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Alternative reporting options for sexual assault: Investigating their use, purpose and potential

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ARO	Alternative Reporting Option (Queensland)
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning or other non-heterosexual identity
PSS	Personal Safety Survey
SARA	Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (Victoria)
SARO	Sexual Assault Reporting Option (New South Wales)
SECASA	South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

Abstract

This project examines anonymous reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors. It also investigates the efficacy of alternative reporting for criminal justice and victim-survivor outcomes by engaging with Victoria Police, the New South Wales Police Force and sexual assault support service providers in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The project identified ways to enhance these reporting mechanisms that will contribute to better justice outcomes for end users. The project found that alternative reporting options operate as an 'in between' pathway for victim-survivors who are unsure about engaging with police. They enable victim-survivors to tell their story in their own words, giving them autonomy and control. Alternative reporting options also assist police with intelligence gathering in unique ways. However, completing an alternative reporting form may be traumatic in the absence of therapeutic support.

Executive summary

Background to the report

In recent years, policing jurisdictions around Australia have seen a 30 percent increase in the reporting of sexual violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). In New South Wales alone, recorded sexual assaults by police jumped 65 percent between March 2020 and March 2021 (Fitzgerald 2021). Although it is unclear what is driving this trend, increasing media reporting on sexual violence and activism led by victim-survivors has contributed to this phenomenon (Fitzgerald 2021). One example includes the highly publicised accusations made by Brittany Higgins of rape that took place inside Parliament House, which resulted in the #March4Justice, wherein activists and victim-survivors around the country called upon the federal government to develop more meaningful violence prevention initiatives and to better support victim-survivors to report sexual violence (Gleeson 2021). Another example was in February 2021, when young activist Chanel Contos circulated a petition revealing widespread perpetration of sexual violence by boys and young men in Australian high schools. The resulting media coverage revealed the persistent barriers young people face in disclosing or reporting sexual violence (Brancatisano 2021; Chrysanthos 2021).

The victim-survivor led activism in Australia that emerged in 2021, coupled with the impact of the #MeToo movement, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and law reform inquiries in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria into the justice system's responses to sexual offending, brought renewed attention to the limitations and challenges inherent in reporting sexual violence to the police, workplaces and other institutional settings. This resulted in a push for alternative reporting options to address the chronic under-reporting of sexual violence (Sakkal 2021). The under-reporting of sexual assault has long been a significant issue for criminal justice policy and practice. According to the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017), nine out of 10 female victim-survivors (87%) who had been subjected to sexual assault by a male did not report the most recent incident to police. A substantial body of feminist research has investigated the challenges associated with formally reporting sexual assault to criminal justice agencies, which contribute to consistently low reporting rates both nationally and internationally. To address problems related to formally reporting sexual assault, policing jurisdictions in Australia and overseas have begun developing alternative reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors.

Anonymous and confidential reporting options refer to written-response interviews that take the form of a self-administered survey. These informal reports do not constitute an official statement but have the potential to support intelligence gathering and crime mapping. In Australia, anonymous informal reporting options are available in New South Wales (the Sexual Assault Reporting Option, or SARO), Queensland (the Alternative Reporting Option, or ARO) and the Australian Capital Territory (for non-recent sexual assault). Victoria does not have any informal reporting options directly associated with police, but in 2012 the Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA) website tool was developed by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA). The purpose of SARA was to provide victim-survivors with the opportunity to disclose their experience, be heard, access services and prevent further harm to others. Unlike most alternative reporting tools, which are focused on the informal reporting of sexual assault and rape, SARA enabled victim-survivors to disclose a continuum of sexually violent experiences, such as sexual harassment, stalking and unwanted sexual attention (physical and non-physical), as well as sexual assault and rape. (Note: in Victoria, rape and sexual assault are two separate criminal offences, whereas in New South Wales sexual assault is a broader criminal offence that encapsulates rape.) De-identified reports were also provided to police for gathering intelligence. (See Loney-Howes, Heydon and O'Neill (2022) for a detailed discussion of the design and function of the SARA reporting tool.)

Anonymous reporting tools or platforms are important new mechanisms for gathering intelligence, reducing crime rates, increasing reporting and connecting victim-survivors to support services (Heydon & Powell 2018). To date, however, very little research has examined the efficacy of anonymous reporting options for sexual assault law enforcement, victim support services and victim-survivors. This report details the findings from a study investigating the purpose, use and potential of anonymous and confidential reporting options for victim-survivors of sexual assault. Given the dearth of knowledge and evaluations of alternative sexual assault reporting options, as well as the increased numbers of victim-survivors seeking alternative platforms to disclose their experiences evidenced by the popularity of the #MeToo movement, the findings from this project offer a foundational, timely and innovative approach to understanding their use, purpose and potential in Australia.

Project aims and objectives

To our knowledge, this project is the first of its kind nationally and internationally to examine anonymous sexual assault reporting options that are associated with and administered by law enforcement and victim support services. Over two years, the project investigated the efficacy of anonymous sexual assault reporting options for criminal justice and victim-survivor outcomes. Focusing on New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland as three case study jurisdictions that have introduced anonymous reporting options for sexual assault, this project involved a collaborative research partnership between RMIT University, the University of Wollongong, Victoria Police, the New South Wales Police Force, SECASA, rape and domestic violence services in New South Wales and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre.

The project generated new knowledge about anonymous reporting options and offered new ways to enhance these mechanisms, which will contribute to better justice outcomes for end users—that is, victim-survivors, criminal justice agencies and victim support services. The project had two key aims:

- to investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms; and
- to document the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping and how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police.

The research was guided by the following overarching research question: what is the purpose, use and potential of alternative sexual assault reporting options? This question was supported by the following sub-questions, which sought to ascertain perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors who have used alternative reporting options, as well as victim support services and the police.

1. What are victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative sexual assault reporting options?

a. Why do victim-survivors use these reporting options?

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

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

d. If victim-survivors do report to police, what role does their initial report play in the development of their case through the criminal justice system?

2. What role have sexual assault reporting options played in identifying perpetrators, gathering evidence and prosecuting accused persons?

e. Is the information provided in alternative reporting options used by the police and how does the format or structure of the form affect the utilisation of information by police?

f. What are the key differences in the quality and quantity of information elicited using different types of reporting tools?

g. How does the format and structure of alternative reporting options influence the quality and quantity of information elicited from victim-survivors of sexual assault?

Research findings and contribution to policy, practice and knowledge

Overall, our findings demonstrate that alternative reporting options are seen as an 'in between' pathway for victim-survivors who are unsure about making a formal report to police or do not wish to engage with police. In particular, the findings demonstrate that alternative reporting options enable victim-survivors to tell their story in their own words in ways that are meaningful to them. In this way, alternative reporting options provide victim-survivors with autonomy and control. Alternative reporting options also assist police with intelligence gathering in unique ways. However, our findings also indicate the structure and design of some forms mean that victim-survivors may have less capacity to describe the harm they have been subjected to in a meaningful way which could undermine the integrity of their narrative and impact the quality of information victim-survivors provide to police. In addition, completing an alternative reporting form may be triggering or traumatic for many victim-survivors—especially for those without therapeutic support.

While our findings illustrate significant potential for victim-survivors to informally report sexual violence to police, the extent to which victim-survivors actually use these platforms to make formal reports currently remains unclear. Further research with victim-survivors who have taken this pathway is needed. Our findings also highlight the need for further research and consultations with culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) and Indigenous communities—among others—to ensure that any future alternative reporting tool is culturally safe and appropriately designed to meet their needs. We advocate for alternative reporting tools to be designed in accordance with best-practice cognitive interviewing techniques, to be trauma-informed, to have robust protections to ensure data security, and to be easily accessible to all victim-survivors.

The under-reporting of sexual offences is a longstanding and significant criminal justice issue. This study was the first of its kind in Australia to explore the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors. It addressed a significant gap in the research literature, where to date only one empirical study in the United States has explored these options, albeit not specifically in relation to victim-survivor or law enforcement experiences. The findings from this project directly contribute to the international sexual violence research literature by empirically examining these new reporting options. The findings reported here also contribute to broader criminological research on police interviewing and supporting victim-survivors through the stages associated with the reporting process.

Importantly, the project's findings will help to inform best-practice approaches for supporting victim-survivors of sexual violence, as well as strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and support services. In particular, we hope that the findings reported here will assist those in the sector to better understand the role, relevance and importance of alternative reporting options for police and support services. Improvements to anonymous reporting options have the potential to create positive experiences for victim-survivors when and if they decide to report sexual offences, as well as strengthen police intelligence gathering and foster increased formal reporting.

Report structure

In the following section, we discuss the development of alternative reporting options which emerged in response to the enduring challenges victim-survivors face when reporting sexual assault to police, as well as highlight the alternative reporting options in operation in Australia. We then present the methodological approach taken to the data gathering and analysis. Data for this project included interview and focus group transcripts as well as records from the SARO reporting databases, and these data sources are presented individually in the section *Research design and methodology*. After discussing the methodological framework for this research project, we discuss our key findings in the next two sections: one exploring the experience of victim-survivors engaging with alternative reporting options, and the other examining the role of data from alternative reports of sexual violence in policing responses to sexual violence. The report's conclusion reflects on the limitations of the project's findings and offers key recommendations for future practice and research.

Literature review

Sexual violence in Australia: Reporting and data collection

Formal reporting to police

The problem of under-reporting of sexual offending has long been recognised as a significant justice issue for victim-survivors. Australian statistics reveal that one in five women and one in 20 men have experienced sexual assault, or the threat of sexual assault, since the age of 15 (ABS 2017). Most victim-survivors, however, do not formally report sexual assault to the police (Ceelen et al. 2019; Daly & Bouhours 2010; Johnson 2012; Rotenberg 2017). According to the 2016 PSS (ABS 2017), nine out of 10 females who had experienced a sexual assault by a male did not report their most recent experience to police.

The reasons victim-survivors chose not to make a formal report are complex. The most regularly cited reasons include: shame and humiliation following a sexual assault, fear of revictimisation owing to police failure to take reports seriously, and fear of retaliation by the perpetrator (Heenan & Murray 2006; Jordan 2008; Rich & Seffrin 2012). A victim-survivor's decision not to report is also governed by perceptions that the assault was not serious enough to report or worry about the perpetrator getting into trouble (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017; Ceelen et al. 2019). Reporting sexual assault is a challenge (Campbell 2006), and the initial contact victim-survivors have with the criminal justice system often shapes whether they will proceed with their case (Jordan 2008). Research indicates that victim-survivors who do engage with the police often have negative encounters that leave them feeling further victimised or blamed for the sexual assault (Campbell 2006; Rich 2014). Interactions with the police and the justice system have been described as 'secondary victimisation' (Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Taylor & Gassner 2010) and rape trials have been likened to a 'second rape' (Spencer et al. 2018), demonstrating why people may be reluctant to report their experience and commence a criminal justice investigation.

Rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes are also still persistent in society, meaning victim-survivors may not feel their experience was 'serious enough' to report (particularly if the perpetrator was someone they know), or they may blame themselves, creating further barriers to reporting and seeking help (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). These barriers can be particularly salient for certain groups who have greater fear and distrust of the police, who have had experiences of the police not taking them seriously and who have experienced a lack of access to services. Such communities include LGBTQ+ communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, sex workers, those living in rural areas, people with disabilities, and people in prison (see, for example, Mitra-Kahn, Newbigin & Hardefeldt 2016; Mortimer, Powell & Sandy 2019; Taylor & Gassner 2010).

The sensitive nature of sexual assault means that reporting and the police interview that follows not only has the potential to retraumatise victim-survivors but also poses significant obstacles to victim-survivors, who must articulate deeply personal experiences (Spencer et al. 2018). In particular, face-to-face interviewing is challenging in the context of sexual violence because of the taboos surrounding using particular words or discussing private experiences with a stranger (Spencer et al. 2018). Nonetheless, despite the high rates of under-reporting for sexual assault, several positive outcomes arise from making a formal report to the police. These include being listened to in a supportive environment that allows for both privacy and anonymity, the provision of accessible support services, and the timely follow-up of the report, including keeping the complainant informed about the development of the case (Powell & Cauchi 2013: 232). Indeed, the desire to be heard and validated by police and support services, irrespective of the outcome of a report, is considered highly important to many victim-survivors (Clark 2015, 2010; Daly 2014; Murphy & Barkworth 2014; Powell & Cauchi 2013; Taylor & Norma 2012).

Data collection

Reports of sexual assault are important contributors to reliable and timely data-gathering about the prevalence and nature of sexual victimisation to develop evidence-based policy and best practice responses to sexual violence (Walby et al. 2017). In Australia, several data sources are used to understand the nature and prevalence of sexual violence, specifically sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape (often reported in the data as the same offence). First, the ABS collates data on sexual assaults reported to the police in each state and territory and publishes these as national statistics yearly. Recorded crime data from 2020 show 27,505 reports (107 per 100,000 persons) of sexual assault were made to police—the highest number of incidents recorded since 1993 (ABS 2020). Second, the latest data from the PSS, which began in 2005 and ran in 2012, 2016 and 2022, showed that 1.9 percent of women experienced sexual violence in the 12 months prior to completing the survey (ABS 2023). Third, there are additional data on specific communities from smaller, targeted studies.

Given the chronic under-reporting of sexual assault, the PSS is generally the most reliable source for sexual violence prevalence rates in the Australian policy landscape, largely setting the agenda for sexual violence funding, policy and law reform (see, for example, the Department of Social Services' (2022) *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*). It is important to note the limitations of these primary sources of sexual assault data. Sexual assault is chronically under-reported to the police, and specific communities who are often more vulnerable to experiencing sexual violence may be less likely to make a formal report. In addition, data collected by the police predominantly serve the purpose of assisting investigations and case management, with statistical analysis only a secondary purpose (Tarczon & Quadara 2012). This means that the data are aggregated into categories useful for police, rather than for statistical analysis, and much of the context surrounding individual experiences is left out. Due to these issues, police data provide only an insight into a fraction of the sexual assaults experienced in the Australian community.

The PSS also has significant limitations. Victimisation data are not always timely due to the large cost and complexity of collecting the data, which means that there is a period of seven to eight years between data collection periods (Tarczon & Quadara 2012). The PSS also excludes those who are most vulnerable to experiencing sexual violence and who are not able to be contacted to answer the survey questions, including children and young people, as well as those in remote communities, or those living on the streets, in crisis accommodation, in prisons or in residential care settings (Mitra-Kahn, Newbigin & Hardefeldt 2016; Tarczon & Quadara 2012).

The PSS fails to collect basic demographic information that would help us better understand who is most vulnerable to sexual violence. For example, it does not ask about Indigenous status, even though Indigenous people are at higher risk of violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). The PSS also only records whether someone was 'male' or 'female' and does not ask about sexuality. Therefore, it excludes the experiences of gender diverse people (Mortimer, Powell & Sandy 2019) as well as those from the LGBTQ+ community, who often experience higher rates of sexual violence (Hill et al. 2020). While the PSS did have trained translators who undertook a small number of interviews, the sample size of women who do not speak English was still small, which means that data on sexual assault against migrant and refugee populations are not reliable (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020).

Finally, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020) suggests that the sample size of men in the PSS is too small to draw robust data from. Indeed, there are barriers to men disclosing and reporting sexual violence, such as the widely held misconceptions that men cannot be raped, that rape is emasculating, or they are to blame (Jarvaid 2018). It may also be the case that men were less willing to participate in the survey, or that they did not recognise their experiences as sexual violence.

There is clearly a gap in meeting victim-survivors' justice needs and this is exacerbated by the obstacles to collecting data needed to prevent and respond to sexual violence. This will be addressed in more detail below in relation to informal reporting options.

The promise and problems of informal reporting options

International and national context

In response to the deficiencies of the criminal justice system, there has been a shift towards informal reporting options both nationally and internationally, with victim-survivors seeking alternative ways to report their experiences. Internationally, there has been significant growth in the development and use of informal reporting options for victim-survivors of sexual violence as well as bystanders. Scholarship documenting their nature and use examines social media spaces (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020), digital apps (Liu 2018) and institutional reporting mechanisms associated with the military, universities and the police.

The US Department of Defense, for example, has provided confidential and unrestricted informal reporting options for sexual offences occurring between military personnel since 2005 (Carson & Carson 2018; Friedman 2007; Rosenstein et al. 2018). Other options in the United States include university and college campus reporting tools. Richards (2019: 1993) noted that 76 percent of colleges and universities in the United States offered confidential reporting options for victim-survivors, with 75 percent of institutions providing completely anonymous reporting options. Project Callisto was also launched in 2016 as an independent, grassroots reporting tool. It allows college students to disclose sexual assault informally and confidentially, with the dual aims of supporting victim-survivors and promoting social justice. Names of alleged offenders are also submitted to a central database to identify repeat offenders (Lilley & Moras 2017).

Informal whisper networks have also been used within industries, such as the 'shitty media men' list, which was a crowdsourced list of allegations of sexual harassment and assault against men in the media industry (Tuerkheimer 2019). There is also 'Ugly Mugs', a third-party reporting platform for crimes committed against sex workers. It originally started in Melbourne in the 1980s but has been recreated by sex worker communities around the world (see Bryce et al. 2015). In terms of policing responses, the United States has the 'nonreport' informal reporting option, which was introduced following reforms to the *Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005* (Heffron et al. 2014). This option allows victim-survivors in the United States to access forensic medical examinations, even if they do not want to proceed with a formal police report, allowing them to receive urgent medical care.

In Australia, there has been a similar uptake of informal reporting options. Following the release of the Australian Human Rights Commission's (2017) report *Change the course*, and Universities Australia's (Heywood et al. 2022) recommendations for responding to sexual assault, which stressed the importance of confidentiality, privacy and choice in reporting, some Australian universities now host informal reporting options for victim-survivors, witnesses and first responders.

Law enforcement agencies also host informal reporting forms in three Australian jurisdictions: New South Wales (the SARO), Queensland (the ARO) and the Australian Capital Territory (the 'Reporting Historic Sexual Assault' form). The SARO and ARO forms exist in both paper and digital formats. Paper-based forms can be printed, completed and then directly handed to, emailed or posted to the police. The NSW SARO scheme has undergone a revision to shorten the form slightly and a dedicated website was created in 2021 following publicity of the scheme in response to the activism of Chanel Contos (King 2021). Contos collected hundreds of reports of sexual violence from high school children in New South Wales and in response, the NSW Police Force set up Operation Vest, which promoted the SARO for young people wanting to report their experiences. In early 2023, the NSW Police Force released a more substantial revision of the SARO, which is now a fully online form with revised questions and available in multiple languages (https://portal.police.nsw.gov.au/adultsexualassault/s/sexualassaultreportingoption).

ACT Policing host a digital informal reporting platform only for historic sexual assault (meaning incidents occurring more than six months ago). Prior to early 2023, non-recent child sexual abuse could also be reported to Braveheart's Sexual Assault Disclosure Scheme, but this was not a policing initiative. Until 2020, victim-survivors, witnesses and support persons could also informally report using a tool developed by SECASA in Melbourne which was known as SARA. Unlike informal reporting options associated with the police, this platform was developed primarily to connect victim-survivors with appropriate support services but with the additional function of providing victim-survivors with the opportunity to be heard by the police, who received their accounts as de-identified intelligence reports. In April 2022, a motion was passed in the state upper house which committed the Victorian Government to a consultation program on a new alternative reporting option for Victorians to report sexual assault informally. At the time of writing, the consultation is currently underway.

What the research says about informal reporting options

To date, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the efficacy of anonymous sexual assault reporting options for the purposes of law enforcement, victim support services and justice needs for victim-survivors. It is worth noting that informal reporting options have a variety of different names depending on the context. For example, anonymous reporting options have been described as 'blind reporting' or 'Jane Doe reporting' (Garcia & Henderson 2010; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). Others refer to them as 'third-party reporting protocols' (Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021) or 'online third-party reporting systems' (Obada-Obieh, Spagnolo & Beznosov 2020) which may also be anonymous. Terms such as 'alternative reporting options', 'anonymous reporting options', 'non-report options' or 'informal reporting options' are also used to describe anonymous sexual assault reporting options (Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021).

While the names may differ, what connects them is: their written format as opposed to an in-person statement or interview, their confidential nature and their capacity for anonymous reporting, and that these reports do not constitute a formal statement to the police or other law enforcement agencies. Importantly, alternative reporting options—particularly those in the United States—were designed to be used in two ways:

- for victim-survivors to access forensic and other medical services without having to interact with law enforcement; and
- for victim-survivors to provide information to the police and law enforcement agencies without having to identify themselves (Garcia & Henderson 2010; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021).

As such, alternative reporting options can be classified as either restricted reporting or anonymous reporting. Restricted reporting refers to victim-survivors reaching out to the police or other law enforcement agencies for support but without making a formal report (Garcia & Henderson 2010; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). Anonymous reporting may be used by victim-survivors to obtain a code number (or 'event number' in NSW) to access medical or forensic services without direct interaction with the police (Garcia & Henderson 2010; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021).

Several US studies have examined informal reporting options, yet only indirectly in relation to law enforcement. A study conducted by Hope at al. (2013) in the United Kingdom investigated the potential of self-administered interview questionnaires to help gather information about crimes in general when the witness was unable to give a verbal statement to police. Hope and colleagues determined through their study that self-administered interviews are particularly useful in crimes where victims have been badly injured and are unable to participate in a verbal interview—for example, after experiencing a violent assault. Hope et al. (2013) discussed a case where a victim-survivor had suffered significant jaw damage but was still able to provide information in a written interview, which then led to the successful arrest of the offender.

