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“I thought I’m better off just trying to put this behind me” – a contemporary approach to understanding why women decide not to report sexual violence

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ABSTRACT

Sexual offence disclosures are on the rise, thought to be the result of growing numbers of prosecutions brought against well-known public figures and mobilisation of movements such as #MeToo. Despite this, data continue to indicate that most victim-survivors will never report their abuse. This study aimed to explore why women continue to decide not to report sexual assault to the police. Secondary data were collated and analysed, pertaining to survivor accounts of sexual assault, posted in response to a prominent online video entitled ‘Women Tell Us Why They Didn’t Report Their Sexual Assault’. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes regarding why women chose not to report: (1) *Lack of faith in the Criminal Justice System* (encompassing two sub-themes, *no evidence and traumatising of reporting*), (2) *Self-blame*, and (3) *Knowing the perpetrator*. Practical applications and reforms concerning empathic police responses and CJS improvements surrounding timeliness, case progression, and conviction rates are discussed.

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KEYWORDS Sexual assault; rape; victim-survivor; disclosure; Under-reporting

Background and context

Prior research has examined barriers to reporting sexual assault, with efforts to reduce and remove these barriers over recent years. The need to regularly reassess victim-survivor’s reasons for choosing not to report remains paramount in informing the success of these efforts as well as in the professional

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training imperatives for members of the criminal justice system. The present study examines unprompted accounts from victim-survivors, elucidating their own perceived barriers to reporting as a response to a social media video on the topic. The outcomes of which look to inform policy and the constituent components of the criminal justice system by enhancing trauma-informed training and practice, thereby increasing confidence in the criminal justice system, and enhancing rates of reporting.

Introduction

Despite variation in definitions used between legal jurisdictions and within the academic literature, *sexual assault* is typically defined as any physical, psychological or emotional violation (or threat of such) that takes the form of a sexual act inflicted upon a person without that person's consent (see Willmott et al., 2021). While anybody can be a victim of a sexual assault, recorded crime figures and crime survey data consistently reiterate that women are most likely to be victims of sexual assault (Ministry of Justice [MOJ], 2013; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Indeed, on average global estimates and prevalence data suggest one in three women will experience a sexual and/or physical assault during their lifetime (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Debowska et al., 2021; Sharratt et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2013). Yet, whilst crime figures and victimisation surveys provide a useful approximation of the extent of the problem, evidence suggests that sexual assault is likely to be the most underreported crime worldwide (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2016; Ceelen et al., 2016; DePrince et al., 2019).

The low levels of reporting associated with sexual assault (Murphy et al., 2022) represent the first of several avenues of attrition among these types of crime. In part, this is due to the pervasiveness of socially embedded myths and stereotypes which appear to govern public perceptions of what a 'real' sexual assault looks like (e.g. Estrich, 1987); the sort of people that commit and are victims of such offences; and the factors which support or undermine the legitimacy of allegations and claimants among sexual assault claims (e.g. Hine & Murphy, 2017, 2019).

When sexual assault is reported, rates of attrition throughout different stages of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) offer victim-survivors limited encouragement to report (Spohn & Tellis, 2012; Willmott et al., 2021). Ultimately, charge and conviction rates remain extremely low (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020a; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018; United Nations, 2018). Set against the backdrop of widely reported poor case outcomes, the incentive is low for victim-survivors to decide to report an experience of sexual assault. Whilst a plethora of research has sought to investigate attrition and case discontinuation or withdrawal at different stages of the CJS (e.g. Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Murphy & Hine, 2019), the diversity and complexity

