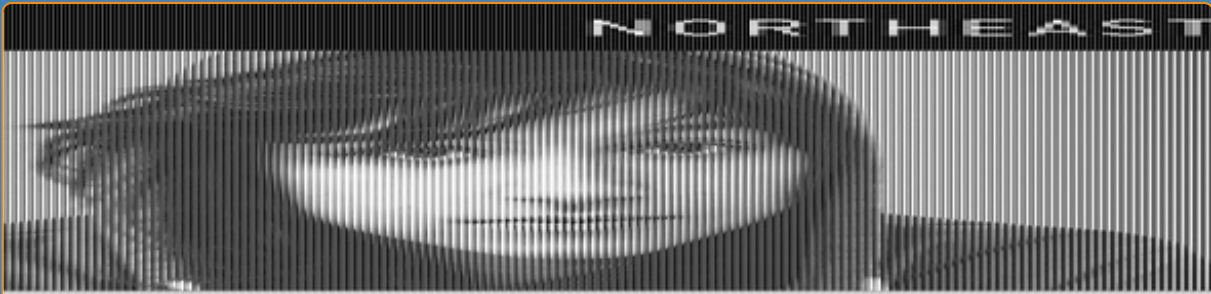


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Dear Colleague:

For this month, the NEARI Press newsletter article explored the impact that rape myth beliefs have on the ability of campus police to perform their work. In fact this study showed that a campus police officer's adherence to rape myths is strongly related to case clearance of sexual assault reports as well as their attitudes towards victims.

We chose to highlight this article because of the growing focus on campus sexual assault. With targeted training on factors known to reduce rape myth acceptance, those who have experienced sexual assault may have a more trauma-informed experience if they choose to report sexual assault.

As always, if you have any other questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,
Joan Tabachnick
NEARI Press

Impact of Rape Myth Acceptance on Campus Law Enforcement

by David S. Prescott and Joan Tabachnick

Authors

Molly Smith, Nicole Wilkes, and Lena Bouffard

The Question

What is the Impact of Campus Enforcement Officers Rape Myth Beliefs on Sexual Assault Response?

The Research

Studies note that while most college students never report their sexual assault, those who choose to report are more likely to call campus police officials than local law enforcement. Campus police officials are often the first (and at times the only) responders taking on tasks such as the initial report, referrals to victim services, and conducting the ongoing case investigation and processing. Numerous studies have described a significant number of police officers ascribe to certain rape myths (defined as common misconceptions regarding the nature and prevalence of rape), hold different definitions of rape, and are disproportionately more likely to view sexual assault reports as being false. In fact, they are most likely to view sexual assault reports as being false when the

victim knows the alleged perpetrator, if alcohol or drugs are involved, or the victim does not physically or verbally resist the attack or show bruises to demonstrate that resistance.

Molly Smith, Nicole Wilkes, and Lena Bouffard observe that the attitude of campus police officers can affect their ability to process complaints and can increase the risk of secondary victimization for those who have experienced abuse. Yet while there is extensive research on local police responses, there is less research on campus police. This research study examines the influence of specialized training for campus police officials on rape myth acceptance as well as how this influences the officer's perception of sexual assault cases.

Results showed that campus police officers who attended a training program on victim sensitivity, the trauma of victimization, the identification of drug-facilitated sexual assaults, and the role of alcohol in sexual assault were significantly less likely to accept rape myths than those who did not attend such training. However, other important training such as on the investigation of sexual assault, federal requirements, etc. did not significantly impact rape myth acceptance.

The results also showed that rape myth acceptance had a significant impact on a police officer's perception of the effect of certain factors on case clearance. For example, officers who are predisposed to believe that women lie about rape will be more likely to record reporting inconsistencies to justify their perception that the allegations are false. Rape myth acceptance predicted the degree to which officers believed that victims were partially to blame, that victim's intoxication impacted their credibility and seriousness of the case. Although the degree of rape myth acceptance affected other factors, the importance in other case clearance factors was relatively modest. The study also found that the length of the officer's tenure in campus law enforcement does not necessarily lead to more victim-centered beliefs among campus police officers.

Bottom Line: A campus police officer's adherence to rape myths is strongly related to case clearance of sexual assault reports as well as their attitudes towards victims.

Implications for Professionals

It is vital that all professionals develop a deeper understanding of the difficulties that those who have been victimized may experience both personally and through the system if they choose to report. While our law enforcement and justice systems are vital to our response systems, many still have not been fully trained on how to respond with equal safety and fairness to all who enter it. Professionals who work with those who have been sexually abused will want to consider that their clients may be re-traumatized by the system designed to protect them. Professional working with victims of sexual assault may also want to consider opportunities to educate campus police, law enforcement and others who may not have a full understanding of how their interaction with someone choosing to report can have life-long implications for that person. In the opinion of the NEARI Newsletter authors, this study likely reflects the experience and opportunities of law enforcement in many environments across the US.

Implications for the Field

These findings point to a simple fact that widespread training on victim sensitivity, the trauma of victimization, and the role of alcohol and drugs in sexual assault victim experiences will improve the system's response to victims who choose to report. In fact, with the results of this study in mind, a more general training may not improve the systems response to those who report quite as much. Given the fact that most victims do not report, great sensitivity may actually increase the rates of reporting and the rates of case clearance once the report is made. There is little question that the work of law enforcement officials requires extensive training in myriad areas and multiple demands from a diverse community. This study illustrates the important and honorable role that all practitioners and researchers can play in educating those who work at the front lines of

responding to the reports of sexual violence.

Abstract

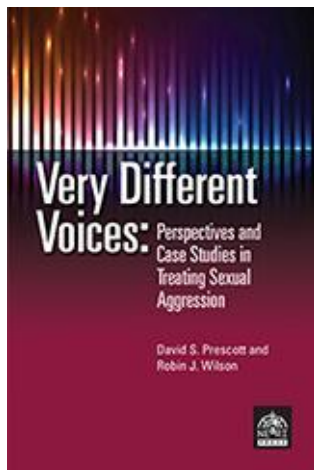
Campus police agencies are often the first, if not only, responders to sexual assault incidents occurring on college campuses. Little is known, however, regarding the attitudinal dispositions of these officers, specifically their acceptance of rape myths and the effect this has on case processing. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining attitudes toward any perceptions of sexual assault among a sample of campus law enforcement officers in Texas. This was done through the administration of a short survey to a sample of campus law enforcement officers prior to their attendance at a sexual assault focused training, as well as all campus police chiefs via the Internet. Survey items inquired about officers' careers in law enforcement, contact with victims, and perceptions of sexual assault. Results suggest that officers' adherence to rape myths is strongly related to their perceptions of campus sexual assault incidents and their attitudes toward victims. Suggestions for future research and policy are offered.

Citation

Smith, M., Wilkes, N., & Bouffard, L.A. (2016). Rape Myth Adherence Among Campus Law Enforcement Officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. Vol. 43, No. 4. pp. 539-556.

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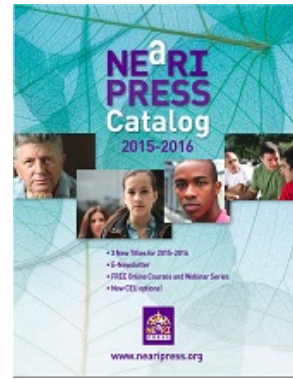
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