Heydon and Powell (2018) have subsequently argued that, if designed appropriately in line with best-practice interviewing questions, paper-based alternative reporting options in cases of sexual assault have the capacity to capture information from victim-survivors in time-lag situations—for example, while they are waiting for a forensic examination or specialist support services, if they live remotely, or if they are reporting historical abuse (see also Heffron et al. 2014; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). Similarly, alternative written reporting options may help victim-survivors for whom English is not their first language and who may require a translator before making a formal complaint (Heydon & Lai 2013; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). Given the challenges LGBTQ+ victim-survivors face when reporting to the police (eg highly heteronormative and cisnormative scripts governing police understandings of sexual violence), it has been suggested that third-party anonymous reporting options may be a viable pathway (Murphy-Oikonen & Egan 2021).

Recent research also indicates that online reporting options can assist with building trust and comfort for victim-survivors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when victim-survivors were uncomfortable or unable to make reports in person (Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). Lonsway and colleagues (2021) further suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant increase in the use of online reporting portals by victim-survivors and this was likely to continue as people continue to rely on digital technologies for their communications. In addition, online reporting portals can provide victim-survivors with information, assist in access to appropriate support services, begin the process of preparing victim-survivors to undertake a formal interview, and aid police with initiating an investigation (Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021).

Other US studies have also examined alternative reporting options available to victim-survivors of sexual assault in higher education settings and in the military. Significantly, research indicates that approximately 15 percent of confidential reports made to the US Department of Defense are later converted into official reports (Markham 2015).

Despite the growing use of informal reporting options for sexual assault in educational, military and community settings, we were only able to identify three studies which have examined the impact of alternative reporting on victim-survivors. Heffron et al.'s (2014) study explored the use of the 'nonreport option' in the United States mentioned previously. The study employed a mixed-method approach, including: 79 qualitative semi-structured interviews with professionals who work directly with victim-survivors of sexual violence, a survey of 131 healthcare professionals and criminal justice employees, and a review of the existing de-identified data of 'nonreport options' submitted to local law enforcement. The findings from the Heffron et al. (2014) study revealed that the nonreporting option held significant benefits to victim-survivors. Sexual assault nurse examiners mentioned that many victim-survivors in crisis did not feel emotionally and physically ready to make a formal report to the police and therefore it was vital that they had an alternative option to record their experience, to seek out a supportive community, to get help and information (including on their reporting options), and to share their experiences with a supportive online group of peers (see also O'Neill 2018).

The opportunity to be heard through the telling of their story in a way that is meaningful and validating has been identified as one of the most powerful justice needs of sexual violence victim-survivors (Clark 2010; Fileborn 2017, 2014; Loney-Howes 2018; O'Neill 2018; Wånggren 2016). Loney-Howes, Heydon and O'Neill (2022) analysed 483 reports made to the SARA informal reporting tool between 2013 and 2016. Their analysis suggests that informal reporting options could offer a positive and timely response to the persistent challenges in reporting faced by sexual assault victim-survivors, including pathways to appropriate support and an opportunity for victim-survivors to engage with police if they chose to formally report later on. They also found that reports were sufficiently detailed to support the police in crime mapping and intelligence gathering.

However, a study conducted by Obada-Obieh, Spagnolo and Beznosov (2020) noted that victim-survivors hold concerns about the privacy and security of the data they might share on a third-party reporting platform, especially regarding the traceability of information shared and the impact this would have on their anonymity. Survivors in the study conducted by Obada-Obieh and colleagues (2020) also raised concerns about third parties misusing personal information and about not having access to support when completing an online form.

With the current high profile of sexual abuse allegations in public discourse, driven largely by the significant response to and flow-on effects of the #MeToo movement, it is evident that an increasing number of victim-survivors are seeking to report sexual violence (including sexual assault) using alternative means, such as through internet-based platforms and whisper networks (O'Neill 2018; Tuerkheimer 2019). In addition, many victim-survivors want anonymity when reporting (Moldovan & Livermore 2013). However, such informal reporting options are not without their problems. Although they might go some way to meeting victim-survivors' justice needs, such as facilitating voice, validation and support, and protecting others from abusers, the justice facilitated by these mechanisms is partial at best (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020; Tuerkheimer 2019). Online spaces do not have any formal checks and balances, and few due process rights are afforded to offenders who are named online (Fileborn 2014; Jane 2016; Salter 2013). Survivors may also encounter backlash if they speak out about their experiences online (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2018), including accusations of defamation (Salter 2013). Whisper networks can only protect those who are privy to the information and sacrifice the pursuit of offender accountability (Tuerkheimer 2019). Therefore, it is important to investigate the possibilities of informal reporting options that are run institutionally and can mitigate some of the shortcomings of informal online spaces.

Given the dearth of knowledge and evaluations of alternative sexual assault reporting options, as well as the increased numbers of victim-survivors seeking alternative platforms to disclose their experiences, this project offers a timely, innovative and interventionist approach to understanding their use, purpose and potential in Australia. In accordance with best-practice approaches, it brings law enforcement and support services into dialogue with the goal of improving sexual assault reporting and better supporting victim-survivors (Campbell 2006, 2005; Campbell et al. 2014; Patterson, Greeson & Campbell 2009). It makes a foundational contribution to understanding, for instance, whether (and to what extent) anonymous reporting contributes to informing law enforcement activity or official reporting statistics. It also seeks to investigate how victim-survivors engage with the justice system across the spectrum of reporting, including informal reporting, and seeks detailed responses from police, support service providers and victim-survivors about the design, function and suitability of forms currently available.

Research design and methodology

This research project is underscored by a feminist methodology (see Hesse-Biber 2007), seeking to centre the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors of sexual violence. This project triangulates victim-survivor voices with those of the sexual assault support service workers and police in order to understand the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options in Australia.

Research questions

The project adopted a multi-layered methodology, using quantitative and qualitative research methods, formed in consultation with partner stakeholders in a co-designed workshop held in April 2020. Including stakeholders in developing the data-gathering instruments ensured that resulting recommendations for preventing sexual violence and supporting victim-survivors accessing the criminal justice system and associated reporting mechanisms are relevant and practical. The approach comprised three key methods that were designed to address the research questions:

1. What are victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative sexual assault reporting options?

a. Why do victim-survivors use these reporting options?

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

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

d. If victim-survivors do report to police, what role does their initial report play in the development of their case through the criminal justice system?

2. What role have sexual assault reporting options played in identifying perpetrators, gathering evidence and prosecuting accused persons?

a. Is the information provided in alternative reporting options used by the police and how does the format or structure of the form affect police use of that information?
b. What are the differences in the quality and quantity of information elicited using different types of reporting tools?
c. How does the format and structure of alternative reporting options influence the quality and quantity of information elicited from victim-survivors of sexual assault?

The three methods—including quantitative data analysis from alternative reports of sexual assault made to SARO; semi-structured interviews with police and support services across New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland; and focus groups with victim-survivors—are described below, followed by a description of the data analysis.

Method 1: Data analysis of demographic and statistical information from reports made to SARO (NSW)

The research team conducted an analysis of de-identified reports made to SARO. The purpose of this phase of the research was twofold. Firstly, analysing the data enabled the researchers to identify patterns in reporting practices of victim-survivors that relate to police or agency practices, such as users seeking further assistance or support services, or pursuing a prosecution. Secondly, the analysis enabled the research team to suggest reforms to existing alternative reporting options to potentially increase their uptake, better inform police intelligence gathering, and assist in converting informal reports to formal statements.

As part of the current project, the NSW Police Force provided a de-identified database of reports to the research team. The team received 1,857 reports from the NSW SARO database, with only a restricted set of fields provided to ensure any identifying information was excluded. The fields included in the SARO database were: incident classification, event reported date, incident date, involvement type (ie victim or offender), gender, age (at time of incident), incident start time, premises (eg private residence, licensed venue), local government area responsible, and region.

Ethics approval to analyse the data was sought from the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network; however, the dataset was exempt from review because:

- all data used were non-identifiable, non-personal data; and
- permission to access the de-identified dataset was received from the database custodian.

The data from the SARO datasets provided to the researchers were cleaned prior to the analysis. To explore the data and arrange them efficiently, we began with commonly used Excel functions such as data sorting and filtering. As the first step, we practised data format homogenisation. We ensured that dates were defined with a four-digit year and day-month-year format to prevent errors during date calculation. In the second step, we handled missing values through defining missing value codes and omitting them from the analysis. For inaccurate values, we adopted data imputation and substituted the inaccurate data with another value which was calculable in the analysis phase.

Method 2: Semi-structured interviews with police and sexual assault support workers

As part of the second phase of the project, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant members of the police in each participating jurisdiction, as well as with relevant staff in sexual assault support services. Semi-structured interviews allow for a reciprocal engagement with a pre-determined set of thematic questions between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman 2012). Questions were open-ended, with prompts to assist both the interviewer and interviewee to explore a particular idea, phenomenon or experience in depth (Bryman 2012). Although the interview schedules differed for police and support services, both sets of interviews were based on the following themes to ensure the resulting data were comparable:

- organisational role in relation to sexual assault reporting (including anonymous reporting options);
- development of reporting forms: institutional motivations, goals and guiding principles;
- institutional processing of anonymous sexual assault report data; and
- experiences of managing and responding to report data.

The findings of the analysis contributed to answering all research questions. Overall, these interviews documented for the first time the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options to support victim-survivors and assist with policing responses to reports of sexual violence. The analysis provided previously inaccessible perspectives on the operation of the anonymous reporting options across three jurisdictions. First, interviews with police provided insight on the development, purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options in each state, as well as the extent to which report data are being shared across state boundaries. Second, interviews with support service workers captured their perspectives on the use of alternative reporting options in their advocacy work and in supporting victim-survivors. Third, the interviews highlighted greater potential for alternative reporting options to assist in bringing victim-survivors into contact with relevant support services, as well as supporting victim-survivors to make formal reports if they so choose. Ethics approval to conduct semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders was granted by RMIT University and the University of Wollongong.

The participants

All participants were recruited from within the partner organisations. Overall, a total of 28 people were interviewed for this project. Table 1 outlines the breakdown of participants from the partner organisations.

Table 1: Stakeholder interviews

Organisation	Number
New South Wales Police Force	8
Victoria Police	6
St George Sexual Assault Counselling Service	4
Illawarra and Shoalhaven Domestic Family Violence and Sexual Assault Service	4
South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault	5
Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Centre	1

Within each participating organisation (police and support services), the researchers were given a list of individuals who had relevant knowledge of and expertise in alternative reporting pathways. The researchers then contacted those individuals directly (to avoid institutional coercion and to preserve confidentiality of study participants) and invited them to participate in an interview. Police participants were officers working in the units that respond to sexual assault reports, as well as sworn and unsworn officers in administrative roles relating to the management of sexual assault data. Sexual assault support participants were working in parts of their agency that have assisted victim-survivors to make alternative reports or were familiar with how they functioned. All participants were provided with a participant information sheet and were required to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed.

The procedure

Following the recruitment process, consenting participants were contacted to arrange a suitable time and place for an interview with the research team. Due to COVID-19, all interviews with support services were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Interviews with Victoria Police officers were conducted in person, while interviews with NSW Police Force officers were held using Microsoft Teams. Interviews ran for 60 minutes and covered a range of questions about the participant's organisational engagement with anonymous reporting of sexual assault. The interview schedule was organised around the following themes:

- knowledge and use of alternative reporting options within the organisation;
- potential of alterative reporting options to assist police and victim-survivors; and
- best-practice design and implementation of future reporting options.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured approach that encourages narrative responses. Questions were designed using 'tell', 'explain' and 'describe' open-ended prompts, in accordance with ethical interviewing practice guides, such as the Principles of Investigative Interviewing developed by the UK Home Office. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a third-party company, OutScribe Transcription. Interview participants were able to review their transcripts before analysis to ensure that our recording and transcription of their interviews were correct, and to give them an opportunity to redact any statements they no longer wanted to be part of the interview. The research team then anonymised the transcripts, removing any identifying details and all participants were assigned a codename according to their role within the organisation for whom they worked.

Coding and analysis

The police interviews were coded first. We used a thematic analysis approach, using NVivo 12 software. The coding scheme was developed by considering the key themes raised in the police interviews in relation to our research questions. The codes fell into four primary themes:

- police action (what can police do with the information from alternative reports?);
- reporting processes (what formal and informal processes are available for victim-survivors currently and how does that work in practice?);
- survivor impacts (how have alternative reports impacted victim-survivors?); and
- system improvement (how could alternative reporting systems be improved?).

Two researchers coded two interviews to make sure they were interpreting the data similarly. Sub-codes were then developed based on the common themes that emerged in each of the primary codes. The two researchers then coded two more interviews to make sure they were coding in a similar manner under the revised coding scheme. There were minimal differences between the two coders' approaches to the data and these were resolved through discussing and refining the sub-codes. One researcher then coded the remaining interviews.

For the support service interviews, we took a similar thematic analysis approach to coding. We devised a coding scheme based on the themes raised by the support service workers in relation to each of our research questions. The coding scheme covered four primary themes:

- formal reporting (impact on victim-survivors);
- nature, use and potential of current informal reporting options;
- informal reporting forms (design and use); and
- future informal reporting (challenges and opportunities).

Three researchers coded two interviews to make sure they were coding similarly and sub-themes were then developed based on the themes arising under each of the primary codes. One interview was then coded again by the three researchers to ensure they were approaching the data similarly. The interviews were then split between the three researchers to complete the final coding.

Method 3: Focus groups with victim-survivors

Our third and final method for this project was running focus groups with victim-survivors of sexual violence to better understand the potential for alternative reporting to address their needs. Focus groups are a commonly used method for evaluating and planning services (see, for example, Smith, Scammon & Beck 1995). They provide information that is qualitatively different to individual interviews because they allow for discussion between group members and differences of opinion or inconsistencies between participants to be 'fleshed out', coming to an overall more nuanced understanding of service users' needs. Discussion between group members also allows the researchers to better understand what language and frameworks participants are using to describe their experiences (Kitzinger 1994). This was particularly vital for this project as anonymous reporting tools need to use language that is sensitive to victim-survivors' experiences, while still gaining clear and detailed information.

When a supportive group environment is fostered, focus groups are an effective method for encouraging participants to discuss sensitive topics, particularly as members hear experiences that are similar to theirs and feel a sense of 'safety in numbers' (Frith 2000; Kitzinger 1994). Considering the important insights that can be gained from focus groups, as well as the group environment providing a potentially more comfortable space for victim-survivors, this method was deemed to be appropriate to facilitate a better understanding of victim-survivors' perceptions of how an alternative reporting system could best suit their needs. Ethics approval for this stage of the project was sought from and granted by both RMIT University and the University of Wollongong human research ethics committees.

Participants

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods, including fliers being shared on social media (eg Twitter, Facebook and Instagram), as well as by our partner organisations and their key contacts. For instance, Chanel Contos, a key advocate in Australia for sexual violence reform, shared the recruitment material with her followers on Instagram. Recruitment was based on the following criteria: participants needed to be over 18 years old, to have experienced sexual violence as an adult, to currently reside in Australia, and to be comfortable participating in an online focus group with other people to discuss alternative reporting options. Due to the small number of people who have used alternative reporting systems in Australia, and the difficulty in reaching them, we decided to reach out to anyone who had experienced sexual violence and could speak to the potential of an alternative reporting system in their view, rather than their actual experiences of using one (although we did have two participants who had used the SARO in NSW).

The recruitment flier included a link to our project website, where participants could read more information about the project and the focus groups and express interest in participating through an email link. When we received an expression of interest, we emailed participants the participant information sheet and questions to clarify their eligibility to participate. Once we determined that a participant was eligible, and they confirmed their interest after reading the sheet, we sent them a link to a site where they could elect their preferred focus group date and time.

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

Procedure

Due to the focus groups being run online, participants were asked to read and digitally sign the consent forms prior to the commencement of the focus group. Focus groups were run over Zoom, using a password-protected Zoom link only available to the focus group participants and the research team. Each focus group was run by two researchers experienced in conducting research with victim-survivors of sexual violence. Safety measures were put in place to enhance the wellbeing of participants during the focus group. This included the use of a 'breakout' room for each participant where they could go during the focus group if they needed a break or did not want to be involved in talking about a particular topic. Each breakout room also had a button the person inside the room could press to 'ask for help'. Clicking on this button would send a message to one of the researchers to alert them that the person in the breakout room needed assistance away from the main Zoom room. Participants were also told that they could leave at any time during the focus group if they no longer wished to participate, and prior to the focus group we collected participants' preferred contact method so we could check in with them if they did leave the room. However, participants were made aware that, if they did leave once the focus group commenced, their data could not be removed. Participants were also made aware on the participant information sheet and consent forms that their anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the focus group format, meaning they were identifiable to others in the group. However, participants were invited to use a pseudonym during the focus group if they did not wish to use their real name.

Focus groups ran for two hours. First, participants were explained the details of the project and then given an overview of how the focus groups would run. They were then provided an opportunity to ask any questions. Participants were reminded that they did not need to disclose their own experiences of sexual violence, and that the purpose of the focus group was to think about how an alternative reporting form could have served their needs following their experience. Participants were told they were welcome to share details of their experience if they felt it provided necessary context. They were reminded that, for legal reasons, they could not mention the names of anyone involved if their case was currently going through a court proceeding.

The focus groups ran according to the following format:

- Focus groups began with a hypothetical scenario describing a person who had experienced a sexual assault. We asked participants to discuss what reporting options were available to the person in the hypothetical situation to gain an understanding of participants' knowledge of reporting options.
- We provided definitions of informal reporting to participants and asked them if they had used informal reporting previously, or whether they would have if they had known about them at the time of their experience.
- Participants were asked to imagine being tasked with designing an alternative reporting option, and to describe what would they want it to look like, how it would run, what the benefits of it would be, what key information it would collect, and any challenges they foresaw.
- Participants were given some real alternative reporting forms to look at and then asked to provide feedback on the current models.

Participants were provided a $100 voucher to compensate them for their time. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by an external transcription company. The research team anonymised the transcripts, removing any identifying details and all participants were assigned a pseudonym. Focus group participants were unable to review the transcripts before analysis in order to ensure the privacy of the other focus group participants.

Coding and analysis

The de-identified transcripts were coded using thematic analysis and NVivo 12 software. The coding scheme was developed through consideration of the following key themes that victim-survivors discussed in relation to the relevant research questions:

- What were victim-survivors' experiences of using formal and informal reporting options and the associated impacts?
- Why do victim-survivors use informal reporting options?
- What are best-practice reporting options and how would they meet victim-survivor needs?

To distinguish between victim-survivors' firsthand experiences, the impact of these experiences, and their thoughts and reflections, we divided our coding scheme into these three high-level codes: experiences, impacts and reflections. Each of these had sub-codes beneath which captured themes in relation to the research questions.

Three researchers then coded the same transcript to test whether the coding scheme captured participants' insights in an appropriate way that would allow us to answer the research questions and capture any unexpected themes. This was also an opportunity to make sure we were interpreting concepts in a similar manner—for example, when we were coding for victim-survivors' perceptions of justice, making sure that were we interpreting justice in a similar way. When comparing our coded transcripts, we found that we were coding in a very similar manner. Where there were discrepancies, this was either because there was no appropriate code to catch a particular insight, we were interpreting a concept in a slightly different way, or a particular insight could fit into multiple codes depending on interpretation. These discrepancies were resolved by adding additional codes, taking a wide interpretation of concepts when coding, and double-coding any insights which could fit into multiple codes.

Due to the interpretive nature of this coding scheme and the small sample being used to generate initial insights into an under-explored topic, rather than a representative sample being used to make 'reliable' insights, it was not appropriate to quantify inter-coder reliability as a numerical value signifying how 'objectively' we were coding (O'Connor & Joffe 2020). Rather, the process of double-coding was to ensure we were conceptually engaging with the data in a similar way, and to agree on ways to interpret the data if any discrepancies arose (O'Connor & Joffe 2020).

Victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative sexual assault reporting options

This section examines victim-survivor, support service and police perspectives on our first research question: what are victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative sexual assault reporting options? The aim was to investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potentials of alternative reporting options. This section is divided into three subsections that each address one of the following research sub-questions:

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

Two victim-survivor participants in the focus groups had used an alternative reporting option and were able to give us firsthand insight into their experiences. The remaining 19 victim-survivors provided invaluable insight into why they may have chosen alternative reporting had it been available to them, how they imagined the experience of using an alternative reporting option would have been, and whether this may have been a viable pathway for them towards making a formal police report. Some support service workers had direct experience with assisting victim-survivors to fill out a form and were able to provide insight into what that experience was like for victim-survivors and how the alternative reporting forms fit in to the therapeutic landscape. While other support workers did not have direct experience of supporting victim-survivors to use an alternative reporting form, they reflected on their experiences of supporting victim-survivors' decision-making processes around reporting and considered how alternative reporting may benefit victim-survivors. Finally, some members of the NSW Police Force and Victoria Police who were interviewed had direct experience with processing and following up alternative reports from the SARA and SARO systems. They provided their perspective on why victim-survivors were using alternative reporting and whether they proceeded to make a formal complaint afterwards. The other police officers interviewed provided their perspective on the potential of alternative reporting options, given their experience working with sexual assault victim-survivors, and how alternative reporting may aid victim-survivors considering the barriers to making a formal police report.