of victim-survivor decisions around reporting sexual assault remain a key challenge for the CJS (Johnson, 2017). Vast underreporting is problematic for many reasons. Firstly, experiencing sexual assault can have devastating impacts for victims (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Psychological disorders, physical health problems, detachment issues and educational difficulties are often experienced following a sexual assault (Boduszek et al., 2019; Debowska et al., 2018; Dworkin, 2018). Literature indicates that this distress can extend to families, friends, and partners of victim-survivors (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000; Mojtahedi et al., 2022). Additionally, not reporting may prevent survivors from being able to access vital help and support (Marchetti, 2012) and even preclude their access to state compensation after experiencing such an assault (Smith et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, victim-survivors who do not receive support experience more severe and enduring psychological trauma overall (Ahrens et al., 2010; Woodfield et al., 2022). Those who do not report are also found to wrestle with additional feelings of shame and guilt, fearing that their unpunished offender may be more inclined to reoffend (Hanson et al., 2003). In reality, even when reported, sexual offences rarely result in an offender being prosecuted or convicted (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020b; MOJ, 2013; Willmott et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Previous literature illustrates a variety of reasons that sexual assault goes unreported. Involving police is not a straightforward decision and is influenced by a multitude of factors including personal circumstances, past experiences and encouragement or pressure to report from loved ones (Johnson, 2017; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Among the multitude of reported reasons for victims deciding not to report is a belief that their experience was not serious enough to warrant pressing charges (Cohn et al., 2013; Weiss, 2011). Women often view a sexual act involving penetration as more 'reportable' than other non-penetrative forms of sexual assault and are therefore less likely to label their experience as assault if it does not adhere to such stereotypes and expectations surrounding severity, force and violence (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Fisher et al., 2003; Sowersby et al., 2022). Similarly, incidents involving physical injury or weapons are more likely to be reported (Felson et al., 2002), again highlighting the importance of victim-survivor perceptions surrounding the seriousness of the offence upon ultimate disclosure. In reality, any sexual violation, regardless of perceived severity (in law or public consciousness), often still result in long-term and enduring psychological harm (Muldoon et al., 2016; Parsons & Mojtahedi, 2022).

Although statistics indicate that most sexual assault victims will know their perpetrator (MOJ, 2013; ONS, 2021), a sexual assault committed by an acquaintance, a casual or formal dating partner or a friend, are those least likely to be reported to the police (Felson & Pare, 2005). Reasons given in the previous research include concerns of the repercussions upon their familial

and social relationships, as well as the fear of not being believed, being blamed or retraumatised by the CJS investigative process (Lorenz et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2017), especially when complainants are neurodiverse (Devine & Mojtahedi, 2021). However, despite the wealth of prior research which identifies a range of barriers to reporting, given the vast recent efforts, campaigns and movements designed to remove and reduce such barriers, it remains important to constantly re-examine victim-survivors decisions to not report their sexual assault to understand how these self-perceived barriers shift over time and their implications for the CJS.

This study makes use of social media to examine qualitative victim-survivor accounts of their reasons for not reporting, detailed in unsolicited, voluntary self-reported public social media discussion forum. Recently research has adopted a similar approach in analysing anonymous victim-survivor blogs of sexual harassment experiences posted on a dedicated website (Thornton et al., 2023) and public views expressed through micro-blog 'tweets' posted on the X platform (formerly named Twitter) concerning attitudes towards; the rough sex defence (Sowersby et al., 2022), violence against women in South Africa (D'Avanzato et al., 2022) and high-profile allegations of sexual assault (Williams et al., 2023). Contemporary studies are developing an understanding of the unique experiences that male victim-survivors of sexual abuse encounter (e.g. Weare, 2021; Widanaralalage et al., 2022); reinforcing the notion that barriers to reporting may vary between different groups. As such, the focus of this study surrounds victim-survivors that identify as women. Additionally, existing literature investigating women's decisions to report sexual assault often use quantitative data collection techniques where participants are directly approached, given a list of predefined reasons for non-disclosure and asked to highlight which reasons best apply to them (e.g. Queirós et al., 2017; Spencer et al., 2017). Despite the broad reach that such a methodological design affords among a large number of victim-survivors, the method inevitably limits variability and nuance of responses and may in turn overlook important distinct explanations surrounding why women decide against reporting. Such quantitative survey-based methods of data collection also create a degree of artificiality rather than examination of victim-survivor explanations which they have decided to share publicly online, in an unpromoted manner. Thus, the aim of the present study was to qualify and build upon existing knowledge surrounding barriers to reporting through the use of qualitative data analysis of naturally occurring secondary data. It is anticipated that data analysed in this way will offer a deeper understanding of the surroundings of why women who have been sexually assaulted decide not to report their experience to the police. By analysing comments which are posted anonymously and freely online, this will afford an unpromoted and unfiltered insight into victim perspectives, especially given that most victim-survivors post anonymously through the use of an

online pseudonym. Therefore, the current study aims to answer the research question: why do women decide not to report experiences of sexual assault to the police?

