you describe some issues or differences that cause negative interactions between victims and officers?

9. Can you give me some examples or suggestions of what helps you cope with the intensity of the challenges presented when responding to sexual assault?

10. Do you feel you can benefit from additional training as it relates to engaging/interacting with victim-survivors of sexual assault?

· Bonus Question- As an officer of the law, are there always resources available to treat your mental well-being after the occasional “duty response to sexual assault”, and are you comfortable enough to access them in the presence of others?

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

**The Lived Experience of U.S. Law Enforcement Officers and the Challenges They Face While Investigating Sexual Assault Victim Reports.**



**About the study:** This study seeks the aid of Law Enforcement Officers across the United States who have experience conducting sexual assault Investigations. You are invited to participate in an interview to discuss your observation and awareness of the following phenomenon. The information provided could potentially facilitate positive

change by enabling society to better understand the social and occupational factors that influence citizen and police interactions.

- One 30–60-minute phone or Zoom interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)
- You will receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank-you!
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that may identify you.

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- They must be 18 years old or older
- Actively working in the United States, having experience as a law enforcement officer responding to and investigating sexual assault reports.
- Male and Female officers possessing at least 5 years of experience in the mentioned area of criminal justice are welcome.

**This interview is part of the doctoral study. The interviews will take place from March to August 2025 and must be scheduled in advance.**