Overall, participants in this study provided valuable insights into the potential for alternative reporting to help bridge the critical gap between victim-survivors and formal reporting processes. Survivors, support service workers and police all saw the potential for alternative reporting to allow victim-survivors to informally report their experiences and access therapeutic supports. Participants, however, also identified limitations and crucial improvements that need to be made so alternative reporting options can fulfil their potential in meeting both the therapeutic and justice needs of victim-survivors.

This section addresses each of the three sub-questions outlined above, outlining victim-survivor, support worker and police responses to each of the questions. Their perspectives will be drawn together in the *Conclusion*, where we also make recommendations for future alternative reporting models based on participants' responses.

Why victim-survivors use alternative reporting options

Survivors' perspectives

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

> I just thought there's no way [I would make a formal report] and it would be incredibly gruelling. I thought if I use an alternative reporting tool there's a record of what's happened. In addition to that, I was questioning myself and what had happened, and I thought that that would happen externally as well. If I reported it formally then someone else would be questioning me of what had happened. I felt that it was a safer way of doing it and I wouldn't have to go through that questioning of my own experience. (Bonnie FG1)

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

While only two victim-survivors in our focus groups had used an alternative reporting option, other victim-survivors said that they would have used one if they had known it was available. Many victim-survivors said they felt their only options were either making a formal police report or doing nothing. They saw an alternative reporting option as having the potential to be an 'in between' option that would allow them to report their experience without having to go through the formal justice process:

> I asked them at the police station is there [an] "in between"? Do I have to say nothing or say everything? But they said no. It's this or you go home and you don't tell anyone. I think it's so crucial to have an alternative option so you can receive that closure. (Ella FG1)

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

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

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

> Most police officers are men. You don't really want to sit in a room with a man and … like it's just not a safe space. Where[as] if you can fill out an online form, you can do it on your own terms. If you start filling out the form and then you're like this is actually a lot for me, I can't handle this right now, you can … in a police station you can't leave until you finish your statement. Like if you're doing an online form, you can write what you need to say and be like I actually need to take a day. Also then you can come back to it later. (Maggie FG5)

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

Support workers' perspectives

Although there was widespread knowledge among support service workers about the alternative reporting options available to victim-survivors of sexual violence, many had little experience supporting victim-survivors to use them. Support workers, however, discussed the use, purpose and potential of alternative reporting options. They focused on four key functions or themes: regaining control, preserving evidence, protecting the community, and accessing support. We discuss each theme in turn below.

Regaining control

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

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

Relatedly, alternative reporting options may allow victim-survivors to document what happened to them in a semi-formal way. They may provide victim-survivors with a sense of empowerment—a 'feeling other than passive' (NSW support worker 1):

> … it gives them an opportunity to talk about or write down what has happened to them, provide as much details as they feel comfortable. They're very much in control of that process. (Vic support worker 2)

Support workers mentioned that victim-survivors could fill out the form at any time that suits them, giving them space to decide about their next steps. A support service worker from New South Wales also suggested that alternative reporting options may circumvent victim-blaming attitudes, including being questioned about not reporting to police at the time the offence occurred:

> Because a lot of, I suppose, is that sense of, "why didn't you report it at the time? Why have you waited so long?" … If it were me, I'd be thinking, "Well, I did actually at the time put a SARO in. I did actually tell New South Wales Police that this happened to me, albeit in an anonymous way or I didn't consent for anything to happen about it at the time, but it wasn't like I didn't say anything". (NSW support worker 1)

Such statements indicate the potential significance of alternative reporting options, providing victim-survivors with control over the outcome of their reporting decision-making, rather than this lying in the hands of police, who may not believe a victim-survivor or choose not to take action. Using alternative reporting options may further provide victim-survivors with a sense of control through being able to report anonymously, in addition to having the opportunity to tell their story and name the offender.

Preserving evidence

Second, support workers suggested that alternative reporting options can assist in preserving evidence, enabling victim-survivors to record what happened to them should they wish to report formally to the police in the future about another situation involving either the same or a different perpetrator. This enables the victim-survivor to record offences over time. It also assists in preserving the victim-survivor's memory of the event.

A significant feature of the NSW SARO is that, when a report is made, an 'event number' is generated. This means that victim-survivors or others submitting informal reports receive identification information to track what is reported to police. Although an event number is an outcome of making a report regardless of why or whether victim-survivors may choose to use alternative reporting options, retaining the event number is crucial should victim-survivors wish to follow up their reports in the future. While it is unclear from our data whether victim-survivors made use of their event numbers, support workers considered just having the event number was important because it allowed victim-survivors to keep their options open.

The Victorian SARA did not provide any sort of reporting receipt or ticket, which made it impossible for victim-survivors to track down or access their report. Unlike SARO, which is hosted by the NSW Police Force, SARA was hosted by a sexual assault support service. As such, the tools were designed and implemented for different purposes, but were nonetheless used in similar ways. Responses from support workers in Victoria highlighted the limitations of SARA for future reporting, with many victim-survivors potentially reporting to SARA thinking they could come back to their report at a later time to make a formal report to police, only to discover the reporting platform was not set up to enable this. As a support worker indicated, this was a challenge for the support service, who received requests from victim-survivors to access their informal reports so 'they could then take it to the police down the track' (Vic support worker 2). Support workers also mentioned that in some situations, victim-survivors thought they had actually made a report to the police by making an informal report, so there was some confusion about the nature and use of SARA as an alternative reporting option.

Protecting the community

Third, in addition to victim-survivors using alternative reporting for taking back power and control, and preserving information for potential future use, support services suggested victim-survivors may use alternative reporting options as a community safety measure, protecting other people from the perpetrator:

> [V]ictim-survivors do often want to be able to achieve something, to stop someone doing something, or to be able to do something that can do that. Maybe that [alternative reporting] would help them feel like that. (Vic support worker 3)

Using alternative reporting options may also assist police with intelligence gathering. As a support worker from New South Wales suggested, for some victim-survivors, using alternative reporting options is:

> … [Two]-fold, it's not just therapeutic, it actually is like a community justice kind of thing. "I've done my bit to say this happened, so you know this is happening in the community, this person …" (NSW support worker 2)

Similarly, as another support worker mentioned:

> So, if [the victim-survivor] made a report about an alleged perpetrator and someone else made a report and they'd been able to name the perpetrator that's, sometimes, not often, but sometimes, the police could piece together parts of the jigsaw puzzle and actually be able to find the perpetrator because someone has made an anonymous report. (Vic support worker 4)

Accessing support

Finally, support service workers commented that victim-survivors may use alternative reporting to access support. For example, victim-survivors who report to SARO are given access to victim support services and victim recognition payments. When SARA was in operation, support workers made follow-up calls to all reporters to see if they wanted further support.

Participants also reflected that victim-survivors were using alternative reporting options to inform support workers about their experiences without having to express this directly or verbally. Some victim-survivors used alternative reporting options to formally acknowledge what happened beyond the therapeutic setting, even if they did not plan to take the report further:

> [I]t's more about a further way of acknowledging this really happened and it ties into the fear of being believed. It's like, "If I make a SARO report, it's showing I'm really serious that I've been willing to put my name and the details to the police", not in a formal way, but an informal way. It is a therapeutic tool for them that this really happened and I'm showing you that I've done this. (NSW support worker 2)

Reporting to an alternative mechanism thus made the process much more formal than just talking to a counsellor. For some victim-survivors, 'putting it out there' (Vic support worker 4) gave them closure on what happened and enabled them to make decisions about their next steps.

One support worker indicated that 'clients had found [SARA] very, very empowering and very, very helpful', especially the 'option of support and acknowledgement, but without pressure to go any further' (Vic support worker 1). However, not everyone who completed a SARA report wanted follow-up support, and some victim-survivors were frustrated or angry that they were contacted by SECASA after making an informal report, even though they had (unwittingly) ticked the option for follow-up support. This kind of response from victim-survivors may reflect the lack of clarity on SARA's landing page, indicating victim-survivors may not have properly understood what the alternative reporting form was for.

Police perspectives

Participants from Victoria Police and the NSW Police Force were also asked to reflect on why they thought victim-survivors might use alternative reporting tools. In part, the police participants were speculating about victim-survivor motives based on their general observations or experiences of working on sexual assault cases. However, many of them had direct experience of examining a high number of completed SARO or SARA forms. By and large, participants thought that the main reason victim-survivors used an alternative form of reporting was that it offered them therapeutic benefits. This was expressed in different ways, including a sense of closure, a sense of empowerment, regaining or retaining control over their story or being linked to support services. Participants from across the two regions expressed this in remarkably similar ways—for example:

> … it's all about empowerment, providing that person with their options and it's their story to tell us, it's not our story to tell them what we're going to do with it but at least they do have that option of coming through informally and talking to us. (Vic Police 1)

> I think a big part of it is that ability to give them back power. I think their power was taken away during the offending against them and it provides them with options … (NSW Police 1)

> … the anonymous process lets people be in control. … The fact that right you have control of doing it anonymously then if you want to take it further, no-one's going to contact you, it's up to you to go to the next step. (Vic Police 2)

One participant noted that this sense of control over the process can be facilitated by an online form that can be accessed any time and is closer to people's everyday experiences of interacting online with authorities and institutions:

> I think in relation to the online reporting perhaps it could be a little bit of convenience like we are moving I guess towards that digital media age. … So, I think they've got the option there of going back to it and completing it over a period of time as opposed to that pressure of perhaps feeling like they need to answer all the questions that an investigator is asking them if they went in person. (NSW Police 1)

Police participants also reflected that victim-survivors completed the alternative reporting form because they were hoping to see some sort of action as a result. For instance, in New South Wales, filing in a SARO report enabled victim-survivors to access victim redress schemes or compensation. Or victim-survivors felt that the police might be able to take action to protect the community from the named offender. This was often tied to the therapeutic benefit for the victim-survivor:

> I think part of maybe the rationale or driving force for a victim to consider an alternate reporting option is because you're under the belief that Police will use your information because you know that person who sexually assaulted you has done it before and will do it again. And it's important that we recognise that is why a victim will use this alternate option … (NSW Police 2)

Closely related to the therapeutic benefits of the anonymous or online reporting process was the avoidance of potentially traumatising or shaming experiences associated with the formal police complaints process. According to one participant:

> Obviously there's the embarrassment issue of how do I walk into a police station and admit that I'm a victim? Having to tell their story to a stranger I'd imagine probably comes up there. Struggle to tell my dearest friend but also I've got to go and meet some person I've never ever met and tell them all the story. (NSW Police 2)

The difficulties victim-survivors experience in disclosing to the police were also mentioned by another participant:

> … because it's so hard to actually walk into a police station and say in front of big, burly male cops at the front desk, "I've been sexually assaulted", and then they ask a million questions. It's so much easier to be able to write that out online, and then have someone call you. I think that that will make a huge difference to reporting numbers if there was a better way of being able to do that. (NSW Police 4)

Police participants also expressed frustration at not being able to reach out to potential complainants to provide more information and reassurance:

> A lot of the Victoria Police juggernaut is not well understood by victims … and there's a lot of self-blame and shame, all those emotions that they experience, and that if we can target some information to them about, that we understand the misconceptions, like we understand [the impact of] delayed reporting, we understand that these are "behind closed doors" crime, and that we don't have necessarily evidence in the traditional form, that that's our job, that don't you worry about that; that's for us to find, it's not for you to go … (Vic Police 3)

Overall, police participants understood the enormity of the barriers that victim-survivors of sexual assault face in using the formal complaint process. Similar to victim-survivors and support workers, police participants indicated that alternative reporting options have the potential to be an 'in-between', giving back power and control to the victim-survivor and helping them make decisions about their next steps.

The experiences of victim-survivors who use the alternative reporting option

Survivors' perspectives

As noted previously, only two victim-survivors in our focus groups had used an alternative reporting option. In this section, we describe victim-survivors' experiences as they were recounted to us in the focus groups. Bonnie (FG1) said that she found writing down her experience somewhat validating, and she was relieved to know her story was recorded in some form:

> I was quite reassured to know that it wouldn't go further. Being able to report the matter because it happened quite a long time ago for me and I only found out about the SARO this year. So finding out about it for me was like, "Oh I have this thing that I can do that will not be triggering a formal investigation". I was quite relieved to know that I could [do] that because I had never considered making a formal report. It was nice to know that I could be somewhat in control and just do this thing and have that information held somewhere.
>
> In a sense it did feel kind of a relief to have that on the page and you know it's going somewhere, like a database or a record, that's kind of another perspective. It's nice to have it out there a little bit.
>
> … in some ways it did feel a little validating to be asked that in questions and to write down details.

Quinn (FG2), who had also used the NSW Police Force's SARO tool, had a more negative experience:

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

Both Bonnie and Quinn expressed similar sentiments around the disappointment and frustration that the SARO did not have further scope beyond collecting their reports, describing it as a 'dead end' and 'high-level census data', rather than something that could bring the perpetrator to account:

> … the SARO is just high-level census data … they can't do anything because those submissions are anonymous and they're not evidence and I think at the very least to use the SARO, there should be come kind of option to "here's my name, contact me if there is another victim and then maybe I can re-evaluate". (Quinn FG2)

> … one of the benefits of the SARO was that it wouldn't necessarily trigger a formal report, but at the same time that means there's no accountability for the perpetrator and that was a huge thing … That lack of accountability for the perpetrator for me is a problem. As I said before, I think having the option for it to go further if it's deemed appropriate would be really amazing, rather than it just being a dead end realistically. (Bonnie FG1)

While for Bonnie the alternative reporting form was validating and allowed her to tell her story in her own words, other victim-survivors in our focus groups found the SARO form too confronting. For instance, Julia (FG3) considered making a SARO report but decided not to after finding out 'they don't really do anything with it apart from put it in the system, and then it does nothing, it just sits there'. She also found the form itself to be too confronting:

> I went and Googled the SARO form, and I chose not to fill it out. … And there were probably a couple of reasons of like, I didn't think there was any point, and the questions are very confronting; you have to detail everything in, it's very, very detailed, and you have to, it's very scientific almost the way you have to lay it out. It's like having a physical exam again, but you have to write it. And I just didn't think it was worth it. (Julia FG3)

Survivors also clearly wanted their form to be meaningful in some way and not just sit in a database. As Ruth (FG5) said, 'I need to know that it accomplishes something, that there's a reason I'm doing this'.

Support workers' perspectives

Support service participants expressed concern that it is not always clear what the alternative reporting tools are for and what the outcomes of their use will be. For example, a support worker from New South Wales said in relation to SARO that the form does not clearly 'answer the main things that they would want to know'. Specifically, the support worker said victim-survivors would probably want to know:

> Will this go on the perpetrator's record? And if another complaint comes through about this perpetrator, will this report help? Will this form part of the evidence? Or will the victim be contacted? (NSW support worker 3).

Another support worker suggested that many victim-survivors probably do not read the first page of the form, which contains the specific details about what the police do with the information contained within SARO reports, and that the information is 'too much' and needed 'to be much more simple … a little bit more readable' (NSW support worker 4).

Support service workers from Victoria expressed similar concerns about the support-service hosted SARA and suggested victim-survivors experience confusion about what they were actually achieving by completing a SARA report. While SARA was marketed as a reporting tool, support services perceived it more as a disclosure tool. This was not clearly communicated to victim-survivors:

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

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

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

It is crucial that victim-survivors understand the nature of the form and potential outcomes that may emerge as a result, to ensure they are making an informed decision to use the form. Survivors may be experiencing significant emotional distress while filling in alternative reporting forms and having clear and concise information about what will happen with their report is crucial.

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

Other support workers felt that the terminology used in the form was also problematic. For example, in the section of the SARO where victim-survivors are asked to tick all the relevant boxes that reflect what happened when they were sexually assaulted, support workers said that their clients might struggle with the term 'torture' on the form (NSW support worker 5). Support service workers also pointed to other terms that may not be clear to victim-survivors, such as 'strangulation' and 'threaten'.

Support workers felt the length of the NSW Police Force SARO tool might also be challenging for victim-survivors. It was suggested that victim-survivors completing online forms would potentially need to: 'go away and come back to it multiple times' (Vic support worker 2). As a support worker from New South Wales remarked, 'the more steps you put into that process, the higher the chance is that they're not going to make it [all the way through the form]. They're going to drop off' (NSW support worker 3).

Support workers also indicated that completing current alternative reporting forms might be difficult because it is not clear how they can record multiple incidents and the different contexts in which they took place. The question on the SARO about when the incident ended may also spark confusion (NSW support worker 2).

Some participants thought that the alternative reporting options should be more inclusive of gender and sexually diverse victim-survivors' experiences, with one person commenting on the SARO that 'nothing in this kind of form would make you feel worse if you weren't male or female' (NSW support worker 5). In other words, the support worker felt that the SARO form was not inclusive of trans or gender-diverse people because there was no option to accurately capture their identity, as the only options available are 'female' or 'male'. The same participant said the form should also be in different languages so victim-survivors from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are able to complete the form in their preferred language.

Support workers also described the emotional experiences of victim-survivors completing an alternative reporting form, with some suggesting the form 'could be quite shocking to read' (NSW support worker 5), or that it was 'daunting', 'draining' and 'overwhelming' for victim-survivors to complete (NSW support worker 3; NSW support worker 6; Vic support worker 5). Other participants described the experience of completing SARO as 'triggering' and 'near impossible for a victim to complete', saying that it was more onerous to complete a SARO than an application for victim services (NSW support worker 3). Some were particularly concerned about the experiences of younger and vulnerable members of the community filling out the form by themselves.

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

> Only one of them wanted to write it themselves whilst I was still sitting in the room and every other one asked me to be the one to physically write it, even though it was their words. (NSW support worker 2)

This was also how another participant used the alternative reporting option:

> [I] would definitely do it for the client and I would always do it with them … I would do it in the room with them … I remember also doing it over the phone with people. So they may not be allocated clients. They might be clients who have called through, with an enquiry, or they're sitting on our waiting list. (NSW support worker 3)

Given the risks to the safety of victim-survivors who are being asked to provide on a form information that may never even be divulged in counselling (Vic support worker 3) or a victim compensation claim, support workers said that alternative reporting options should always be linked to a sexual assault service. Support services can help victim-survivors understand whether this is something they want to do and what are the challenges are (NSW support worker 1).

Being able to complete the SARO in a therapeutic setting may alleviate some of the challenges experienced by victim-survivors in retelling their story. Specifically, one support worker indicated that, because they already know the victim-survivor's story, they are well placed to assist with capturing and even translating victim-survivors' experiences to align with policing language. Support services can help victim-survivors 'navigate' the form and 'make tighter their potential interpretation' of the information the form is asking of them and there is an opportunity to 'debrief afterwards' (NSW support worker 2). Completing the SARO in a therapeutic setting enables support workers to pause and 'have a conversation' and to 'slip into therapeutic mode' when things get challenging, which is a very different experience to making a formal report to the police (NSW support worker 2).

Completing the SARO may provide victim-survivors with an opportunity to express further information about what happened. As NSW support worker 2 said, 'Some of them may have not been at the point in therapy that they've shared every specific detail of what occurred in the trauma. I may have just had an overview of what occurred.' Therefore, they said that alternative reporting options like SARO may act as a 'conduit', allowing support services to get the whole story if they have not yet heard all the details.

Support workers also felt that the tick boxes assisted some victim-survivors to complete a SARO:

> [It's] just another way of managing information for someone who's not good at a narrative or can't bear to type that particular word down. So, it just might be for some people, "I can barely put that in a sentence, but I could just tick a box that that happened to me". (NSW support worker 1)

Policing interview practices have shifted towards capturing the 'whole story', which focuses on victim-survivors talking about 'what happened' in their own words rather than responding to specific and explicit police questions. As such, it is also considered best practice to enable victims and witnesses of crime to describe what happened in their own words on alternative and informal reporting options (Tidmarsh, Powell & Darwinkle 2012). However, given the issues outlined above regarding the retraumatising capacity of alternative reporting options like SARO, having the capacity to tick a box when it is impossible for a victim-survivor to describe an experience may be beneficial. At the same time, support workers also identified that victim-survivors may experience difficulties completing the form because of the policing tone and unclear questions asked. It is also important to note that answering these questions incorrectly could result in questions of narrative consistency and contaminate the evidence should an alternative report be used later in a formal report, especially if the alternative report is subpoenaed by a legal defence team.

Participants also indicated that completing alternative reporting forms may provide victim-survivors with some insight into the experience of making a formal report and may help to ease the anxiety or intimidation victim-survivors may feel about going to the police:

> I think it actually does shift something in them to build a bit of a connection with the police that's not so intimidating or something like that. I really do believe it could really have that impact. (NSW support worker 5)

Police perspectives

From the perspective of the police participants, the experiences of victim-survivors using the SARO or SARA were primarily described in comparison with police procedures in a formal complaint. The findings relating to experiences do have a considerable overlap with the findings relating to why victim-survivors use the tools, which were reported above. Police participants in our study often said that an alternative reporting option was less confronting and emotionally easier than a formal complaint to the police. A phrase that was used by at least two participants was that it was a 'soft option':

> I call it a soft way of reporting in it was just that one step removed, the initial contact which is I think the hardest thing to do for a lot of people, that first step … and a lot of sexual assault services were using it as well, I think again, as a less confrontational way of making a report of a sexual assault for people that might not have been coping very well with the whole process. (NSW Police 4)

Another participant described it as a 'baby step':

> I think that it's an opportunity—a baby step to sort of dip your toe in[to] … the police and investigation response [or] indeed the wider judicial court process. (NSW Police 2)

While police speculated at length on the motivations of victim-survivors reporting via an anonymous or confidential tool (see discussion above), police participants did not offer much direct commentary on the actual experiences of victim-survivors using the tools, primarily because the SARA and SARO are designed to be completed independently, and so police tended not to observe victim-survivors using a form in person. One participant saw the potential for an online form to be isolating or retraumatising for some victim-survivors if there was no support available:

> I look at some of the information that's asked for here, and I think, if this person's sitting alone at midnight at night trying to report this, and let's face it, they may have been drinking, it could bring back some pretty dark moments as they sit there alone. (Vic Police 4)

Yet, overall, police participants described the experiences of victim-survivors using the form in positive terms. While many saw it as a step towards a formal complaint, there was also an acknowledgement that it was an important option that contributed to the recovery process for many victim-survivors regardless of the outcome. This potential for the informal tool to assist victim-survivors in their journey towards recovery was strongly endorsed by the police, and usually linked to the capacity of victim-survivors to access support while completing the report.