Method

Design

To address the research question, a qualitative design was employed. Recurring themes within the data were identified to allow flexible exploration of the lived experiences of women regarding why they decided not to report sexual assault (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sexual assault is not a rare experience, thus qualitative research on this topic is important and particularly useful when trying to answer 'why' questions (Campbell & Wasco, 2005).

Data collection

Secondary qualitative data was gathered from comments in response to a prominent YouTube video entitled 'Women Tell Us Why They Didn't Report Their Sexual Assault'. The video was produced by the online US women's magazine *Bustle* and uploaded free to access on their YouTube channel in October 2016. At the time of writing, the video had been viewed 218,000 times and received 1,163 comments. The video includes first-hand accounts from several American women of the reasons why they chose not to report a sexual assault perpetrated against them. The video itself is met by comments from users of the online platform self-disclosing their own reasons for non-reporting, which constitutes the data under scrutiny in this study. Most comments utilised pseudonyms or a first name only and included a profile picture of either a real person or some other non-photographic image/avatar. In order to develop insight into the phenomenon of non-reporting, a random selection of 10 A4 pages of comments were selected, after filtering comments by the newest first. From the 10 A4 pages, a total of 48 different user profiles posted more than different 60 comments. Of these, 38 separate victim-survivors made disclosures about experiences of sexual assault. All disclosure comments were then collated for the purpose of analyses. Comments were excluded where they included personally identifiable information and given the focus on female survivors in the current study, where it could not be clearly ascertained that the comment was posted by an adult female (18 years +). This left a remaining sample of qualitative disclosures from 32 different adult female sexual assault survivors. This was based on a manual assessment of a combination of the user's profile name, photograph used, and information related to age and gender publicly displayed on the users

'about' page. The advantages of using existing secondary data such as this posted freely in a public sphere without researcher prompting are that it is often considered to be more authentic and truthful than data collected for specific research purposes (Wilson & MacLean, 2011).

Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used to search across data in order to identify recurrent patterns. From a contextualist epistemological perspective, this approach allows the researchers to derive socially produced meaning from the content of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were analysed in line with the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was familiarisation with the data which involved transcribing the video and collating relevant comments. Initial codes were generated and using these the researcher searched for potential themes. These themes were reviewed in relation to the entire data set and initial codes. Themes were subsequently named and defined in order to describe the essence of each theme. Finally, findings from this thematic analysis were classified during the write up and interpretation phase.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at ****BLANKED FOR PEER REVIEW**** University. As secondary data was used for analyses, informed consent could not be obtained from individual participants. However, as participants had already posted their comments online on a free-to-access public platform, passive consent could be inferred. Despite the data being freely accessible in the public domain, given that participants were effectively disclosing that they had experienced sexual assault, participants were anonymised at all times within the present study. Unique anonymised quote numbers referring to specific account holders' comments were used in place of YouTube usernames. All guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society concerning online data sources were adhered to throughout (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2018).

Findings

Commonalities across the data were identified, and it must be emphasised that there are many reasons why victims do not report sexual assault. However, as a small-scale study, it is impossible to provide an in-depth discussion on all-reoccurring patterns. Therefore, themes deemed most prominent will be discussed below.

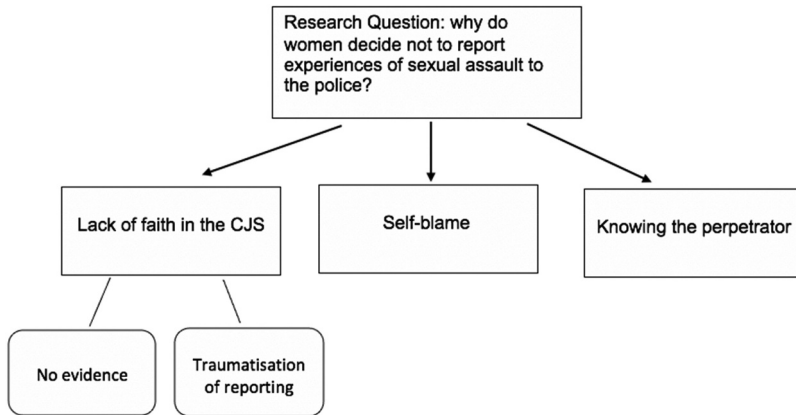


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes.