Formal reporting by victim-survivors to police after using the alternative reporting option

Survivors' perspectives

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

> … you dip your toe in, you start the process and then you go okay yeah, actually I am okay with someone calling me, or I'm not yet but I totally will be at some point, I think. And so, it's just a matter of having that, easing yourself in a little bit more but still being part of that formal process, I think. (Aubrey FG2)

Other victim-survivors wanted a system that only proceeded to a formal report if other victim-survivors came forward against the same perpetrator:

> … a lot of people's experiences or motivations to report is to protect others from experiencing harm. I think that's a really common desire to not have that happen to anyone else. (Violet FG1)

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

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

Support workers' perspectives

According to support worker participants in our study, few victim-survivors who made informal reports proceeded to make formal reports of sexual violence to police. We wanted to know if support services had any experiences of assisting victim-survivors to make formal reports following the completion of an informal report. However, most support service workers commented that they did not actually know. One reason for this was that clients were no longer attending the service, so the workers had no contact with them.

Yet some participants were aware of situations where an informal report did lead to a formal report. For instance, one participant said that making a SARO report, using the NSW Police Force tool, meant a victim-survivor could bypass speaking to a uniformed officer and go straight to a specialist detective. A victim-survivor may then not have to retell their story because they had an event number and an initial informal report that the police could refer to:

> I have had circumstances where I've done the SARO with the client, and then at some point after that they've decided to make a police report, a formalised report, and then I find this is the most useful tool, because you can skip, I guess I don't know how much you know about the police session, but [it] seems to me like when you want to make a report in person to the police you need to meet with a uniformed person first, and tell them it was a sexual assault, and then they have to deem that credible enough to call the detective. And if you have your event number you can skip telling the story to the uniformed person, and I think that's really valuable. It saves you so much time, effort, and re-traumatising by telling the story again. So that way you can call up and you can say, "I've got an event number, I want to book a session with the detective." And I would encourage my clients to do that. (NSW support worker 3)

The participant felt that completing the SARO helped to 'mediate that process' by 'getting a foot in the door' and that some barriers to reporting were broken down because the victim-survivor could go straight to a detective. However, they indicated that the process was still slow for the victim-survivor.

Although victim-survivors may not go on to make formal reports, the data suggest that making an informal report may lead at least to a conversation with the police:

> I supported her to go in, and we were able to have a conversation with the detectives, because they had the event number and the information, and that way we could discuss whether she should make the statement or not. (NSW support worker 3)

While our data do not show whether victim-survivors go on to make formal reports to police after completing informal reports, support workers mentioned some examples of police following up on informal reports, encouraging victim-survivors to come forward:

> I have had one client who then was contacted … by the police and it was quite some time after they'd done the SARO and they were wanted—you know, they were basically invited in to come and, you know, contacted to see if they wanted to give a formal statement and I think, from memory, the police had collated that this was a serial offender and they'd used that SARO and they'd taken statements from other victims and they wanted to see whether she wanted to give a formal statement. (NSW support worker 7)

Support service workers had mixed experiences of police following up reports with victim-survivors. One participant said it was 'rare', while others said that police sought to contact victim-survivors quite frequently when they had located an offender. Two workers thought follow-ups were only likely when a serial offender was identified (NSW support worker 7 & Vic support worker 5). Following up on alternative reporting can only be done if victim-survivors choose not to remain anonymous.

Police perspectives

Participants mentioned that in some cases, alternative reporting helped to shape the victim-survivor's decision to pursue a formal report: 'Sometimes people do an informal report through the SARO and then decide later on that they do actually want to proceed with a formal investigation' (NSW Police 5). The comment below reflects similar stories told by police participants in our study. The story relates to historical child abuse reported by three separate women who all identified the same offender in their reports. Through analysis of the reports, the officer was able to connect the incidents and use the supporting argument of multiple victims to progress to a formal complaint:

> … a couple of years on, the sister contacted me and said her situation had changed. Her health and whatnot has improved. She would now give a statement. I contacted the third victim and said, "Look would you consider providing a statement?" and I said, "There are other victims of this offender out there". So she thought on that for a little while and she came back to me and she said, "Yeah I'll do it". So I guess in that situation, so there's three victims on their own [who] may not have proceeded to Court. (NSW Police 3)

Another story from a police participant was remarkably similar, also involving multiple victims of an offender and showing how the case could be progressed following the earlier collection of a SARO report:

> … a report that I took, it would have been maybe 10 years ago that, it was a girl that had been sexually assaulted, and she was very mentally unwell and wasn't able to proceed with a police investigation, so maybe six or seven years ago she finally felt well enough to be able to report the matter, and from the original SARO and all the contact that I had her with in the first place, then she came back to me, she still had my email address so she emailed to say, "Okay, I'm now ready", and I referred it out to [location] Police Station, and they just called me last week to say they're about to go and arrest the offender, and in doing the investigation they've identified five or six other victims of this man as well, which has all come from that original SARO, so that was a really good news report. (NSW Police 4)

A further example below shows that an alternative report can be an opportunity for police to encourage a victim-survivor to make a formal report:

> … there was a previous SARO report which had been received and we saw that she was willing to be contacted, this female, and we actually received a formal complaint that was made against a particular person, and given that we saw the SARO report on the system and that she was willing to be contacted … she decided that she would become a witness too, and assist this other person's matter and also make a formal complaint, and it was time for her to make a formal complaint and have her matter investigated as well. (Vic Police 1)

In summary, victim-survivors of sexual violence choose alternative reporting options for a variety of reasons. While it is not known how many of those informal reports led to a formal report to the police, participants in our study indicated alternative reporting can be a stepping stone to contact with the police and a pathway to formal reporting.

Summary

In this section, we have explored responses to our first research question: what are victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative reporting options? We broke this question down into three sub-questions:

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

In summary, there are multiple reasons why victim-survivors may use alternative reporting options:

- they are not sure if the offence (or offences) is significant enough to warrant police involvement;
- they are concerned about the offender finding out they have been to the police;
- they see it as a softer introduction to the criminal justice system; and
- there are persistent issues associated with shame, stigma and victim-blaming when victim-survivors come forward to the police.

Victim-survivors' experiences of using alternative reporting options were predominantly marked by uncertainty as to what happened to the information provided and what outcomes—if any—resulted from making an informal report beyond receiving an event number. Both support services and police remarked that filling out the SARO reporting form hosted by the NSW Police Force may be challenging, traumatic and triggering for victim-survivors. As such, it appears many victim-survivors may complete the SARO form in a therapeutic setting. However, only half the victim-survivors in the 2016 PSS indicated they had sought help or support following their latest incident of sexual violence (ABS 2017). As such, the perspectives provided by support services only reflect the experiences of those victim-survivors who seek help.

We still know very little about the experiences of sexual assault victim-survivors who have used alternative reporting options beyond a therapeutic setting. Whether victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report after completing an informal one remains unclear. Indeed, as none of our participants had experienced an alternative report leading to or being involved in a sexual assault case proceeding to trial, we did not have sufficient data to answer the last sub-question ('If victim-survivors do report to police, what role does their initial report play in the development of their case through the criminal justice system?'). However, some survivors indicated they would be more willing to make a formal report if multiple reports had identified the same offender. Support services and police both felt informal reporting enabled victim-survivors to get a 'foot in the door,' introducing them to criminal justice procedures and investigations. Importantly, though, victim-survivors indicated they did not necessarily want police involvement at all. These victim-survivors' perspectives reflect wider calls for more innovative and informal justice responses to sexual violence that are more accessible to victim-survivors, focus on accountability rather than punishment, and work to repair the harms of sexual violence outside the constrains of the law (see, for example, Daly 2014; Flynn 2015; McGlynn 2011).

The role of alternative reporting options in identifying perpetrators, gathering evidence and prosecuting accused persons

In this section, we examine victim-survivor, support worker and police perspectives on our second research question: what role have sexual assault reporting options played in identifying perpetrators, gathering evidence and prosecuting accused persons? The aim was to document the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping and how informal and confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police.

This section is divided into three sub-questions, including:

- Is the information provided in alternative reporting options used by the police and how does the format or structure of the form affect police use of that information?
- What are the differences in the quality and quantity of information elicited using different types of reporting tools?
- How does the format and structure of alternative reporting options influence the quality and quantity of information elicited from victim-survivors of sexual assault?

Survivors were given the opportunity during the focus groups to provide feedback on two alternative reporting forms: the SARO (the tool hosted by the NSW Police Force) and the SARA (the tool hosted by a support service in Victoria). Specifically, they were asked how the format and structure of the forms would impact their ability to tell their story and the quality and quantity of information they would be able to give. From here, we analysed how alternative reporting options may be used by police based on victim-survivors' responses. Survivors also provided feedback on how alternative reporting could be improved to increase uptake and to make it better able to capture their stories. We have not included the victim-survivor perspective on the first sub-question, as victim-survivors were unable to directly answer how alternative reporting forms have been used by the police.

Support service workers were asked in their interviews to reflect on how alternative reporting contributes to police responses to sexual assault. While many of the support service workers were unsure of how the police used the reports, they were able to provide valuable insights into what types of information victim-survivors were disclosing and how they thought this information would be useful for intelligence and evidence gathering. Support service workers also raised important concerns, such as the need for alternative reporting forms to be completed with a support worker, and the potential for defence lawyers to use these forms to discredit victim-survivors.

Finally, members of the NSW and Victoria police forces were able to provide comprehensive insight into how alternative reporting options have been used by police for intelligence gathering and identifying and prosecuting offenders, with alternative reporting in some cases providing valuable information that has helped police progress cases. However, police also spoke about the frustrating barriers to using alternative reporting and the limitations to what they can do with the information given the anonymous nature of many reports.

Overall, participants indicated that alternative reporting options have significant potential to aid police in intelligence gathering and identifying and prosecuting perpetrators of sexual assault. Victim-survivors indicated that they were more likely to use alternative reporting than to make a formal police report, and that the information they would give may be qualitatively different to the information contained in a formal police report, as they might feel more comfortable telling their story in that format. This suggests that alternative reporting may also provide information to police that would otherwise have gone unreported. However, support workers raised some concerns about the use of alternative reporting, and police identified significant limitations in their ability to use these reports. Survivors also identified changes they would like to see to current forms that would increase their likelihood of using them and capture their story in a more accurate way.

Police use of information provided in alternative reporting options and how this is affected by the format or structure of the form

Support workers' perspectives

Support workers from New South Wales were not entirely sure what happened to the information provided via the NSW Police Force's SARO tool or how police used it. They mentioned that they do not receive any information about the reports after they are submitted. Despite this, many workers indicated that they thought alternative reporting options were useful for police in building a profile of sexual assault offending and offenders and for identifying repeat offenders. Some participants said that they told their clients that this is what the police were using the forms for, even though they were not actually sure. As one worker said, '[I] don't even know if that's really accurate, but that's what I tell clients' (NSW support worker 3).

Because support service workers were unsure about what happens with information provided in alternative reports of sexual assault, they expressed a desire to know more about where that information went, and especially whether reports are used to gather intelligence on repeat offenders. Other participants said they wanted clarification on what 'intelligence' means in the context of investigating a sexual assault, as this lack of knowledge was influencing decision-making with respect to recommending alternative reporting options for victim-survivors. They suggested the police needed to make it clear that the information was being used for the purposes of profiling, and that this may encourage more victim-survivors to report.

Some support workers said they had received requests from the police for IP addresses of reporters who had left no contact information. However, workers noted that making reports anonymous undermined police capacity to follow up, recognising the 'frustrating' position for police. Workers stated that sometimes they were able to play a mediating role between the victim-survivor and the police when they had left a contact number. For example, Vic support worker 4 recalled:

> The hardest thing was initially we didn't even have mobile contact it was email, so that was really difficult, but later on we did ask victim-survivors to put their mobile contact and that did make a big difference because once we spoke to them we could ask permission as well and gain consent, that was something that they'd be comfortable for the Police to phone to ring them and all that.

Support workers expressed concern that police or defence lawyers might use the information recorded in the informal report in ways that could be detrimental to victim-survivors if they chose to make a formal report. In particular, support workers were concerned that information in the informal report might be used to undermine the victim-survivor's account in court, and that the defence might use the information to discredit the victim-survivor:

> [I]f they [victim-survivors] leave out information, which they will, or if they provide contradictory information on eye colour or something, could that be used against them in court? Could the defence get their hands on these documents? (NSW support worker 3)

> [Y]ou certainly could submit them (photos) as evidence. It's not to say that they couldn't be used. But they're not going to stand up to scrutiny and they will be dismissed because, "Who took the photos?" "I did". "Okay. So how are we to know that you didn't use makeup to exacerbate these?" "Well, I didn't. I was assaulted". "Well, it's your word against his". (Vic support worker 5)

Support workers were also wary about whether the information contained in alternative reports would hold up to scrutiny in a criminal justice process, particularly in the context of a tool such as SARA, which did not have legal safeguards protecting the reports or personal information of victim-survivors who were not registered with their service:

> [U]nder health privacy information, all of our stuff is protected if somebody's a registered client of our health service. So we can argue not to release information. … [T]he more areas that people can get access to information that is not protected, the more it can be used to undermine that individual's credibility. And it seems like such a small detail that someone would get the eye colour wrong. Who gives a shit? But it can be such a massive thing in a case. Particularly a case that may be heard in front of a jury … (Vic support worker 5)

The same participant outlined the different legal safeguards that would prevent the defence from gaining access to information depending on whether a victim-survivor was making a disclosure or a report. She said that if it is considered a disclosure, then it would be protected by legislation; however, as these were anonymous reports made through SARA, they were not protected by legislation and, as such, they were vulnerable to being subpoenaed by defence lawyers or the service could be subject to a search warrant:

> … people were anonymously reporting and then we were receiving search warrants from VicPol where we wouldn't know who the reporter was but they could track the reporter through their IP address … [T]hey would issue us with the search warrant. I don't know how they handled it beyond that but the reality is that they could have knocked on somebody's door or called somebody. (Vic support worker 5)

In summary, support workers were unclear as to how police used informal reports made to SARO or SARA, with the exception of occasions when they were contacted by police to follow up with a victim-survivor. Knowing what happens with the information contained in the reports is vital, as support workers expressed concern about the lack of legal safeguards to protect victim-survivors, which could mean defence lawyers are able to access that information.

Police perspectives

Police in the interviews gave extensive and detailed responses about the use of the information provided in SARA and SARO reports, sometimes also commenting on other informal reporting mechanisms, such as anonymous tip-offs, or disclosures that occur in the course of a separate investigation, typically a domestic or family violence investigation. Police participants from New South Wales gave clear and detailed responses about how information from a SARO report is put into their systems:

> So, in terms of an intelligence review, so the way we currently do it is the time and date, the location and the victim's details. They're compulsory fields within a sexual assault box report. So, they're the only mandatory fields that need to be completed to generate an event. If we have all of that, those three fields, then we will generate a COPS [Computerised Operational Policing System] event. If we don't have enough to generate an event, then we will do an intelligence report. So, in order to simplify our data entry of the report, what we do is we will enter those mandatory fields and then put a brief overview in the COPS narrative of what has occurred and then that is all that gets entered into the actual COPS system. However, we then scan, or if it's already a PDF, upload, a copy of the actual SARO report to the COPS event. So, the information is available if people probe further into the event. They can get the full SARO report. But in terms of just a general intelligence review on crime and that type of thing, it would just be that limited information in the actual COPS search. (NSW Police 5)

> So, when they submit a SARO report it's processed, it's given a report number, and then that report number and a fairly generic email is sent back to the victim, or the victim's counsellor, with the notation that if you decide to have this matter investigated then make contact with the SARO section and we then make the appropriate referral to the relevant police area command. So, yes, they can either come back, if they change their mind and want it investigated, they can come back to the SARO section or if they complete a SARO and then go to a police station and say, "I want it investigated", then the police also have access to that SARO report and can link it up. (NSW Police 5)

In some cases, the information collected in the NSW Police Force's SARO tool can be used to generate a record of an incident where an investigation seems unlikely because there is not enough evidence or it is not a priority for the police. According to one participant, this is an under-utilisation of the potential application of the SARO where it plays 'more of a report making process rather than an opportunity for further follow up to be conducted on the report' (NSW Police 6).

Information within the form can be used to support intelligence-led policing, as described here, in relation to the work of assigned investigators:

> Their responsibility is to investigate the matter, and to look for recurring offences or potential other offences that may involve the same offender and/or the same type of victim, or the victim group or victim type. (NSW Police 6)

While police participants all gave examples of how information from a SARA or SARO report could aid investigations or provide opportunities for proactive policing, there were several comments that highlighted the limitations of anonymous or informal complaints, such as the following:

> Yeah, we can record the details, particularly if we've got the offender's details, because, yes, we do have that information, but clearly, it is very difficult … Yes, the information can be held, but the information, I suppose, it's difficult to validate when it's an anonymous report. That's the reality, I suppose. However, what it can do is, if we do have reports from other victims particularly, then we do have information on that, that that perpetrator has potentially been involved in this type of behaviour before. (Vic Police 4)

As a practical tool, the SARO was described very clearly by another participant as having many advantages in cases that might be delayed for a long period before the victim-survivor decides to proceed with a formal complaint. This participant noted the probative value of the statement collected at the time of the incident from not only the person filing the report but potential witnesses as well. The participant described cases that involved some contact between the police and the victim-survivor following the initial filing of a SARO report:

> [There is a] … benefit of providing a statement as soon as possible after the event because it's most fresh in your mind and that in turn is going to minimise cross examination of the witness as to their reliability to recall that account and provide that statement … I think another benefit is it allows police to get corroboration, again, while it's fresh in the witness's mind and we do that with consent. But if a victim was to come forward and give a statement today saying this is what happened to me last week, "I've told you my story, I just don't want to go ahead with it now". … it's very beneficial for police to go and get … [the SARO statement to file alongside the statement taken by the police] …. If the victim comes back 10 years down the track a good chunk of the police investigation's already done, as opposed to the victim comes back to us 10 years later, I've got to knock on someone's door and go, "Can you remember what happened 10 years ago?" and you get them standing there with a blank look on their face, you know what I mean? I now need a statement off you and their statement's going to be a lot stronger when it's got sooner. So that's the second benefit. (NSW Police 3)

Further examples were given by several other police participants, showing how the information was used to support criminal investigations, providing valuable intelligence in a range of ways:

> [If] the assault happened at the such and such nightclub at 3am on this morning and it happened, you know, in the alleyway next to the nightclub, or something along those lines. So I would like to think that as an investigator if I got a report like that I'd go, "okay well let's go and secure that CCTV footage". And that's not to identify the victim, that's just knowing that okay, that footage might only be there for four weeks. … so we may be able to identify the offender. So that would be why I would think that we'd want to know those things. (Vic Police 4)

> As I said without the complainant it may not go anywhere but at the least it enables us to get a profile and put an alert to say well this person's obviously active and then we can start having a look at what else have we got and often there might be previous complainants where the matters weren't authorised to go to Court, there wasn't enough evidence, so then we might be able to reactivate those and again look for patterns with the new information that's come through. (Vic Police 2)

> But what it also does is forensically we can have say cold case type investigations within the Sexual Crimes Squad for instance where you can have DNA that could be outstanding for instance. We've got a DNA profile of a stranger rapist. What anonymous reporting has the capability to do is you identify a pattern of a person that is committing violence against women in a particular area. It raised our intelligence levels to be able to go and seek DNA samples relative to other offending as well. I know sometimes people might have the instant thought that someone who remains anonymous and confidential doesn't give us a great deal for a prosecution but to me that's very narrowminded. This actually provides us more intelligence on a person's … modus operandi, and obviously gives us an ability to seek forensic samples based on an intelligence lead by application to a Court. (Vic Police 1)

Another important function of anonymous reporting mentioned by police participants was its capacity to provide intelligence relating to child abuse, which would lead to an investigation wherever possible.

In Victoria, the experiences of filing, sharing and accessing the information from the SARA form were more mixed, in part because SARA was not an official police tool. There was less clarity about how the information was being managed by the support service hosts of SARA, SECASA, but Victoria Police were nonetheless able to point to its usefulness:

> So yeah, all you can do is share it, you know, with the right people you think, you know, for the individual information and it might mean something to their particular unit where it doesn't mean anything to us and it doesn't fit a criteria that we would conduct an investigation on it, but certainly it might be, fit information that they've got … (Vic Police 5)

Participants noted that SARO reports were noted as being very useful in court. This underscores the need for accuracy in the record taken through the SARO:

> It's very important that it's recorded accurately, and then recorded by us accurately as well, because we're just reading the form and then transcribing that onto our COPS system, so it's important that we record it correctly too, to get all of the information down, because it definitely would come into it, and if there's any differences, it would definitely be an issue at court; not an issue that we wouldn't be able to get past if it was for a, if we could explain the reason why it's different, but it definitely would be an issue at court if there were any difference in the original SARO, and then whatever happened at court. (NSW Police 4)

In summary, all 14 police participants gave several examples of the different ways in which the information on a SARA or SARO report was or could be used in their investigations, in general crime prevention strategies or to support an ongoing case. However, it is clear from the data that victim-survivors and support services are not aware that this is how the information is used. Communication between the different parties is crucial, and the ways police use information contained in alternative reporting tools need to be clear and easily accessible to victim-survivors and support services so they can be fully informed about their use and potential for law enforcement.

Table 2: Summary of police use of alternative report data

Primary use of alternative reports by police	Description
Intelligence gathering	The police can use the time, date, location, and details of the offence provided to gather intelligence about incidents and patterns of sexual offending. Police can use these data to look for recurring offences or other offences that may involve the same offender or victim group, supporting ongoing investigations.
Proactive policing	The information can provide opportunities for proactive policing such as surveillance or patrols in areas where sexual assaults have been reported, safety checks on reported hotspots and disruption operations.
Preserving evidence	Alternative reporting may be beneficial where a victim-survivor delays filing a formal complaint. The informal statement collected can minimise the survivor having to retell their story, provides corroboration for the police's investigation, and allows the victim-survivor to record the details at the time of incident. This can be used for future investigations, even if the victim comes forward years later.

The key differences in the quality and quantity of information elicited using different types of reporting tools

Survivors' perspectives

Survivors were given an opportunity during the focus groups to look at the SARO and SARA forms, to provide their feedback on the forms and to share their perspectives on filling out these forms following a sexual assault. Survivors reflected on some of the benefits of using these alternative reporting forms over other methods of reporting. As Willow (FG1) noted, one of the key benefits is that, if someone fears authority figures like the police, they might give clearer information in an alternative reporting form, where they feel more control over their narrative, as compared to giving a statement to a police officer. Some victim-survivors thought alternative reporting provided them more of an opportunity to tell their story in their own words.

Another benefit some victim-survivors saw in an alternative reporting form compared to a police statement is that it does not need to be filled out in one go. Survivors can revisit it later, which provides an opportunity to add details that they might not have remembered on the first attempt:

> I think when it comes to retelling your story and what happened to you, I know for me personally there were things that I forgot and then remembered later. I think what would be good, it would be challenging if the report, you couldn't come back to sort of thing. If it could be like a save and come back and tick it as you can rather than starting over every single time. I think that would be a really good way to put it. (Ella FG1)

Some victim-survivors felt that the NSW Police Force's SARO form was too close to what they would be asked in a police interview, and they did not understand why such a high level of detail was needed unless the form was going to lead to a charge against the perpetrator. This suggests that, if the form is too close in style and language to a police interview, that might discourage some victim-survivors from using it, particularly if they are seeking alternatives to a formal police report:

> There's just one page on it that's like, 'List all the different ways you could be touched or hurt against your will,' and then it asks you to describe it. And I just don't know how that helps someone, if they're not making a charge, like if you're making, if you're going to a police report and you're charging someone with those specific acts, then I totally understand. But the SARO is an alternative method of reporting, so it's not turning into a police charge unless you decide it, so I don't really understand why you should have to detail all of that so explicitly, because I don't actually know who that serves. There could be an option for someone to describe it, if they would want, but seeing all those, I don't know, seeing the way it's so, the way it's laid out and it's just very confronting, and I just don't, I don't know, I probably wouldn't have that on a form … It feels like you're making a police report, even though it says at the top you're not, so I think it's very hard for a survivor to distinguish how it's different. (Julia FG3)

Overall, victim-survivors saw alternative reporting forms as an opportunity to record their experience, which they otherwise would not have through formal reporting mechanisms. Some victim-survivors saw the potential for alternative reporting to record information about their experiences in qualitatively different ways to a police report. This was because some felt they would be able to give clearer information if they were not feeling intimidated by the police and would have more of an opportunity to tell their story in their own words. Not having to complete the form in one go also meant they could revisit the form later to add additional details. Some saw potential in being able to attach media files (eg photos, videos) as it meant they could add extra details and evidence to the report. However, some victim-survivors thought that the SARO form was too similar to a police report and felt that this would discourage them from reporting.

Support workers' perspectives

Survivors completing alternative, informal reports of sexual violence in the presence of a support worker are more likely to provide police with accurate information. This is because, as outlined above, support workers can help victim-survivors navigate and interpret the complex questions and length of police-based forms and mitigate the possibility of secondary trauma. Having a support worker assist a victim-survivor may also help to address the repetitiveness of the SARO form and mitigate any stress resulting from the types of questions asked in the form.

Support workers expressed a need for alternative reporting options to be more user-friendly and victim-survivor-centric to improve the quality and quantity of the information they elicit. Support workers remarked that the introduction page of the NSW Police Force's SARO form needed to be simpler and easier to understand. They said the first page needs to clearly outline what will happen to the information contained in the report. One participant said that her clients typically want to know whether there are any consequences for the perpetrator if they make this report, whether the report will actually help and whether the report will be used as evidence (NSW support worker 3). Others mentioned that the form asks for a lot of detail for something that is 'not really going anywhere' (NSW support workers 4 and 5).

Support workers described some challenges around the language used in the alternative reporting forms which could also affect the evidence. For instance, the SARO form lists 'torture' as one of the experiences victim-survivors can indicate happened to them, but one participant felt that in the absence of a definition, this could be confusing, as torture can mean many things, including psychological torture (NSW support worker 2). Equally, 'strangulation' is challenging for victim-survivors to understand (NSW support worker 3). Participants also discussed how victim-survivors may not understand the distinction between 'rape' and 'sexual assault', which could create further confusion and potentially impact the quality of the evidence. Moreover, as mentioned by one worker, the SARO form lists 'normal sexual intimacies' alongside different forms of assault, which adds further confusion (Vic support worker 3). Participants indicated they would like questions about the impacts of sexual violence beyond the physical act.

Reflecting on the SARA, some participants expressed concern that victim-survivors were able to attach a photo. They were concerned either about what the purpose of the photo would be or that support workers might be traumatised by viewing these images.

Questions on the form that focused on the victim-survivor were also identified as potentially problematic. For instance, many workers questioned whether it was appropriate for the victim-survivor to be asked about their racial appearance: 'To me, it's more an offender question. What was their racial appearance? Yet we're asking this about a victim' (NSW support worker 2). Another participant said:

> What's your general appearance [and] what were you wearing at the time of the assault? That's problematic. Because of what we know about that question, it puts blame onto survivors, so that's a bit problematic. I don't know what's the use of it [is]. (Qld support worker 1)

Other questions that support workers felt reinforced victim-blaming included:

> [Q]uestions about if the survivor was under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time. I understand the purpose of it, but I guess you need to be very careful that you're not going to reinforce the narrative of blaming [the] victim in any way. (Qld support worker 1)

Across the board, support workers had a lot to say about the problems with the questions asked on the SARO form, specifically questions they felt victim-survivors would struggle to answer. These included questions about when the assault took place or when the incident ended, because there may have been multiple assaults, or the abuse may be ongoing. Questions asking victim-survivors if they attended hospital are also problematic because they may suggest that, if they did not, their experience was less serious.

Police perspectives

The value of reports from the NSW Police Force's SARO tool in developing crime prevention strategies was clearly set out by one participant in our study, who contrasted the reactive policing usually associated with sexual assault offences with the opportunity for proactive policing:

> The biggest thing that jumped out for me, the biggest benefit for SARO is intelligence gathering for police and allowing police to be more proactive in our responses. Sexual assault investigations is very reactive unless you've got a complainant … we can see patterns emerging. So we can take [these] anonymous reports … and go "hang on a minute we've had five victims say that they were raped in this geographical area. They all give the same description of the offender or there is a pattern. They all visited this nightclub. Something happened" … So it gives us, I suppose, the information, the tools to go "well this is an opportunity for us to proactively engage, to disrupt offending". (NSW Police 3)

Similarly, another police participant identified the use of the information in an anonymous report as theme-based intelligence, as opposed to having value in detailing a specific offence:

> So they would, you know, they would talk to their counterparts if need be, that, you know, oh this may be occurring in our neighbouring, in our southern, southern neighbours and things like that, because we're eastern, if you like. So that's sort of, it's more of a theme thing if it's anonymous rather than specific offending. (Vic Police 5)

One participant saw the information in the SARO as summary-level information compared with an interview completed face-to-face:

> The SARO form wouldn't get all of the information that you needed for a statement, but it's more designed to get the information that we need to create a COPS event to record the incidents that have occurred. So generally, if the person says, "I've been abused for 20 years", and then we haven't got enough information, then we would contact that person if they consent to being contacted and to get that information as to what we can record. (NSW Police 7)

In contrast, another participant felt that the information collected through SARO was more detailed than would be collected in a face-to-face conversation with a potential complainant.

An important aspect of investigations relating particularly, though not exclusively, to child abuse cases is the grooming of victims by offenders. One participant noted that victim-survivors who complete a form are unlikely to include details that confirm any grooming activities unless they are directly asked for extensive background information in a face-to-face interview:

> That's one of the things that we try and look, we try and get the whole story. When we do actually speak to people we try and get the whole story because we do know that there's patterns of grooming that might take place for a number of weeks and months before the offending might actually occur. (Vic Police 4)

One participant further noted that the types of questions asked on the SARO form are inconsistent with best-practice interviewing. Current models of police interviewing, especially for vulnerable interviewees, are based on obtaining a detailed narrative using open questions and avoiding specific questions as much as possible. One participant from Victoria Police described the SARO as 'exactly the opposite' of what they are trained to do in interviews with victim-survivors, and explained that 'by asking specific details about times, dates, [it is] more likely for the victim to make mistakes' (Vic Police 3). This participant went on to explain that, if a form is used for reporting, it must be consistent with existing interviewing practices:

> … it's just giving someone another way to communicate with us, well, then we need to apply the same principles [as interviewing] otherwise we are going to cause inconsistent statements, which is exactly what we try and avoid when we're out there interviewing. (Vic Police 3)

How the format and structure of alternative reporting options influences the quality and quantity of information elicited from victim-survivors of sexual assault

Survivors' perspectives

In the focus group discussions, victim-survivors were given the opportunity to read through the SARA and SARO forms and to reflect and provide feedback on how the format and structure might impact their experiences of using these forms. Some victim-survivors felt the NSW Police Force's SARO form was too sterile and clinical, with some victim-survivors comparing it to filling out a 'tax form'.

> It kind of feels like we're going into cold, clinical questioning straight off, and it's like "wow, I'm overwhelmed already, you're asking for all … even just asking for my name". (Adelyn FG5)

Adelyn described the SARO form as not providing enough reassurance that their reports will be believed, which she said would discourage her from using the form:

> I feel with all these forms, it should say "what happened to you is not your fault, we believe you", before we even get to anything. … Let's put in a disclaimer like "what happened to you is not your fault, we believe you, if you need help, here are your sexual assault services, they can help you fill in the form". Because already looking at it, it's like I can't even fill it in, I can't even fill in my name because it's too triggering … (Adelyn FG5)

Survivors also identified issues with the language used and categories provided on the SARO form. They said that they reinforced ideas around what types of experiences 'count' as sexual assault, which could discourage those whose experiences did not fit:

> I feel like it's really geared for the type of assault that you kind of see on TV with the laneway alley kind of mugging situation. (Bonnie FG1)

> I think it [the SARO] just kind of plays into—and we kind of talked about this—but this narrative that most people who are assaulted don't know their offender and therefore need to go through this really long drawn out, we are going to take down every bit of information about this person's appearance, whereas we know from research that most victim-survivors know the person who assaulted them and therefore can just be like, it was them. So this just seems like a really, really unnecessary way to introduce someone to this process of questioning. (Molly FG5)

Some victim-survivors also criticised the SARO for asking victim-survivors to answer questions about what they were wearing and what alcohol and drugs they consumed, which they said could be interpreted as victim-blaming. Ella (FG1) pointed out that these questions were not asked in the SARA form, which made her feel more in control of her report. Survivors generally preferred the SARA form as it was shorter, felt less intimidating to fill out, and was more accessible:

> … there's really not that much on it that you have to sit and labour over; it's accessible, especially for someone who may get overwhelmed easily, or who may already suffer from anxiety, or any kind of perhaps feelings around having to do tasks. (Julia FG3)

Some victim-survivors thought that the format of some of the SARA and SARO questions, which allowed a victim-survivor to tick a box to indicate what happened to them rather than having to describe it, might help victim-survivors to record their experience, whereas they might otherwise struggle to find the right words. However, there were differing views on this, with other victim-survivors having a visceral reaction to the tick box list, finding the language used to be confronting. This was particularly the case with the SARO form, which includes graphic language such as 'shooting' and 'stabbing' on the list. As Aubrey noted, this would have been too confronting for her to fill out follow a sexual assault:

> I think also given that for a lot of people that might be completing this form relatively soon after their assault at a time when you're already terrified and traumatised, and having this list of really frightening things in front of you. Like I would've been in the foetal position honestly, if I'd seen all of this and been like oh my goodness, that can also happen too. (Aubrey FG2)

While victim-survivors generally liked the inclusion of blank boxes where they could tell their story in their own words, some felt as though the boxes for answers were not long enough, and that it might force victim-survivors to curtail their responses and not provide much detail.

Overall, victim-survivors saw benefits to some aspects of the SARA and SARO forms such as the free space boxes allowing them to tell their story in their own words, and the tick box formats, which potentially helped victim-survivors who did not have the language to describe their experiences (although there were differing views on this). Generally, the shorter support-service hosted SARA form was preferred as it was less intimidating for victim-survivors to fill out. However, victim-survivors identified many aspects of both forms which needed improving to capture their experiences better and encourage them to use the forms.

Support workers' perspectives

Support workers were concerned that the format and structure of alternative reporting forms could impact the quality and quantity of information provided by victim-survivors. SARO was generally considered to be too long and traumatising for victim-survivors to complete, whereas SARA was considered more 'victim-survivor friendly'.

> [The SARO form] I just felt was way too long … people are just going to be completely turned off filling it out … to me this just looks like a Centrelink form. (Vic support worker 2)

> What I know about it [SARO] also is that it's super long, and that clients find it really overwhelming to fill out all of that, 14 pages. And that is very police style … And so, one, it can be emotionally draining going through that for the client, but also some of it might seem really irrelevant, but I try to prepare clients about that, and that it's a police document to try and cover everything all in one … form wise I like this one [SARA]. It's much easier, much less traumatising, and [the] majority of my clients could do that without my assistance, or not as much assistance, so it wouldn't have to take two sessions like it does for some clients. Yeah. I think that's great. (NSW support worker 4)

While SARA may have asked less of victim-survivors by enabling them to offer up whatever information they wanted to share, the SARO nonetheless gave victim-survivors insight into the formal reporting process. One participant also felt that SARA did not ask enough questions (NSW support worker 3).

In terms of accessibility, support workers felt that it was important that the form be available in both hardcopy and digital formats, along with being available in other languages.

Support workers were not sure if the unstructured part of the SARO was helpful for victim-survivors, suggesting it could be quite a 'paralysing thing for them to say some of the words or say some of the details of what occurred if they're given that free rein' (NSW support worker 2). Another worker said, 'Your 19/20-year-old is going to say … "oh what the fuck, I've just gone through all this and they want me to write an essay on it"' (Vic support worker 4).

Support workers reflected that the structure and format of the SARO were more relevant for capturing information about 'one-off' sexual assaults, assaults perpetrated by strangers, and serial offenders. As such, SARO could reinforce myths about sexual violence. This potentially impacts not only the quality of information provided on the form but also whether victim-survivors complete it.

Ultimately, support service workers felt the NSW Police Force's SARO form was not trauma-informed, and as such the structure and format of the form may make victim-survivors feel as though they had not completed it correctly, leading them to choose not to proceed with a formal report or seek support.

Police perspectives

Police participants had a great deal of professional experience in different forms of questioning and other ways of eliciting information. They provided detailed and nuanced responses about how the different questions on the SARA or SARO forms might influence the quality of information received, as well as comments about the accessibility of the form more generally. There was a clear preference among police participants for a more sophisticated online form, as exemplified in the following comment:

> I think there's a huge opportunity to make it a digital platform to not only create greater awareness of SARO in the community of this alternate reporting option, but we need to have internal education and training and built in processes and an intelligence response to that information if we're going to promote it as information that we'll use to link and identify offences and offenders or to reduce recidivism, etc. I don't want that to be a superficial presentation of SARO in the community when we really could actually be using it meaningfully. (NSW Police 2)

A different perspective was expressed by another participant, who noted the potential for users to be put off by the security risk posed by an online form (Vic Police 5).

Several participants mentioned a preference for narrative-based responses over closed questions in alternative reporting forms. For instance, the inclusion of narrative details was an opportunity to learn more about the patterns of offending in the absence of a comprehensive dataset of official reports.

Police participants made detailed contributions relating to the questions used on the form and their likely impact on victim-survivors, as well as their value to policing. Similar to the concerns expressed by the victim-survivors and support workers in our study (see discussion above), police participants felt that some questions could come across as victim-blaming:

> … the types of questions that are asked in there regarding the victim and what the victim was wearing and where they were and that type of thing. I think in today's standards, while from a police perspective it's information that is important, I think the tone of it now is probably a little victim-blaming. So, yeah, the questions themselves I think need to be updated and I think it needs to be simplified. (NSW Police 5)

These questions about the victim have a policing function, which is generally to allow police to identify the victim in CCTV footage or witness accounts of the incident, but given this very limited potential (only applying to offences occurring in a public or video-monitored space), it seemed unnecessary to some police participants to include these kinds of questions:

> … a lot of the questions in there are very bulky, very onerous … It's the sort of form that an investigator would fill out in the field if they were going to investigate a sexual assault … (NSW Police 8)

Another participant noted that questions about intoxication might be victim-blaming, but could also be important to any future prosecution:

> … and I do know that these questions do have to be asked because they will be asked at some stage about intoxication but it'll be great to … if it is an anonymous report I don't know that we necessarily need to ask. I don't think we need to accuse the victim, which I reckon we do a bit by asking those questions. Down the track if they are, if they come forward, yes we have to cover them, there's no question, that's the reality because they will get raised. (Vic Police 4)

Police participants generally agreed that the NSW Police Force's SARO form was too long and included too many questions. One participant, for instance, commented that the form needed to be easy to complete, which in their view meant fewer narrative-based questions and more check-boxes:

> I think it might be a little bit too long. … They might be stressing over, "This is never going to end" sort of thing, per se. Anyway, that's just the more tick-and-flick you can have I think the better. There's a lot of information here that people can write a narrative and I'm not sure, again it depends on the person, whether spending the time to do that may be too much for them … (Vic Police 5)

However, the lack of narrative detail was identified as a drawback by others and is contrary to interviewing practices, as noted by some police participants. One participant explained that the high number of very specific questions on the SARO form can undermine the likelihood of obtaining a detailed narrative. When the SARO is used by support workers on behalf of a client, there is a pattern whereby the person completing the form uses the checkboxes to list specific information about the incident but does not provide a detailed narrative version of what happened. Narrative versions of events are emphasised in many interviews as the preferred mode of information provision. Another participant said that the high number of questions reduced the narrative response:

> They just sort of, for want of a better term, gloss over the whole aspect of the sexual assault. We're focusing on the sexual assault what took place, they're focusing on the before and after of it. So, I think it would be important, if we took out a lot of the colourful questions about what the offender was wearing, how the offender got there, what clothes were you wearing at the time, a lot of those sort of things. Unless they're obviously entirely relevant to the scenario, but most of those questions could be taken away … (NSW Police 8)

The participant suggested that the form could have fewer questions and avoid the 'information overload', while concentrating on quality responses elicited through a careful explanation of the purpose of each question:

> If you take out half of the questions, and then you could, even when you're asking a question, you could put a little blurb in there as to why this question is so important. While you may not, in your context, you may not understand why the police are asking these questions, but the police can use that information to identify locations, possible offenders, possible vehicles, times of offences, days of the week when the offences occur, things that the offender might have said. Like, they might have the same MO. Things like that. Like, in your one incident, you might think that's not relevant. But in the bigger picture, it might be exactly the same MO, and then the person over here might have been able to say, "Yeah, the person was 6ft tall, blonde hair, broad shoulders, slim build". (NSW Police 8)

This approach is closely related to the 'engage and explain' phase of a PEACE interview, the model of interview training used in New South Wales. This is relevant to the findings relating to the sub-question about the types of information elicited using different reporting tools, in that it links the different kinds of interview format. Similarly, another participant noted the SARO asks leading questions, or forced choice questions. They noted that this is contrary to their interview training:

> There's a lot more leading [questions] from my recollection … which we wouldn't normally [use]. … in our questioning, [we] try and keep it as open ended as possible and I know that there are quite a few closed [questions] … in the SARO reporting … it's not something that we do as well … I think even by giving them a number of options it can sometimes, as far as what I've studied about memory and suggestibility, it probably in my view wouldn't be best practice. (NSW Police 1)

The potential for the form to be translated was also noted by an officer with experience of working in multilingual and culturally diverse areas of Melbourne:

> If something is coming in a different language, what do we need to do? How do we need to process this and get the information? And also get it translated to English and everything else because in the end, that's the way it's going to go. If it gets to court it's going to have to all be translated and everything else, and then you've got to look at supporting that person all the way through until it gets to the court stage with the translation and interpreters and that sort of thing when they get to court. (Vic Police 5)

Some police participants also speculated about possible new approaches. For instance:

> I would like to see that the SARO comes, that the questions that we ask are trauma informed or that when they're clearly designed for investigation or intelligence purposes that there is a caveat, or clear rationale that a victim or the community member or the counsellor can access. And there's a reason why we perhaps ask "what you were wearing at the time of the incident". But I would like to see that the questions are again, it all depends on the point of the SARO, but if it's seen as both a therapeutic tool and an intelligence tool, that the questions are evidence based. They're designed to elicit the information that we will then use to respond to meaningfully through being able to extract the data too. So it would be a digital platform that you can hit a couple of buttons and you've got nice data downloaded to a spreadsheet and then you can do your intelligence magic with that. (NSW Police 2)

Summary

In this section, we have explored responses to our second research question: what role have sexual assault reporting options played in identifying perpetrators, gathering evidence and prosecuting accused persons? We broke this question down into three sub-questions:

- Is the information provided in alternative reporting options used by the police and how does the format or structure of the form affect police use of that information?
- What are the differences in the quality and quantity of information elicited using different types of reporting tools?
- How does the format and structure of alternative reporting options influence the quality and quantity of information elicited from victim-survivors of sexual assault?