Three major themes were generated from the analysis: *lack of faith in the Criminal Justice System (CJS)*, *self-blame* and *knowing the perpetrator*. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the overall thematic structure.

Lack of faith in the CJS

The theme *lack of faith in the CJS* encompasses two subthemes ‘*no evidence*’ and ‘*traumatisation of reporting*’ which summarise reasons women do not report sexual assault relating to distrust in the CJS at various stages. It appears that women consider it futile to report a sexual assault when ‘*nothing would come of it*’ (user 32), showing a general lack of faith in the effectiveness of the CJS.

Numerous reasons emerged regarding why women do not trust the CJS, such as a fear of being blamed. For example, the quote ‘*the cops will assume the victim is at fault in some way*’ (user 3) demonstrates a concern surrounding the role of victim-blaming. The most common reasons for not trusting the CJS which in turn influence decisions not to report are summarised in subsequent subthemes.

No evidence

Women often referred to having ‘*very little proof*’ (user 22) or ‘*no proof*’ (user 26) to support their experiences of sexual assault. These quotes suggest women are thinking about the likelihood that reporting a sexual assault will lead to a conviction. Several women made references to an assault not being ‘*bad enough*’ (users 7, 11, 19, 20, 25, 28) and not having physical injuries to provide the required evidence that it did happen: ‘*the courts are likely to find no evidence of forcible rape unless of severe physical injury*’ (user 30).

Likewise, existing research highlights that even victims who do not believe in rape myths themselves often still believe the CJS will not take their report seriously if their experience does not fit with 'real rape stereotypes' (Waterhouse et al., 2016). Many of the victims in this study and previous research whose sexual assault led to lack physical injuries highlight that this lack of this 'physical evidence' led them to conclude that the CJS was unlikely to take their report seriously (Du Mont et al., 2003; Waterhouse et al., 2016).

Traumatisation of reporting

Deciding to report and go through the justice system continues to be daunting as the process is felt to problematically (though necessarily) involve reliving the experience. One woman stated she *'couldn't imagine pressing charges and then having to sit in a courtroom and look at his face over and over'* (user 2). Having to *'relive it over and over again'* (user 15) seemed to discourage women from reporting due to the expected traumatisation of retelling their experience.

It could be that women think it less traumatising to try and forget it happened as one woman explained *'I thought I'm better off just trying to put this behind me'* (user 2) and another said *'I imagine and I think rightfully so that it would have been more traumatising for me in many ways had I reported it'* (user 6).

Supporting this theme, previous research has acknowledged a lack of faith in the CJS as a reason that women decide not to report, particularly due to fear of being blamed or re-traumatisation (Spencer et al., 2017). This, combined with the present findings, suggests women still lack faith in the system to fairly deliver justice. Many victims are also aware that police, prosecutors and jurors may hold problematic attitudes and endorse rape myths themselves (Lorenz et al., 2019; Murphy & Hine, 2019; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Stevens et al., 2022; Willmott et al., 2018b) which may explain why women had reduced trust in the criminal justice process.

Self-blame

This theme was concerned with how women often and enduringly blamed themselves for the sexual assault that they experienced which in turn, facilitated their decisions not to report their experiences to police. One victim stated, *'I didn't report it because I thought it was my fault'* (user 23), whilst another woman explained *'I blamed myself for putting myself in that situation'* (user 10). These quotes suggest that the women themselves frequently adhere to commonly held rape myths which serve to blame the victim for their sexual assault experience rather than recognising the role of the perpetrator. This finding is consistent with earlier research illustrating that a common reason for not reporting sexual assault is self-blame (Orchowski

et al., 2013), emerging from internalising and endorsing stereotypical rape myths (Lorenz et al., 2019).

One woman wrote *'it's sad that we all feel such shame even though we did nothing wrong and nothing that happened was our fault'* (user 13). This highlights that even when not directly blaming themselves, survivors often still feel the shame associated with their victimisation.