In summary, police use information contained in alternative sexual assault reporting options in a variety of ways, including intelligence gathering about offenders and about the nature of sexual offences. Police also use the information to run interference via safety checks on hotspots and identify repeat offenders. However, this information is not clearly communicated with support services or victim-survivors, who, as discussed in the previous section, were uncertain about what happens with the information provided in informal reports.

Police and support workers both highlighted the need for good data security and privacy. They raised concerns about whether defence lawyers, for example, could access information contained in informal reports, and whether victim-survivors' reports were genuinely anonymous and confidential given the potential for police to follow up with victim-survivors when this may not be what victim-survivors themselves want.

Survivors, support workers and police all identified concerns over the nature, format and structure of the forms, and the quality and quantity of information that may be provided. While victim-survivors indicated that using an informal reporting option may help them give police more detailed information about what happened because they are not in the intimidating environment of a police station, support workers and police highlighted that alternative reporting forms, such as the NSW Police Force's SARO form, do not conform to the best-practice 'whole story' approach due to the length of the form, the use of narrowly framed or leading questions and the potentially triggering nature of the questions.

Our findings demonstrate there is significant work still to do to design a trauma-informed alternative reporting tool that meets the needs of victim-survivors and police. In the next section, we discuss our recommendations for how this could be designed and operated.

Conclusion and recommendations

In response to the deficiencies of criminal justice responses to sexual assault, including negative encounters with the police which contribute to under-reporting, alternative and informal reporting options have become increasingly popular both nationally and internationally. Alternative reporting options provide an avenue for victim-survivors to tell their story and connect with other victim-survivors and therapeutic services. In some cases, alternative reports of sexual assault can be passed on anonymously to the police for intelligence and crime-mapping purposes.

Scholarship has documented the range and use of alternative reporting options internationally, from social media spaces (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020) and digital apps (Liu 2018) to institutional reporting mechanisms associated with the military, universities and the police (Carson & Carson 2018; Friedman 2007; Richards 2019; Rosenstein et al. 2018). There are also grassroots reporting tools such as Project Callisto for college students in the United States (Lilley & Moras 2017) and Ugly Mugs, a third-party reporting platform used by sex workers around the world (Bryce et al. 2015).

In Australia, law enforcement agencies also host informal reporting forms in three jurisdictions: New South Wales (the SARO), Queensland (the ARO) and the Australian Capital Territory (the Reporting Historic Sexual Assault form). Until 2020, Victoria had an anonymous reporting tool, SARA, which was developed by the sexual assault support service SECASA. Unlike informal reporting options associated with the police (such as SARO), SARA was developed primarily to connect victim-survivors with appropriate support services but with the additional function of providing victim-survivors with the opportunity to be heard by the police, who received their accounts as de-identified intelligence reports. This reporting tool was discontinued in 2020 due to insufficient resources to run it and concerns around data security. However, in April 2022 a motion was passed in the upper house of the state parliament which committed the Victorian Government to a consultation program on a new alternative reporting option or online reporting pathway for Victorians to report sexual assault informally.

While these various alternative reporting options have been in limited use since the commencement of the present research project, at the time of writing, our team observed increased discussions about improving or implementing alternative reporting options in Australia. Despite this growing attention, very little research has explored the efficacy of alternative reporting options for victim-survivors, law enforcement or victim support services. Some research suggests that informal reporting options may help to gather information about crimes (Heydon & Powell 2018; Hope et al. 2013) and support the police in intelligence gathering and crime mapping (Loney-Howes, Heydon & O'Neill 2022). Heffron et al. (2014) found that alternative reporting options had direct benefit to victim-survivors who were not physically or emotionally ready to report to the police. Other research supports the proposition that alternative reporting options may be helpful for communities who face barriers to reporting to the police, such as those who would ordinarily require an interpreter (Heydon & Lai 2013; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021) or for LGBTQ+ victim-survivors (Murphy-Oikonen & Egan 2021: 789).

This research has limitations, but we know that victim-survivors are increasingly seeking to report and receive support following an experience of sexual violence (see, for example, O'Neill 2018; Tuerkheimer 2019). This project offered an important opportunity to explore the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options in Australia from the perspectives of victim-survivors, support services and the police. In total, we conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including police (*n*=14) and victim support service workers (*n*=14), primarily from New South Wales or Victoria (we also interviewed one support service worker in Queensland). The aim of those interviews was to gain an understanding of how victim-survivors of sexual violence use (or have used) the alternative reporting options SARO (the NSW Police Force reporting tool) and SARA (the support-service hosted tool in Victoria). This also included how the information contained in the report is used by police, and what improvements could be made to boost their use and enhance outcomes for victim-survivors.

In addition, we undertook five focus groups with victim-survivors of sexual violence to understand their needs when reporting sexual assault via alternative mechanisms like SARA and SARO (total participants *n*=21). The research team also had access to 1,857 reports made to the NSW SARO and conducted content analysis to ascertain what information was disclosed through these alternative reporting mechanisms, what this can tell us about victim-survivors' justice and reporting needs, and how these data can fill knowledge gaps in national datasets such as the PSS and official crime statistics. (See *Research design and methodology* for a full explanation.)

In this final section, we analyse and synthesise the findings. We draw together the data from all sources as needed to address the three themes of the research. We discuss conflicts and consistencies across the different cohorts represented in the data, as well as comparisons with findings from studies on reporting more generally. Finally, we provide recommendations for future research and for the development of alternative reporting protocols.

Purpose: Alternative reporting options

Alternative reporting as a pathway to formal reporting or support

Support service workers described alternative reporting options as an 'in-between' option for victim-survivors of sexual assault—for those who might not be ready to report or interested in reporting to the police but still wanted to put something official in writing. Police participants regarded alternative reporting options as a 'baby step' or as a 'softer' and generally more accessible approach than attending a police station in person. These findings echo those of Heffron and colleagues (2014), who found that the 'nonreport option' available in the United States gave victim-survivors the ability to record what happened when they were not sure how they wanted to proceed. While the findings from Heffron et al. (2014) suggest that victim-survivors may use alternative reporting pathways when alcohol or other drugs were involved, if the victim-survivor had a disability, or knew the perpetrator, our research shows additional reasons why victim-survivors may use informal reporting pathways. These reasons include:

- to regain a sense of control over their narrative;
- to obtain an 'event number', which is generated when a report is made via SARO and means the report is searchable in the NSW police database;
- to protect the community from the offender; and
- to access therapeutic support.

The dual function of alternative reporting options as a police investigative tool and a therapeutic option has been discussed by others (see, for example, Loney-Howes, Heydon & O'Neill 2021; Lonsway, Archambault & Huhtanen 2021). However, the importance of alternative reporting pathways being an additional mechanism for obtaining the event number needed to access victim support or for future formal reporting was not considered as part of the initial analysis by Loney-Howes, Heydon and O'Neill (2021) and represents a new finding in Australian research.

Overall, while it was unclear from our data the extent to which victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report to the police after completing an informal report, we were able to draw conclusions about perspectives on, and expectations of, alternative reporting. For instance, our data suggest that some victim-survivors view alternative reporting as a potential pathway to formal reporting. Other victim-survivors saw alternative reporting as a pathway to making a formal report but only if other victim-survivors come forward against the same perpetrator. Yet many victim-survivors did not want any police involvement; instead, they wanted an alternative reporting system to be a true alternative to the criminal justice system rather than a pathway to making a formal report. This was primarily due to victim-survivors' negative views and experiences regarding how police handle sexual assault cases. Their views align with research that finds that victim-survivors are often not taken seriously and that they can have negative encounters with the police and court system, leaving them feeling further victimised and blamed (Campbell 2006; Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Rich 2014; Taylor & Gassner 2010).

Considering this, it is unsurprising that for some victim-survivors an alternative reporting option was desirable if they could maintain more control over how they tell their story and what happens with their story. These victim-survivors said this had the potential to restore some of the autonomy taken away by the experience of being sexual assaulted.

Support service workers had limited knowledge about whether victim-survivors who made informal reports went on to make formal ones, largely due to victim-survivors no longer being a client of their service. However, support workers from New South Wales in particular understood the importance of obtaining an event number. An event number is useful for victim-survivors in two specific ways: it allows them to access victim support services or the National Redress Scheme, and it means evidence and information from a victim-survivor who is unsure whether they will make a future formal report to police is preserved. Participants also mentioned that having an event number allowed victim-survivors to speak directly to a detective rather than a uniformed police officer at the station. Through this process, support workers felt that alternative reporting options helped to mediate the process of engaging with law enforcement and helped get a victim-survivor's 'foot in the door' to start a conversation about whether they would like to proceed to a formal report. Police reported that, while not a common occurrence, there was clear evidence in case files and from their own experience that alternative reports could progress to formal complaints. Police participants also mentioned the use of a SARA or SARO as an introductory or ice-breaker tool, or as evidence for domestic violence or child abuse investigations.

The design of alternative reporting forms

As a response to the growing desire expressed by some victim-survivors to speak out about their experiences and the issues associated with both formal and informal reporting of sexual assault, police interviewing techniques in a variety of national and international jurisdictions have embraced elements of alternative reporting options to better support victim-survivors when they come forward to report sexual offences. For instance, having a detailed account from a crime witness in their own words is increasingly recognised as best-practice police interviewing (Heydon & Powell 2018), particularly in the context of sexual assault reporting. Heydon and Powell (2018) argue that written-response reporting tools based on best-practice cognitive interview techniques have a strong potential to maximise the quality and quantity of information collected for police intelligence purposes.

In particular, the 'whole story approach' to interviewing (Tidmarsh, Powell & Darwinkle 2012), which has been adopted by Victoria Police and is based on best-practice models in the United Kingdom, is considered the most appropriate format for collecting witness testimony because it prioritises the interviewee's free narration or description of the incident in their own words (Heydon & Powell 2018). The whole story approach encompasses the use of in-person interviews, self-administered questionnaires and written testimonies, and seeks to avoid shoe-horning witness testimony into predetermined questions that might influence their responses in a negative way or retraumatise victim-survivors, which may cause them to withdraw their statements. Police participants in this research consistently recognised the importance of providing an opportunity for victim-survivors to tell their story in their own words. They identified the therapeutic and justice needs of the victim-survivor as paramount but also noted that the design of a form which prioritised the narrative evidence of the victim-survivor was consistent with their best-practice interviewing models.

However, many participants, including victim-survivors, noted that the long lists of items with check boxes used in the NSW Police Force's SARO form might be distressing or retraumatising. They also raised issues with questions about the appearance and behaviour of both the victim-survivor and the offender, saying that victim-survivors could perceive these questions as victim-blaming and that they were ultimately unnecessary, given the informal nature of the report. This is an important reflection, as research has demonstrated that victim-blaming reactions to disclosure can deter victim-survivors from pursuing formal reporting (Campbell 2006; Rich 2014). Some police participants suggested that victim-blaming may be mitigated by adding clear explanations of why questions are being asked and how the answers were relevant to a potential police investigation.

A minority of police participants identified the check-box lists as an easier way for victim-survivors to disclose intimate details about the offence than writing out the words themselves, but this contrasted with the strong tendency to prioritise a narrative format in the form's design. The police participant interviews also provided important guidance for the implementation of a reporting tool, such as the need to ensure that the format was adequately consistent with existing police databases such that data could be entered and searched efficiently.

Data security and privacy

Both support workers and police participants raised concerns about data security and privacy. Some support workers questioned whether alternative reporting tools could be truly confidential and anonymous given that online platforms leave digital footprints that lead back to victim-survivors who may not wish to be contacted by the police. Police participants noted not only that data security was important to maintaining the highest levels of integrity and privacy protection but that victim-survivors were likely to be especially concerned about the security of their data. This was noted in relation to providing online access to a form. In New South Wales, most participants felt that the form would be more secure—and better integrated into police systems—if it were managed by the police, as is the case for the SARO.

However, in Victoria, where the SARA was accessed outside of policing (provided by SECASA on their website), most participants felt that it was more appropriate for any informal reporting form to be located within a therapeutic environment and accessed via a police website. In other words, having had the experience of a form that was managed externally, police participants stated a strong preference for retaining that model for the benefit of victim-survivors. Police participants who had no experience of an external agency like SECASA managing reports tended to focus on policing priorities and expressed a preference for existing arrangements.

Use: The lived experiences of victim-survivors

A safer way to report and a chance to reclaim autonomy and control

Although only a small number of victim-survivors who participated in focus groups had used alternative reporting options, those who had indicated that they had done so because they were not sure whether the offence was serious enough to contact police and because they feared reprisal from the perpetrator. For example, Bonnie, who had used the NSW Police Force's SARO form, said that she never would have reported to the police as the perpetrator was someone she knew, and she did not know whether the offence was serious enough. This reflects research that demonstrates how rape myths are a barrier to reporting (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). Bonnie said she felt the SARO form was a safer way for her to report her experiences without having to face police questioning, where these rape myths may have been reinforced.

Police participants characterised alternative reporting as providing autonomy and control for victim-survivors in relation to their story, the reporting process and the amount of contact they chose to have with the police. While the police participants were concerned that victim-survivors did not feel comfortable contacting them directly, some expressed frustration that they were unable to adequately communicate to the broader community that anyone reporting sexual violence formally could still maintain control and choose how far to take the complaint. Police participants also demonstrated a clear understanding that victim-survivors had many valid and powerful reasons for avoiding contact with police—as highlighted by Bonnie above. In discussing why they thought victim-survivors might choose to report anonymously or informally, they expressed detailed and nuanced understandings of the shame and embarrassment that victim-survivors often feel when reporting formally to the police.

Echoing sentiments from support services, police participants were aware of the beliefs held by victim-survivors that an informal report might provide an opportunity for police action or preventative measures to protect the community from an offender. It is important to note that police participants were aware of the importance to victim-survivors of trying to protect the community, even if they could not engage in formal proceedings against the offender.

Need for clarity and the desire to accomplish more

Survivors in our study saw the potential for alternative reporting options, yet they expressed frustration with the way current alternative reporting options functioned. The three victim-survivors who had used or considered using the SARO were disappointed and frustrated that their reports were being collected but they did not know what happened to that information afterwards. They also felt that there was no scope for the perpetrator to face any type of accountability. This was a perspective shared by many of the support workers, who were also unsure what, if anything, happened to the reports once they were submitted to the police. These experiences reflect the shortcomings of alternative and informal reporting options identified by others, who have said that informal systems can only partially achieve justice and are unlikely to be able to meet all victim-survivors' needs (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020; Tuerkheimer 2019). Indeed, it was also a core tension and frustration for police participants that keeping victim-survivors anonymous meant it was difficult to pursue any type of offender accountability (Tuerkheimer 2019).

While alternative reporting in its current form had some benefits for victim-survivors in validating their experiences, connecting them with support services and allowing them to tell their story in their own words, victim-survivors wanted alternative reporting to accomplish more. Police participants also acknowledged that victim-survivors wanted to see action as a result of their report, yet victim-survivors often experienced a lack of action. This points to the limitations of what can be done with alternative reporting in its current form. Support service participants expressed that it was not clear on the SARO and SARA forms precisely what the information being collected was going to achieve—namely, what would happen to the offender once this information was shared with the police. In other words, victim-survivors' main experience in filling out an alternative reporting option is one of uncertainty regarding the level of offender accountability. As indicated by victim-survivors in our focus groups and the literature more broadly, victim-survivors want accountability as a justice outcome for people who perpetrate sexual violence (see Clark 2010; Daly 2014).

Support for completing the form

Although only a small number of victim-survivors in our focus groups had used alternative reporting options, many of our support service interviewees from New South Wales had assisted victim-survivors to complete the SARO form. They indicated that victim-survivors' experiences of completing the SARO were best described as 'overwhelming'. This was in reference to the amount of information victim-survivors are required to provide in the SARO report, as well as the need to navigate difficult terminology they might not be familiar or comfortable with, leading some victim-survivors to feel that their experiences were not reflected in the forms.

Support service workers expressed that the SARO form is too long and emotionally draining for victim-survivors to complete. They said it often takes two or more counselling sessions to complete. Given the challenges support service workers identified for victim-survivors completing alternative reporting forms, these participants suggested that most victim-survivors currently complete forms like SARO in a therapeutic context. Indeed, some victim-survivors in the focus groups echoed these sentiments, indicating that they would not be able to complete the forms themselves due to the retraumatising nature of some of the questions. Although completing a form like SARO may be challenging or triggering for a victim-survivor, support service workers commented that the form enabled victim-survivors to tell the 'whole story' (Tidmarsh, Powell & Darwinkle 2012), informing the support worker of exactly what happened.

The experience of completing a SARO may also provide victim-survivors with insight into what a police interview may entail should they wish to make a formal report. Although police participants described alternative reporting options as a gentler and less intrusive experience for victim-survivors, they expressed concern about the questions on the SARO form, as mentioned above, which they felt might be traumatising for a victim-survivor to answer without support at hand. This is a specific concern relating to the format and nature of the questions on the NSW Police Force's SARO form and was not expressed in relation to informal reporting generally.

Potential: Intelligence gathering, accountability and justice

Perhaps one of the more unexpected findings of this research was the wide variety of ways in which police participants described how they could use the data from SARA and SARO reports to advance ongoing investigations or disrupt offending behaviours. Whereas it might be expected that police would be sceptical about the usefulness of anonymous crime reports, in fact the police participants in this study described the many ways that the reports are currently used and suggested other ways the data could be used if more effectively managed.

A proactive approach to policing sexual offending included safety checks on reported hotspots and disruption operations targeting named, known offenders. In complex or historical cases, a written report could preserve evidence until such time as the victim-survivor was willing or able to make a formal complaint (if at all) and could provide valuable links between multiple offences committed by the same offender. A report could identify parties involved in cold cases and allow investigators to pursue new leads. In cases that involved several victims, DNA evidence collected in another investigation could be linked to a new case, or a report might include details of an offender's location at a specific time, which can be matched with CCTV footage, helping in other cases involving the same offender.

However, it is clear that information about what police do with the data contained in informal reports like SARO is not necessarily shared with external organisations, given the uncertainty expressed by support workers about what police did with the information they received from informal reports. Support service workers identified several areas that required clarification to minimise the misuse of the information provided in alternative or informal reports of sexual violence. In particular, support service workers wanted clarification on what police mean by 'intelligence', and what happens with this intelligence, to be able to endorse victim-survivor use of alternative reporting mechanisms as a viable pathway to meet their justice needs.

Many victim-survivors do not wish to have police involvement after making an informal report; thus there appears to be some tension between policing outcomes and victim-survivors' justice needs when reflecting on the outcomes of informal reports. Support service workers also raised concerns regarding whether the information contained in alternative reports could be accessed by defence lawyers and the impact that incorrect, incomplete or contradictory information could have on a victim-survivor's credibility in any future criminal trial. Therefore, strong legal safeguards are needed to protect the interests of victim-survivors who use alternative reporting options, coupled with clarity around how and by whom these reports can be accessed once they have been submitted.

Regarding the differences in the quality and quantity of information provided using different alternative reporting options, victim-survivors indicated they may be able to provide clearer information when completing a form in a comfortable environment in their own time, compared to a formal police interview, where they may feel uncomfortable or scared, particularly for victim-survivors who are afraid of the police. Survivors also thought the form gave them a greater opportunity to tell their story in their own words and saw a benefit in not having to complete the form in one go. They valued being able to come back and add additional details they remembered later. This is a crucial point, considering that many victim-survivors are reluctant to go to the police due to previous bad experiences with police, fears they will not be taken seriously, or the belief that the experience will be retraumatising (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017; Ceelen et al. 2019; Heenan & Murray 2006; Jordan 2008; Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Rich & Seffrin 2012).

Our findings indicate that the information provided by victim-survivors through an alternative reporting option is likely to be qualitatively different to that given in a formal police interview, being less influenced by police and legal priorities. Informal reporting options give victim-survivors the space to describe their experiences without feeling pressured to fit their story into a narrative fitting the confines of criminal justice discourse. Importantly, though, an informal mechanism has the potential to extend the range of communities from which intelligence about sexual offending can be gathered. Many victim-survivors indicated that they did not go to the police following their experience of sexual violence, but that they would have filled out an alternative reporting form had it been available. Indeed, we know that sexual violence is chronically under-reported to police.

If victim-survivors are more willing to report their experiences using alternative reporting, this may have implications for those communities who are least likely to report to the police, including LGBTQ+ communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, sex workers, those living in rural areas, people with disabilities, and people in prison (see, for example, Mitra-Kahn, Newbigin & Hardefeldt 2016; Mortimer, Powell & Sandy 2019; Taylor & Gassner 2010). Our research suggests that alternative reporting might be more effective in collecting reports from these groups, whose experiences are otherwise under-represented or unrepresented by current crime data. However, alternative reporting forms must be designed in ways that will be culturally safe and accessible for these groups. Indeed, others have suggested that anonymous reporting is a viable pathway for LGBTQ+ victim-survivors due to the challenges these communities face with formal reporting (Murphy-Oikonen & Egan 2021: 789). The same principle would support alternative reporting options as a pathway to justice and therapeutic outcomes for other marginalised groups of victim-survivors.

Limitations

While this project has generated detailed information on the purpose, use and potential of alternative sexual assault reporting options, there are several limitations to this research. The first limitation is the absence of any prior research that analyses informal reports of sexual assault. While a strength of this research is its novelty, it is nonetheless inevitable that in breaking new ground we will have prioritised some aspects of this phenomenon over others in our research design and presentation of the findings. In other words, there is a risk that our perspectives might shape future work on informal reporting of sexual assault such that other approaches or perspectives are less explored. As such, we would take this opportunity to encourage future research that explores a variety of aspects of informal reporting of sexual assault.

Secondly, we spoke to very few victim-survivors of sexual assault. The voices of our participants are valuable and critically important to the research, but they do not speak for all victim-survivors, and they do not represent the experiences of victim-survivors in diverse communities. In future research, it is vital to include perspectives on alternative reporting from First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people living with a range of disabilities, people living in a range of institutions, LGBTQ+ communities, victim-survivors who are men, and those in regional and remote communities. These groups are likely to have differing views on the purpose of alternative reporting mechanisms, including justice outcomes. For example, we know that First Nations people and LGBTQ+ people are less likely to engage with police, and therefore may be more likely to seek justice outside of policing responses. Different groups will also have specific needs in terms of functionality. For example, people with disabilities or living in institutions may not have access to an online form and may require assistance filling out an alternative reporting form. Any future research and development regarding alternative reporting options must consult with diverse range of survivors and stakeholder organisations who work with them to ensure the system is widely accessible, culturally appropriate and suitable for people with differing justice needs.

Another limitation of the research relates to location. We only focused on alternative reporting options used in New South Wales and Victoria and, to a lesser extent, Queensland. Although this covers the most populous parts of Australia, it is not representative of the entire nation and care must be taken in generalising the findings to all Australian jurisdictions.

A fourth limitation relates to the data analysis of NSW Police Force SARO reports, which was limited to a small selection of fields that did not contain identifying data. Because we did not have access to the full reports, we were limited in our analysis and what we could say about these reports overall.

Finally, like most research conducted after March 2020, we used videoconferencing for interviews and focus groups with most of our participants because the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face meetings largely unfeasible. The exception was the interviews with Victoria Police participants, which were conducted in person. All other interviews and the focus groups with victim-survivors were conducted online. There were no noticeable differences between the interviews conducted face-to-face and online but, nonetheless, the discrepancy is noted as a potential limitation to the comparative analysis of those data.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research, we propose recommendations to improve existing and future alternative reporting options. These fall into three broad areas: form design; data use, storage, security and consistency; and hosting and support.

Form design

The data collected about the current structure, format and design of the SARA and SARO alternative reporting options highlighted important changes needed to ensure victim-survivors are safe and comfortable using them, and that victim-survivors provide accurate information to police for intelligence gathering, crime mapping and running interference. For example, with the information provided in alternative reporting mechanisms, police could inquire about situations involving child abuse or domestic and family violence. We recommend three specific ways form design can be improved to ensure alternative reporting options comply with best practice:

- *Any future form should feature trauma-informed design*. Our research findings from interviews with support service workers highlighted that many victim-survivors have difficulty completing alternative reporting forms, particularly the NSW Police Force's SARO form, due to the nature of the questions on the form that did not reflect their experiences or were triggering to respond to. For police to gather accurate intelligence from alternative reporting options, the forms need to be underscored by a trauma-informed approach to care and support. A trauma-informed approach to care is a set of guidelines or principles for ensuring victim-survivors receive the best support to assist with their recovery from sexual violence (see Palmieri & Valentine 2021).

- *Accessibility and cultural safety for all users should be a priority in the design of the forms.* This includes ensuring alternative reporting forms meet the needs of diverse victim-survivors, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors, victim-survivors from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (ie having multilingual forms), LGTBQ+ victim-survivors, victim-survivors with disabilities, and victim-survivors on temporary visas. As noted, a limitation of our study was that we undertook focus group discussions with a small cohort of victim-survivors, and our support service participants were also drawn from a small section of the workforce. Additional consultation with diverse sexual violence support services and victim-survivors is needed to ensure future alternative reporting options are culturally safe and accessible to all victim-survivors.
- *Cognitive interviewing principles must underpin the individual questions on the form and the structure of the form.* Our research with police participants confirmed the earlier findings of Heydon and Powell (2018) that any form collecting information in relation to sexual offending must have a design that is consistent with best-practice investigative interviewing. This means that the questions asked are constructed to avoid contamination of evidence, suggestibility or influence over the structure of the narrative. The free narrative is prioritised in this model, with closed, specific questions used sparingly. Users should be given clear instructions to maximise the quantity and reliability of the information provided. This is important if the form is to be used to support a formal investigation. It is also critical to eliciting reliable information, irrespective of the legal process that might ensue. Investigative interviewing experts must be consulted to ensure consistency between the design of a form and the approach used in best-practice police interviews with victim-survivors.

Data use, storage, security and consistency

In our study, survivors and support service workers expressed concern about what happens to the data contained in alternative reports of sexual violence, how it is stored, and what privacy and data security safeguards are in place to ensure reports are confidential. There is also a need to ensure data feed into police and support service record keeping because cross-referencing information from multiple sources is a vital tool in the work of both police and support services in responding effectively to sexual violence offences. As such, we recommend three ways that data use and storage can be improved to boost confidence in the use of alternative reporting options:

- *Users should be given clear, plain language information about the process of data handling, sharing and storage, as well as police use of the data*. Clear information is needed on the forms so victim-survivors, other users and those who support the completion of alternative reporting options know what will happen to the information they provide. This should not be contained in the fine print of a document or at the bottom of a page, where it is difficult to find, but should be clearly stated at the start and end of the form so reporters are fully informed.

- *Any future alternative reporting tool must have stringent data security.* Data security is paramount to ensure the information contained within alternative reports is protected. In addition, legal protections are needed for reports to guard against misuse in trials or to prevent defamation lawsuits. Protections such as those afforded to whistleblowers could be expanded to protect victim-survivors, bystanders and third parties using alternative reporting options.
- *Consistent data should be collected across systems (police and support services) and across jurisdictions.* Data consistency needs to be addressed by technical specialists to ensure that the information collected can be used effectively by officers in both types of organisations to analyse offending patterns and evaluate service responses. While this means the data need to be formatted to ensure consistency across multiple systems, it is still paramount to protect the security and privacy of users.

Hosting and support

Our research findings indicate alternative reporting options should be hosted by a third-party agency rather than the police, to facilitate therapeutic support first and foremost.

- *Reporting portals should be hosted by a third-party agency, such as a sexual assault support service, whose role is to provide counselling and support and to mediate engagement with the justice system for victim-survivors who may wish to make a formal report*. The service would need to be adequately funded and would need to have appropriate expertise and data security to prevent unauthorised access to reports.
- *Alternative reporting options forms should be hosted via a website and printed copies made available in public spaces such as libraries, medical practices and hospitals*. Reports submitted on paper forms would need to be entered manually into a digital database for security purposes; however, the potential for a form to be used more widely makes this a cost worth bearing.
- *Consideration should be given to how alternative reporting options could be used to support and assist victim-survivors subjected to domestic and family violence*. This is important given the prevalence of sexual violence in the context of domestic and family violence. This support is primarily intended to assist victim-survivors of domestic and family violence who would prefer not to pursue a formal complaint in relation to co-occurring sexual violence but nonetheless wish to record their experiences in an informal report.

Conclusion and future research

At the time this research commenced, many thousands of Australians were publicly expressing outrage in response to specific incidents of sexual assault as well as what people perceived as a culture of tolerance for such crimes. An important feature of this public expression of anger was the emergence of informal, mostly online, reporting of people's own experiences of sexual violence to demonstrate the overwhelming prevalence of this often-hidden crime. This included the well-known #MeToo movement and the reports collected by Chanel Contos in relation to school children's sexual abuse experiences. Although our research into SARA began prior to this increased public engagement with reporting as a form of justice-seeking and activism, it has become increasingly clear that alternative reporting options for those who have experienced sexual violence play an important role in responding to these crimes.

Our research into the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting shows that there are specific challenges to overcome to support effective implementation. Our research has confirmed that having an alternative to making a formal complaint of sexual violence to police is supported by victim-survivors, as well as those working with victim-survivors in support services and police services. However, our research also identified a disjuncture between victim-survivors' experiences of reporting to police and the police perceptions of the same process. To a large extent, this simply reinforces our recommendation to provide an alternative reporting option via an agency external to the police. The repeated message from victim-survivors was that their reports to police were not taken seriously, that the police were overly concerned with the availability of evidence supporting the report (or lack thereof), and that police did not direct them to complete an informal report, even when that option was provided by the same police service, such as the SARO. Police participants in our research, on the other hand, expressed a clear understanding of the justice and therapeutic needs of victim-survivors and demonstrated a preference for prioritising those needs over the police investigative functions of reporting. From these findings, we conclude that police responses to victim-survivors reporting sexual violence are variable and most likely need to be addressed through training and cultural shift.

A further conclusion is that a form designed to prioritise the justice and therapeutic needs of victim-survivors can also reflect the best-practice cognitive interviewing principles which underpin Australian models of police investigative interviewing. This includes an emphasis on a free narrative account in the victim-survivor's own words, avoidance of too many specific questions and clear information about the use and purpose of the form. This is encouraging, since any reporting option intended to support the needs of victim-survivors should not inadvertently undermine the potential for a future police investigation or elicit unreliable information by using an inappropriate format.

Data management and cybersecurity are critically important to the success of any alternative reporting scheme, and our recommendation that such a scheme be situated in a therapeutic environment has implications for data security and data transmission to relevant agencies, especially police services. Despite the challenges that might arise from locating a reporting scheme outside a law enforcement agency, our research indicates that the capacity of a scheme to encourage reporting by victim-survivors, especially victim-survivors from marginalised communities, and to connect those victim-survivors to support services, will be substantially undermined if it is only available through a police service. An alternative reporting scheme must instead be adequately resourced to store data securely and to transmit data in an appropriately de-identified format to police. Police capacity to contact the reporter indirectly through the agency managing the scheme is also an important function not to be overlooked in the design of an alternative reporting pathway. Mediated contact with police is an important pathway to formal reporting.

Finally, our research found that while informal or alternative reporting fulfils an unmet need in Australia, there is presently no available option that conforms to the expectations of victim-survivors or professionals working with victim-survivors. This research provides new data analysis and findings in an area that is gaining momentum in public policy as well as the practices of victim-survivors, although it is largely unrepresented in the literature. As such, the research provides impetus for further studies, as well as support to policymakers in preventing sexual violence.

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Appendix A: Participant information sheets and consent forms

Participant information sheet for police participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon Principal Investigator
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Associate Professor Nicola Henry

What does my participation involve?

1 Introduction

You are invited to take part in this research project, which is called *Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia*. You have been invited because you have valuable expertise and experience in sexual assault reporting from a police perspective. Your contact details were obtained through the liaison person from your organisation who is working with us as a partner in the research project.

The partners in this project are: RMIT University, the University of Wollongong, Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), Rape and Domestic Violence Services New South Wales, and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC).

This Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form tells you about the research project. It explains the processes involved with taking part. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research.

Please read this information carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to.

If you decide you want to take part in the research project, you will be asked to sign the consent section. By signing it you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read
- Consent to take part in the research project

You will be given a copy of this Participant Information and Consent Form to keep.

2 What is the purpose of this research?

The project has two key aims: first, it seeks to *investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms*; and second, it seeks to *document the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping* and how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police.

The project will help to inform best-practice approaches for supporting survivors of sexual violence, as well as strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and support services. In particular, we hope to better understand the role, relevance and importance of alternative reporting options for police and support services. Improvements to anonymous reporting options have the potential to create positive experiences for survivors when/if they decide to report sexual offences, as well as strengthen police intelligence gathering, and foster greater potential to convert informal reports into formal ones.

Between the beginning of 2013 and the end of 2016, 483 reports were made to the Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA) alternative reporting option hosted by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) from across Australia. By April 2018, the number had more than doubled (personal communication with SECASA). It is therefore clear that within the past five years, there has been a growing use of informal and alternative reporting options for sexual assault survivors, with social movements like the #MeToo Movement clearly demonstrating the need for survivors of sexual assault to have access to viable and secure reporting options. Given their increasing use and purported benefits to end-users (survivors, support services and law enforcement), it is timely to investigate both the advantages and disadvantages of such options.

The study will be the first of its kind in Australia to explore the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options for sexual assault survivors. It addresses a significant gap in the research literature, where to date only one empirical study in the US has explored these options, albeit not specifically in relation to survivor or law enforcement experiences. The project directly contributes to the international sexual violence research literature through empirically examining these new reporting options. It also contributes to broader criminological research on police interviewing and supporting survivors through the stages associated with the reporting process.

This research has been funded by a Criminology Research Grant administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

3 What does participation in this research involve?

- Consent form will be signed prior to involvement in the research
- Participants will be required to:
  - take part in an interview
  - there will be one interview at a convenient location that is appropriate for recording (if applicable)
  - the interview will last from 30 to 60 minutes
- We will request consent from participants to audio-record the interview.
- Participants may choose the location for the interview, such as a private meeting room in their workplace.

There are no costs associated with participating in this research project, nor will you be paid for the interview. However, you may be reimbursed for any reasonable travel or parking expenses associated with the research project visit.

4 Other relevant information about the research project

We anticipate that 30 people will be taking part in interviews for this part of the project. There will be different participant groups including police participants and support agencies worker participants. The project involves two universities (RMIT University and the University of Wollongong) and five partner organisations (Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), Rape and Domestic Violence Services New South Wales, and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC).

Other parts of the project will involve focus groups with sexual assault survivors and the analysis of anonymous reports made by complainants.

5 Do I have to take part in this research project?

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage.

If you do decide to take part, you will be given this Participant Information and Consent Form to sign and you will be given a copy to keep.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with the researchers or with RMIT University.

You may stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

6 What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We cannot guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this research; however, you may extend your own knowledge of the use of anonymous reports by your work unit and you may appreciate contributing to wider knowledge. Possible benefits may include strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and crisis services, and helping to improve the reporting process and better assist survivors with their reporting options. There will be no clear benefit to you from your participation in this research.

7 What are the risks and disadvantages of taking part?

Psychological distress

It is possible that you might respond to our questions with information that is stressful or upsetting. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go to the next question, or you may stop the interview immediately. If you become upset or distressed as a result of your participation in the research project, members of the research team will be able to discuss appropriate support for you.

Professional practice

You might feel that in responding to our questions, you are being evaluated on your own practice. However, the information we obtain from this research will be aggregated and our purpose in the interview is to understand your perspective on the use of anonymous reporting of sexual assault by your work unit, and not to assess or evaluate those practices. You will also have the opportunity to select whether you will be identified by name, by organisation, by role, or by none of the these.

8 What if I withdraw from this research project?

If you do consent to participate, you may withdraw up to four weeks after the interview has taken place. After that time, it will not be possible to remove your data from the findings generated through the study. If you decide to withdraw from the project before that time, please notify a member of the research team.

You have the right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, providing it can be reliably identified.

9 What happens when the research project ends?

The project report will be made available to you as a participant, if you request it.

How is the research project being conducted?

10 What will happen to information about me?

- The data collected will be coded and information will be referred only by the type of organisation (police or support agency), or as directed by you in the consent form
- Electronic records from the data collection will be securely stored on RMIT password protected computers to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.
- Participants are being asked to provide consent for the use of their data for this project only.

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using information from you for the research project. Any information obtained in connection with this research project that can identify you will remain confidential. Identifying material in the interview transcripts will be removed and/or replaced with codes. Only the named researchers will have access to the coding sheet which will be stored on RMIT password protected computers, to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in

such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your express permission. Identifying material in the interview transcripts will be removed and/or replaced with codes. Information will be referred only by the type of organisation (police or support agency), or as directed by you in the consent form.

In accordance with relevant Australian and/or Victorian privacy and other relevant laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member named at the end of this document if you would like to access your information.

Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is protect you or others from harm, (2) if specifically allowed by law, (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. Any information obtained for the purpose of this research project that can identify you will be treated as confidential and securely stored.

11 Who is organising and funding the research?

This research project is being led by Associate Professor Georgina Heydon.

This research has been funded by a Criminology Research Grant administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

12 Who has reviewed the research project?

All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This research project has been approved by the RMIT University HREC.

This project will be carried out according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

13 Further information and who to contact

If you want any further information concerning this project, you can contact one of the researchers listed below:

Associate Professor Georgina Heydon +613 9925 3640

Dr Rachel Loney-Howes +612 4298 1334

Associate Professor Nicola Henry +613 9925 2467

Research contact person

Name	A/Prof Georgina Heydon
Position	Chief investigator / Senior supervisor
Telephone	+613 9925 3640
Email	georgina.heydon@rmit.edu.au

14 Complaints

Should you have any concerns or questions about this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers listed in this document, then you may contact:

Reviewing HREC name	RMIT University
HREC Secretary	Vivienne Moyle
Telephone	03 9925 5037
Email	Vivienne.moyle@rmit.edu.au
Mailing address	Manager, Research Governance and Ethics RMIT University GPO Box 2476 MELBOURNE VIC 3001

Consent form for police participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon Principal Investigator
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Associate Professor Nicola Henry

Acknowledgement by participant

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research described in the project.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I consent to being referred to in reports and publications by:

(complete one or more as preferred)

Name _____

Role _____

Organisation _____

None of the above _____

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time up to four weeks after the interview and that withdrawing will not affect my relationship with RMIT.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

Name of Participant _____

(please print)

Signature _____ Date _____

*Declaration by researcher**

I have given a verbal explanation of the research project, its procedures and risks and I believe that the participant has understood that explanation.

Name of Researcher

Signature Date

*An appropriately qualified member of the research team must provide the explanation of, and information concerning, the research project.

Note: All parties signing the consent section must date their own signature.

Participant information sheet for support worker participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon (Principal Investigator)
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Professor Nicola Henry
Principal Research Student(s)	(none)

What does my participation involve?

1 Introduction

You are invited to take part in this research project, which is called *Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia*. You have been invited because you have valuable expertise and experience in sexual assault reporting from a support agency perspective. Your contact details were obtained through the liaison person from your organisation who is working with us as a partner in the research project.

The partners in this project are RMIT University, the University of Wollongong, Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, Queensland Police, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), St George Sexual Assault Support Services with DFVSAS Illawarra and Shoalhaven, and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC).

This Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form tells you about the research project. It explains the processes involved with taking part. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research.

Please read this information carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to.

If you decide you want to take part in the research project, you will be asked to sign the consent section. By signing it you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read
- Consent to take part in the research project

You will be given a copy of this Participant Information and Consent Form to keep.

2 What is the purpose of this research?

The project has two key aims: first, it seeks to *investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms*; and second, it seeks to *document the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping* and how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police.

The project will help to inform best-practice approaches for supporting survivors of sexual violence, as well as strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and support services. In particular, we hope to better understand the role, relevance and importance of alternative reporting options for police and support services. Improvements to anonymous reporting options have the potential to: create positive experiences for survivors when/if they decide to report sexual offences; strengthen police intelligence gathering; and foster greater potential to convert informal reports into formal ones.

Between the beginning of 2013 and the end of 2016, 483 reports were made to the Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA) alternative reporting option hosted by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) from across Australia. By April 2018, the number had more than doubled (personal communication with SECASA). It is therefore clear that within the past five years, there has been a growing use of informal and alternative reporting options for sexual assault survivors, with social movements like the #MeToo Movement clearly demonstrating the need for survivors of sexual assault to have access to viable and secure reporting options. Given their increasing use and purported benefits to end-users (survivors, support services and law enforcement), it is timely to investigate both the advantages and disadvantages of such options.

The study will be the first of its kind in Australia to explore the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options for sexual assault survivors. It addresses a significant gap in the research literature, where to date only one empirical study in the US has explored these options, albeit not specifically in relation to survivor or law enforcement experiences. The project directly contributes to the international sexual violence research literature through empirically examining these new reporting options. It also contributes to broader criminological research on police interviewing and survivor reporting.

This research has been funded by a Criminology Research Grant administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

3 What does participation in this research involve?

- Consent form will be signed prior to involvement in the research
- Participants will be required to:
  - take part in an interview
  - there will be one interview at a convenient location that is appropriate for recording (if applicable)
  - the interview will last from 30 to 60 minutes
- We will request your consent to audio-record the interview
- Participants may choose the location for the interview, such as a private meeting room in their workplace.

There are no costs associated with participating in this research project, nor will you be paid for the interview. However, you may be reimbursed for any reasonable travel and parking expenses associated with the research project visit if the interview takes place face-to-face.