Knowing the perpetrator

An additional theme which helps explain victim-survivor decisions not to report sexual assault concerns the prior relationship or acquaintance that they had with the perpetrator. Several survivors discussed that knowing the perpetrator was a reason that influenced their decision not to report sexual assault, explaining that they felt they were less likely to be believed if they had previously engaged in consensual sexual intercourse with the offender; *'I didn't report it because he was my boyfriend, I had had consensual sex with him before'* (user 6). This seems to link to the previously discussed theme of *a lack of faith in the CJS* in so far as this quote suggests women feel a conviction is less likely to occur if they have previously consented to sexual activity with the perpetrator.

It was most common for women to refer to the perpetrator being a boyfriend as a key barrier to their reporting (users 5, 6, 12, 14, 21, 23, 31); however, this was not the only relationship which seemed to stop women reporting the sexual assault. One woman explained, *'it was a friend of a friend'* (user 1), whilst another said he was her *'drug dealer'* (user 4) and one stated, *'he was a co-worker'* (user 29). These quotes demonstrate that varying forms of prior acquaintanceship with a sexual perpetrator prior to the assault, influenced women's decision to not report.

Existing literature indicates that sexual assault is more likely to go unreported if the perpetrator is a prior acquaintance, casual or formal dating partner or friend (Felson & Pare, 2005), supporting this theme. A woman's decision not to report an assault because they knew the perpetrator could be because sexual assault committed by a stranger is widely believed to be consistent with the 'real rape' stereotype. Therefore, victim-survivors may feel that their experience is less serious or will be taken less seriously, when committed by someone known to them (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011).

Discussion

Overall, analysis of naturally occurring victim-survivor comments surrounding reasons for not reporting their sexual victimisation demonstrated that deciding not to report an assault remains a multifaceted decision (Johnson, 2017; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the three dominant main themes

identified, *lack of faith in the CJS, self-blame* and *knowing the perpetrator*, provide contemporary explanation and support surrounding why many women continue to not report a sexual assault to the authorities. Indeed, the aforementioned reasons for non-reporting of sexual assault appear to reflect commonly believed rape myths. Rape myths can be described as inter-correlated beliefs and stereotypical ideas used to justify and excuse rape (Burt, 1980). Common myths which bias judgements about sexual assault include victim-blaming, doubting the truth of allegations, excusing the accused behaviour and pre-conceptions of 'real' rape (Bohner et al., 2009). Internalising these stereotypes or being aware that other people including police believe them (Lorenz et al., 2019), may impact a woman's decision to report a sexual assault.

While providing a contemporary contribution and alternative dataset by which we have sought to develop our understanding of the reasons why women chose not to report sexual violence, the present study is not without limitations. Firstly, whilst the victim-survivor comments are taken at face value, there is of course no way in which claims can be independently verified. Indeed, any self-report study design which relies on participant responses or interview data is subject to the same limitations and verification restrictions. That said, with estimates displaying that false allegation rates are extremely rare in cases of sexual assault (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2012), despite the prevalence of public perceptions to the contrary, it is more likely than not that these qualitative disclosures relate to genuine and credible accounts from real sexual assault victim-survivors. Next, whilst the data analysed in this project were drawn from recently posted qualitative responses online, there is no reliable way of establishing which legal jurisdiction sexual assaults took place in or when exactly the offence took place. As such, the findings are limited in that they are not able to provide clear insights of regional variation in CJS responses or case handling performance contemporarily. The reasons given for not reporting, many of which surround perceptions towards poor CJS performance, may be based on historic experiences or expectations rather than current police responses and case handling. Therefore, whilst this work offers an insight into the continued reasons why victim-survivors indicate they do not report their experiences to authorities, these may relate to non-contemporary decisions made to not report. Finally, as this study was conducted on a small scale, with a relatively small number of adult female victim-survivors, definitive conclusions cannot be made regarding why variations on this victim group may not report sexual assault.