4 Other relevant information about the research project

We anticipate that 30 people will be taking part in interviews for this part of the project. There will be different participant groups including police participants and support agencies worker participants. The project involves two universities (RMIT University and the University of Wollongong) and six partner organisations (Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, Queensland Police, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), St George Sexual Assault Support Services with DFVSAS Illawarra and Shoalhaven, and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC).

Other parts of the project will involve focus groups with sexual assault survivors and the analysis of anonymous reports made by complainants.

5 Do I have to take part in this research project?

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage.

If you do decide to take part, you will be given this Participant Information and Consent Form to sign and you will be given a copy to keep.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with the researchers or with RMIT University.

You may stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

6 What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We cannot guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this research; however, you may extend your own knowledge of the use of anonymous reports by your work unit and you may appreciate contributing to wider knowledge. Possible benefits may include strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and crisis services, and helping to improve the reporting process and better assist survivors with their reporting options. There will be no clear benefit to you from your participation in this research.

7 What are the risks and disadvantages of taking part?

Psychological distress

It is possible that you might respond to our questions with information that is stressful or upsetting. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go to the next question, or you may stop the interview immediately. If you become upset or distressed as a result of your participation in this research project, members of the research team will be able to discuss appropriate support for you.

Professional practice

You might feel that in responding to our questions, you are being evaluated on your own practice. However, the information we obtain from this research will be aggregated and our purpose in the interview is to understand your perspective on the use of anonymous reporting of sexual assault by your work unit, and not to assess or evaluate those practices. You will also have the opportunity to select whether you will be identified by name, by organisation, by role, or by none of the these.

8 What if I withdraw from this research project?

If you do consent to participate, you may withdraw up to four weeks after the interview has taken place. After that time, it will not be possible to remove your data from the findings generated through the study. If you decide to withdraw from the project before that time, please notify a member of the research team.

You have the right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, providing it can be reliably identified.

9 What happens when the research project ends?

The project report will be made available to you as a participant, if you request it.

How is the research project being conducted?

10 What will happen to information about me?

- The data collected will be coded and information will be referred only by the type of organisation (police or support agency), or as directed by you in the consent form
- Electronic records from the data collection will be securely stored on RMIT password protected computers to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.
- Participants are being asked to provide consent for the use of their data for this project only.

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using information from you for the research project. Any information obtained in connection with this research project that can identify you will remain confidential. Identifying material in the interview transcripts will be removed and/or replaced with codes. Only the named researchers will have access to the coding sheet which will be stored on RMIT password protected computers, to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your express permission. Identifying material in the interview transcripts will be removed and/or replaced with codes. Information will be referred only by the type of organisation (police or support agency), or as directed by you in the consent form

In accordance with relevant Australian and/or Victorian privacy and other relevant laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member named at the end of this document if you would like to access your information.

Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is protect you or others from harm, (2) if specifically allowed by law, (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. Any information obtained for the purpose of this research project that can identify you will be treated as confidential and securely stored.

11 Who is organising and funding the research?

This research project is being led by Associate Professor Georgina Heydon.

This research has been funded by a Criminology Research Grant administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

12 Who has reviewed the research project?

All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This research project has been approved by the RMIT University HREC.

This project will be carried out according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

13 Further information and who to contact

If you want any further information concerning this project, you can contact:

Dr Rachel Loney-Howes +612 4298 1334

Professor Nicola Henry +613 9925 2467

If you would like to contact the Lead Chief Investigator of this project, please see her details below:

Name	A/Prof Georgina Heydon
Position	Chief investigator / Senior supervisor
Telephone	+613 9925 3640
Email	georgina.heydon@rmit.edu.au

14 Complaints

Should you have any concerns or questions about this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers listed in this document, then you may contact:

Reviewing HREC name	RMIT University
HREC Secretary	Vivienne Moyle
Telephone	03 9925 5037
Email	human.ethics@rmit.edu.au
Mailing address	Manager, Research Governance and Ethics RMIT University GPO Box 2476 MELBOURNE VIC 3001

Consent form for support worker participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Professor Nicola Henry

Acknowledgement by participant

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research described in the project.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I consent to being referred to in reports and publications by:

(complete one or more as preferred)

Name _____

Role _____

Organisation _____

None of the above _____

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the project without affecting my relationship with RMIT.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

Name of Participant _____

(please print)

Signature _____ Date _____

*Declaration by researcher**

I have given a verbal explanation of the research project, its procedures and risks and I believe that the participant has understood that explanation.

Name of Researcher _____

Signature _____ Date _____

* An appropriately qualified member of the research team must provide the explanation of, and information concerning, the research project.

Note: All parties signing the consent section must date their own signature.

Participant information sheet for focus group participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon (Principal Investigator)
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Professor Nicola Henry
Principal Research Student(s)	(none)

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research project. It explains the processes involved with taking part. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research.

Please take the time to read this information carefully. You may ask questions about anything that you do not understand or want to know more about.

Your participation is voluntary, so if you do not wish to take part, you don't have to. If you begin participating, you can also stop at any time.

What is this research about?

Research has long identified the persistent underreporting of sexual assault to police and the criminal justice system, with reliable estimates suggesting only 15% of sexual assaults are ever reported. Recent public attention to the issue has highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with current responses, with police and governments under pressure to provide alternative reporting options for victim-survivors.

Alternative and informal reporting mechanisms have been used in NSW, QLD and VIC in Australia as a way for people to anonymously report sexual assault and be connected with therapeutic support services. However, no study to date has analysed the potentials of these systems for victim-survivor and/or criminal justice outcomes. There are also key differences in how these systems are administered across jurisdictions, with no evidence as to what a best-practice model may look like.

This project seeks to address this gap in knowledge and offer new ways to enhance these alternative reporting mechanisms. Therefore, this project has two key aims. First, it seeks to investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms. Second, it seeks to document the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping and understand how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police.

The project will help to inform best-practice approaches for supporting survivors of sexual violence, as well as strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and support services. In particular, we hope to better understand the role, relevance and importance of alternative reporting options for police and support services. The study will be the first of its kind in Australia to explore the purpose, use and potential of alternative reporting options for sexual assault survivors.

Who is funding this project?

This research has been funded by a Criminology Research Grant administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology (CRG 25/19–20).

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part, you will participate in an online focus group over Microsoft Teams with 2–5 other people who have also experienced sexual assault. The focus groups will take around 2 hours and will be audio recorded and transcribed for the researchers to analyse later. However, all personal identifiers about you (i.e., name, age, location) will be removed. You will be reimbursed for your time with a $100 voucher.

The focus groups will cover the following topics and activities:

- Looking at a hypothetical scenario involving sexual assault and discussing what the person involved options are in regard to reporting, what challenges they may face and what other factors may impact their decision to report. We are using a scenario because we understand you may not always want to think or talk about your own experiences of sexual assault to begin with. However, we would like to know about your personal experiences of reporting or not reporting, and how you came to make your decisions.
- Discussion around why you might choose to use an alternative reporting option, and what you think the benefits, outcomes and limitations of this option might be.
- Brainstorming what information you would like to express in an alternative report.
- Looking at some alternative reporting tools that exist and providing feedback.

Other relevant information about the research project

The project involves two universities (RMIT University and the University of Wollongong) and five partner organisations (Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), St George Sexual Assault Services, and the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC)).

Other parts of the project will involve interviews with police and sexual assault service workers. We have also analysed previous anonymous reports submitted to the SARA and SARO alternative reporting systems. In total we will be conducting six focus groups with people who have experiences sexual assault (two in NSW, QLD and VIC).

What are the possible benefits?

This project will help to inform the role, relevance, and importance of alternative reporting options for those who have experienced sexual assault. We also hope that it can strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and support services through understanding what victim-survivors need before, during and after submitting an alternative report. Improvements to alternative reporting options have the potential to create positive experiences for victim-survivors when/if they decide to report sexual offences, as well as strengthen police intelligence gathering, and foster greater potential to convert informal reports into formal ones. We expect that this project will have practical outcomes and be of direct benefit to end-users of alternative reporting systems.

What are the possible risks?

It is possible that you may find some of the topics brought up in the focus group to be sensitive or difficult to discuss. The focus group questions will not be directly asking you to talk about your experiences of sexual assault, however we acknowledge that this may come up during the focus group. We also understand that you may have had frustrating, upsetting or distressing experiences with reporting or accessing support for your experiences of sexual assault. Every effort will be taken to make sure that all participants are as comfortable as possible, and participants will be asked to be respectful to each other's stories and points of view during the process. If you find that you are uncomfortable at any point during the focus group, you are free to turn off your camera and/or mic and take a break, or leave the focus group. A researcher will also be available to debrief with you via break-out room and provide you referrals to support services. We will also ask you to provide your best contact (either email or mobile) in the event that you drop out of the online focus group, so that we can check in with you.

Please note that once the focus group has commenced the conversations you have in the focus group cannot be removed from the data. One of the researchers will send you a follow up email the day after, as well as a week after the focus group to thank you for participating, and reminding you of the available supports should you be experiencing any distress as a result of participating.

Any personal identifiers you give (i.e., name, age, locations) will be removed from the focus group transcripts. You may also choose to use a pseudonym during the focus group if you do not wish to use your real name. Whilst we ask all focus group participants to keep the contents of the group confidential, we cannot guarantee full anonymity due to the focus group context. It is advised that you do not participate if you wish for full anonymity.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is voluntary. You are also welcome to inform the researchers at any point if you feel uncomfortable and would like to take a break, or if there are any questions or topics that you would prefer not to answer. You may leave the focus group at any time, but once the focus group has commenced your part in the conversation is unable to be removed from the research.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then leave, will not affect your relationship with the researchers or with RMIT University.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

The project report and any publications arising from the research will be made available to you as a participant, upon request. You have the option to leave your email address to receive these on the consent form.

What will happen to information about me?

The data collected will be coded and any personal identifiers you give will be anonymised.

Electronic records from the data collection will be securely stored on RMIT password protected computers to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.

Participants are being asked to provide consent for the use of their data for this project only.

By signing the Consent Form, you consent to the research team collecting and using information from you for the research project. Any information obtained in connection with this research project that can identify you will remain confidential. Whilst focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed, you will not be able to review or edit your focus group responses due to the collaborative nature of the focus groups - it would be unethical to allow participants to edit and review other participants responses. Identifying material in the interview transcripts will be removed and/or replaced with codes. Only the named researchers will have access to the coding sheet which will be stored on RMIT password protected computers, to which only the named researchers have access, for 5 years before being destroyed.

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

In accordance with relevant Australian and/or Victorian privacy and other relevant laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform one of the research team members if you would like to access your information.

Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is to protect you or others from harm, (2) if specifically allowed by law, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. For instance, a court could subpoena the deidentified transcription of the discussion. However, we will not be asking you for details of your sexual assault and/or any details of any unadjudicated proceedings, rather the focus of the discussion will be on your experiences of reporting or not reporting a sexual assault and your views on the best ways for people to report sexual assault. Any information obtained for the purpose of this research project that can identify you will be treated as confidential and securely stored.

Who has reviewed the research project?

All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This research project has been approved by the RMIT University and University of Wollongong HREC.

This project will be carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

Where can I get further information?

If you would like more information about the project, please visit: www.alternativereportingproject.com. Alternatively, you can contact one of the researchers:

- Associate Professor Georgina Heydon: +613 9925 3640
- Dr Rachel Loney-Howes: +612 4298 1334
- Professor Nicola Henry: +613 9925 2467

Complaints

Should you have any concerns or questions about this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers listed in this document, then you may contact:

Reviewing HREC name	RMIT University
HREC Secretary	Vivienne Moyle
Telephone	03 9925 5037
Email	human.ethics@rmit.edu.au
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Support services

Call 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) or online. This is a 24 hour crisis line.

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: Tel: 1800 806 292 - this is an after-hours line that operates between 5pm – 9am weeknights, and throughout weekends and public holidays.

QLife (LGBTI support service): 1800 184 527 or online (available daily 3pm-midnight)

Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24-hour service, 7 days a week)

Consent form for focus group participants

Title	Anonymous and Confidential Reporting Options for Sexual Assault: An Exploration of their Purpose, Use and Potential in Australia
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Associate Professor Georgina Heydon
Associate Investigator(s)/ Associate Supervisor(s)	Dr Rachel Loney-Howes, Professor Nicola Henry

Acknowledgement by participant

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research described in the project.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to stop participating at any time during the project without affecting my relationship with RMIT University.

I understand that once the focus group has commenced that my data cannot be withdrawn.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

We are collecting some basic demographic questions so we can better understand who is participating in our focus groups. Please provide as many answers as you feel comfortable, and note that all information about you will be anonymised after the focus group.

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Sexual Identity: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Postcode of your location: _____

If you would like to receive research reports and publications for this project, leave contact email here: _____

OPTIONAL: You may choose to use a pseudonym during the focus group discussion. If you want to do this, please indicate your chosen pseudonym here (first name only)

_____

(please note: you may need to change your name on the settings in the Zoom room or use an anonymous account if you wish to use a pseudonym)

In case you drop out or leave the online focus group, can you please provide your best contact method (phone or email) so that we can check in with you:

_____

Name of Participant _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Declaration by researcher

I have given a verbal explanation of the research project, its procedures and risks and I believe that the participant has understood that explanation.

Name of Researcher _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B: Interview schedules

Police interviews

1. Can you tell me about **your role** in relation to receiving or processing reports of sexual assault?
2. 2. Can you describe **different ways** that people report sexual assault to police?
    - Prompt: what different reporting options are available to survivors, witnesses or bystanders if they contact police (both informal or formal)?
3. In your view, what does **confidential and anonymous informal reporting** of sexual assault entail?
4. Tell me about how **your organisation processes** anonymous or confidential reports of sexual assault, such as SARO reports.
    - Prompt: can you describe the processes involved when/if you (or your organisation) receive/s an anonymous or informal sexual assault report?
    - Prompt: who is making these confidential and anonymous reports (support services, victim-survivors, bystanders etc)?
5. Have you had any subsequent contact with victim-survivors who have made an anonymous and confidential informal report of sexual assault?
    - Prompt: did they find the process helpful? What was the outcome of their reporting? Did it lead to a more formal report down the line? Were there referral pathways offered?
6. From your perspective, what's the **purpose or potential** for anonymous and confidential informal reporting options for survivors?
7. How do anonymous reports contribute to a police response to sexual assault offending, from your perspective?
8. Can you describe how such reporting might be used differently by your unit or the police service as a whole?

9. What kinds of limitations are there in terms of responding to such reports?
10. Can you describe what you see as a good practice model for anonymous or confidential sexual assault reporting – from a policing perspective?
    - Prompt: what role might support services play in developing and maintaining confidential and anonymous informal reporting options?
11. Thinking more specifically about the data that are contained in sexual assault reports, what is the most useful kind of information that police could obtain from a confidential and anonymous informal report?
12. Can you comment on the format of the data that you receive in relation to anonymous reports of sexual assault?
    - Prompt: for example, do you get them in written form? Is a paper version better than an online option?

[Examples of different report forms from Australia and around the world will be provided to participants here.]

13. Reflecting on the design of the reporting forms I've just shown you, are there data fields or reports that would be useful to police that could be provided from the larger data set of reports (e.g. SARA currently has a data set of around 3000 reports)?
14. Can you comment on the difference between information that is elicited in a sexual assault reporting form compared to information that is elicited in a police interview?
15. Do you have any further comments about the reporting of sexual assault, from a policing perspective?

Support service worker interviews

1. So, you told me before that you are [summarise their role] … Can you tell me about **your responsibilities** in relation to supporting survivors of sexual assault?
2. Can you describe the **different ways** that you or your organisation support people to report sexual assault to police?
    - Prompts: what different reporting options are available to survivors, witnesses or bystanders if they wish to contact police?
    - In your view, what are some of the benefits of these different reporting options?
    - What are some of the limitations of reporting to police in your view and based on the experiences of survivors that you or your organisation have worked with?
3. What do you know about **informal options** for reporting sexual assault?
4. What options are you aware of for the **confidential and anonymous reporting** of sexual assault across Australia?
    - Prompts: SARA, SARO, ARO, university reporting options; international options?

5. From your perspective, what is the **purpose** of informal reporting options for survivors, police, support services and others?
6. To what extent does **your organisation promote or use** informal reporting options for survivors of sexual assault?
    - Prompts: can you describe a time when you (or someone in your organisation) supported a survivor to make an informal sexual assault report?
    - OR under what circumstances would you suggest a survivor or someone else make an informal sexual assault report?
    - If you don't use or support informal reporting options, can you explain why?
7. Have you had any **subsequent, follow-up contact with victim-survivors** whom you have helped to make (or who have independently made) an informal report of sexual assault?
    - Prompts: Did they find the process helpful?
    - Was there support involved/provided from your organisation (or another?) through this process?
    - What was the outcome of their reporting? Did it lead to a more formal report down the line?
    - Did you assist (or did your organisation assist) the survivor to make the formal report?
8. Do you think that informal reports **could contribute usefully to a police response** to sexual assault offending?
    - Prompt: what are the limitations for police in responding to informal reports of sexual assault?
9. Do you think informal reporting helps survivors?
    - Prompts: how might they help survivors who do not want to make a formal complaint?
    - Do you think they provide an opportunity to record the survivors' story?
    - Do you think they could assist survivors in receiving support?
    - Are there potential benefits for survivors who decide to make a formal report after already doing an informal report?
    - What challenges might arise for survivors making a formal report after they have reported informally?
    - What role might support services play in assisting survivors with this process?

[Examples of different report forms from Australia and around the world will be provided to participants here.]

10. We are now going to go through the three examples together of some informal reporting tools. If you can just let me know your thoughts and reflections on the things you like or dislike as we go through, that would be great. I'll ask more follow-up questions at the end as well. [*if participant doesn't have those to hand, just copy the link to the documents in the chat for them to open; if they still can't open them, then share via your screen*]

11. In your view, what kind of features or characteristics would make a **good practice model** for an informal reporting tool?
    - Prompts: how do you think the form could be designed? Which is better: a paper form or an online form?
    - What sort of information should they seek to capture? (e.g. contact details)
    - What role might support services play in developing and maintaining/hosting/ managing informal reporting options?
    - Do you think a support service would be an appropriate hub for maintaining/hosting or managing an informal reporting option? (as opposed to police, govt. etc.). Would this be feasible for your organisation in terms of resourcing, capacity and staffing?
    - What challenges do support services face in managing and safeguarding informal reports of sexual assault – if a support service was to house such reports?
    - Are there safety and privacy concerns that need to be taken into consideration, especially for digital reporting platforms?
12. 12. Do you have any further comments or questions about informal reporting sexual assault options?

Victim-survivor focus groups

Ok, great, let's get started then. We have just under two hours. We are going to start the discussion with a hypothetical sexual assault scenario and then get you to brainstorm together the different reporting options and what challenges might arise referring to information on the slides we provide for this discussion.

Hypothetical scenario

We are going to start with a simple hypothetical scenario. The purpose of this is to get the group warmed up and to provide group members an opportunity to discuss experiences of reporting or not reporting a sexual assault.

The scenario is deliberately left vague and not very specific. We are using a scenario because you may not always want to think or talk about your own experience to begin with. It also allows you to imagine different circumstances surrounding this scenario – such as the victim-survivor's gender, sexuality, age and relationship to the perpetrator.

We have put the scenario on the screen.

> *Sam has used an online dating site for a number of years, eager to hook up casually or maybe start a more serious relationship. Sam and Alex are matched together and chat online before organising to meet up in person. They meet at a bar and then go to the hotel where Alex has been staying. Sam does not want to have sex with Alex, but Alex pays no attention and sexually assaults Sam.*

Questions – reminder not to talk about your personal experience of sexual assault here

1. What are Sam's options for reporting the sexual assault? Prompts:
    - Who might she/they/he report to? [e.g., police; dating app/site; eSafety Commissioner; workplace; sexual assault service; ACORN etc].
    - Are the reporting options the same for witnesses or bystanders?
    - What are the challenges that Sam might face in reporting the sexual assault?
    - Thinking about your own experience, did you consider using any of these options yourself? Were there other reporting options that we haven't mentioned that were relevant for you?
    - What challenges did you face?
    - Has age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, disability, socio-economic status, circumstances, alcohol/drug consumption, involvement of intimate images, the relationship to the perpetrator or any other factor played a role in shaping your decision to report or not report, or who you report to?
    - Were you aware of alternative reporting options? Did you report through this more informal way? And if you had known about an alternative reporting option, do you think you would have used it?
2. Ok, so let's say your group has been tasked with coming up with a different, more informal reporting option for victim-survivors of sexual assault, what would it look like and how would it work? During this exercise, we want you to reflect on your personal experiences of reporting or nor reporting. We would like to understand how an informal reporting option could have assisted you after you experienced sexual assault, or what some challenges with this option may have been. Prompts:
    - What purpose should it serve?
    - What range of offences might be reported?
    - Would it involve police and/or support services?
    - Would it be online or in paper form?
    - What might be the benefits of your proposed alternative reporting option?
    - What might be some challenges?
    - What might be the consequences of such an option – for instance, do you think it should lead to a more reporting option?

3. Moving on now, we would like to discuss the two different models of alternative reporting options you were sent prior to the focus group. Again, it would be great if you could reflect on your own personal experiences and how you would want to be able to report [participants will be shown some different alternative reporting tools on the powerpoint slide to discuss – trigger warning for p4 of SARO]. Prompts after seeing both forms:
    - What kind of information do you think should be collected about victim-survivors?
    - Do they get the language right?
    - What do think is better – a paper form or an online form?

CRG reports

CRG 25/19–20

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