Future studies should aim to replicate this research on a larger scale drawing upon a more diverse range of comments and quotes from a varying range of sources. In particular, future research could involve analysis of data gathered in online group forums (sometimes referred to as *threads*) where victim-survivors make use of the designated platform to more

extensively discuss their reasons for not reporting and may indeed directly interact with other victim-survivors when doing so. This was the basis by which recent analysis of women's experiences of street harassment were examined by Thornton et al. (2023). The benefit of this approach, similar to the data analysed in this study, is that victim-survivors post on such forums freely and anonymously making them valuable sources of more naturalistic, non-researcher facilitated or promoted data. Having said this, such anonymised platforms and datasets also allow researchers to explore an approach whereby they may directly correspond with survivor groups and individuals, seeking additional information or clarification in a way that allows respondents to remain anonymous throughout. Clearly, the ethical parameters of such an approach would need to be carefully considered before undertaking such research. Importantly, whilst some recent research has sought to investigate first-hand accounts of barriers to reporting among male victim-survivors of sexual assault (Weare, 2021; Widanaralalage et al., 2022), application of the existing methods and analytical approach to unsolicited male experiences in anonymous online space, may be equally advantageous in enhancing the breadth and depth of awareness of the multifaceted reasons for non-reporting. Given the vast underreporting and unique stereotypes, myths, and experiences that impact this population, this may be a particularly fruitful methodological approach. Likewise, future studies among LGBTQIA+ populations may also benefit from such a design, given that recent quantitative survey-based research and meta-analyses have indicated considerable disparities in sexual assault victimisation among such groups and individuals, relative to their heterosexual and cisgendered peers (Murchison et al., 2023).

Irrespective of the limitations outlined above, the study findings offer several notable implications. Firstly, it is clear that the criminal justice process and practitioners operating within it need to implement a more victim-centered approach to improve victim trust in the process. Conscious efforts to improve public and survivor confidence in the CJS response and process following a report of sexual assault are vital in encouraging survivors to disclose their abuse. Specifically, fostering a consistent, trauma-informed police response after a report is made where empathic first responders and investigative personnel guard against re-traumatisation is vital (Dalton et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2022). A timely and supportive point of contact is needed alongside regular case updates throughout the duration of any police investigative, prosecution and, in rare cases, criminal trial. Where this support is provided by external organisations such as the Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) role in the UK, other CJS practitioners (police, prosecutors, court staff) should aim to ensure active collaboration is sought and trauma-informed responses are understood when engaging with complainants throughout the justice process (see Hudspith, 2022). Failure to do so may inevitably result in

a withdrawal or retraction of the allegation (see HMIC & HMCPsi, 2012). Ultimately, however, to validate victims' experiences, reduce self-blame and encourage further reporting of sexual assault, survivors must see greater rates of prosecution and conviction at trial before jury. Furthermore, future exploration of ways in which the general public and survivor organisations may help to educate people on why rape myths are indeed myths will serve to improve reporting rates in the long term, debunking misconceptions which *can* serve as barriers to reporting among victim-survivors and hinder the impartiality of justice practitioners' and jurors' decision-making (see Willmott et al., 2021). Campaigns on social media debunking rape myths, sexual assault myths more broadly, and school-based educational curricula and interventions, alongside work-based training to tackle problematic rape myth belief systems, appear to show early signs of success (Boduszek et al., 2019; Hudspith et al., 2023; Waterhouse et al., 2016). Likewise, there is therefore also a need for large-scale public relation campaigns by CJS organisations following the implementation the sort of substantive improvements recommended above such that victim-survivors and the general public are educated about how they now handle reports of sexual violence. As such, future research should attempt to rigorously evaluate the most effective interventions for targeting inaccurate beliefs around sexual assault to increase victim-survivor decisions to disclose and perhaps even reduce perpetration in the first place.

To conclude, a wealth of prior research has examined barriers to reporting sexual assault, with an abundance of efforts to reduce and remove these barriers over recent years. As such, the need to regularly reassess victim-survivor's contemporary reasons for choosing not to report remains paramount. Findings from this analysis of unprompted victim-survivor accounts online display three central barriers: *lack of faith in the Criminal Justice System* encompassing two sub-themes no evidence and traumatisation of reporting, *self-blame* and *knowing the perpetrator*. Police investigators and prosecutors must therefore work to improve empathic responsiveness following an allegation of sexual assault. Trauma-informed practice and training will help to reduce re-traumatisation and self-blame, though improved timeliness, increased rates of prosecution and conviction are ultimately required to improve faith in the CJS and encourage greater rates of reporting. Such improvements are not only likely to result in increased rates of reporting, but also reduced withdrawals and retractions throughout the CJS process too.

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Data availability statement

The secondary data source used in this study can be found via the following URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSWwX7IBEGk>

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