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Gateway to Reform? Policy Implications of Police Officers' Attitudes toward Rape

Amy Dellinger Page

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that prosecutors rely more heavily on victim characteristics and other extralegal factors than on criteria set forth by the law, when evaluating the merits of a rape case. Little is known, however, about the factors police officers use when assessing the merits of a rape case. The current study contributes to what is known about police officers' attitudes toward rape. A survey was administered to 891 sworn police officers in two states in the southeastern United States. The surveys were designed to assess police officers' acceptance of rape myths. Police officers who accept more rape myths were less likely to believe victims who did not adhere to the stereotyped 'genuine victim.' This research contributes to what is known about the factors affecting police officers' decision-making in rape cases. This study has implications for assessing the effectiveness of rape law reforms, inasmuch as these reforms are conveyed through police work.

ARTICLE

Introduction

The level of discretion employed by individuals within the criminal justice system varies widely. Prosecutors have practically unlimited discretion to charge an individual with a crime and the charges themselves. They may also choose to offer a plea bargain for a lesser offense or sentence. Police officers, too, have discretion in choosing which cases deserve investigation and sometimes the charges that result from the investigation. Due to the discretionary power of police and prosecutors, one must assume that their personal beliefs, along with organizational ideologies, may

affect the investigation, charging and prosecuting of sexual assault offenders. This article will highlight existing research literature on police officers' attitudes toward rape and will analyze data on the attitudes of police officers toward the crime of rape. Because police officers exercise their discretion when determining how a case will be investigated and possibly the charges that will result from the investigation, it is important to assess the attitudes that may influence this discretion.

Review of the Literature

LeGrand (1973) noted that societal attitudes not only inform laws, but that the constructions represented in law inform societal attitudes. In other words, laws and beliefs are mutually reinforcing. The question this study seeks to address is whether police officers use legal standards when assessing the validity of rape complaints or whether rape victims are held to a different standard than are other victims of crime. If police officers endorse stereotypical ideas about gender and rape, only cases meeting the characteristics of an "ideal" rape (i.e., the victim and offender are strangers, the victim incurs physical injuries and there is physical evidence of a sexual assault) will be deemed credible and will thus be investigated.

Police officers are the first contact that rape victims have with the criminal justice system. Despite legal reforms, there is no measure of how closely police officers adhere to the reforms. For instance, many states no longer require corroboration of the victim's statement. Furthermore, the definition of rape was re-written in some states to include gender-neutral language (meaning a woman could legally rape a man) and the definition of penetration was expanded to include any intrusion of a person's body with any part of another person's body or object. Negative attitudes toward women and/or the endorsement of rape myths may shape the investigation process and result in the dismissal of legitimate rape complaints.

Research assessing police officers' attitudes toward rape has been sparse in the last thirty years. Thus, we have little knowledge of police officers' attitudes toward rape and whether, relatedly, they hold rape victims to a different standard than victims of other non-sex based crimes. Galton (1975) analyzed police case files in a Texas police department from August 1974 to August 1975 to assess the effectiveness of rape investigations and the adherence to rape law reforms. He also interviewed rape complainants and police officers about the handling of rape cases. Galton noted that the first question frequently asked of rape complainants was whether they intended to prosecute. If they answered 'no,' the fact gathering process would cease. Further, if the police officer became suspicious of a rape case, s/he would attempt to obtain an affidavit of non-prosecution rather than continue the investigation.

Additionally, Galton (1975) observed that the police officers often held "rape complainants to a higher standard of conduct than the law requires" (p. 17). In fact, he remarked that "investigators freely admit that no complainant's story in any crime

is errorless; yet they expect a rape complainant to be wholly consistent in her testimony” (p. 20). He noted that decisions regarding the continuation of a rape investigation were often made arbitrarily: that is, no material factors distinguished investigations of different durations. He concluded that rape law reforms would have little effect on the prosecution and investigation of rape because of this arbitrary decision-making. Interestingly, Galton found female officers to be more suspicious of rape complainants than their male counterparts. Male police officers believed an average of 12% of rape complaints were false. Female officers, however, placed this estimated average at 40%.

Subsequently, LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985) conducted the largest study to date of police officers’ attitudes regarding rape. Using county and municipal law enforcement agencies that contribute to the Uniform Crime Report, the researchers surveyed 2,170 sworn officers. Unlike any other study assessing police attitudes about rape, LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985) reported a low endorsement of rape myths among police officers. They viewed rape victims as innocent and disagreed that women should have to prove they did not encourage the rape through their behavior. They strongly disagreed with statements indicating that a raped woman is not truly a victim. Police officers seemed somewhat perplexed about the motivations of the rapist. While officers did not agree that rapists are “normal,” neither did they agree that rapists are mentally ill. They believed that rapists are sexually frustrated and that rape is a sex crime, but disagreed that rapists have an “uncontrollable desire for sex” or that they “commit rape for sex.” The police officers did not consider rape an expression of the rapist’s manhood, but they did see the crime as an exercise of the rapist’s power over women.

LaFree (1989) studied the processing of rape cases in Indianapolis during the 1970s at various points in the criminal justice system (police, prosecutors, courts and juries). In addition to examining police and court records, he also observed court proceedings and conducted post-trial interviews with selected jurors. LaFree (1989) maintained that women who engage in “risky” behaviors and those that do not fit traditional sex role expectations were more likely to be viewed as suspect. He and other researchers (Field 1978; Burt 1980) contend that individuals hold certain beliefs about the crime of rape and rape victims. The more a victim, or the characteristics of an assault, deviate from this preconceived idea, the less likely police and prosecutors are to devote extensive time and energy to processing the case (LaFree 1989; Hazelwood and Burgess 1995).

LaFree’s (1989) research demonstrated that police officers were less likely to make an arrest when the victim did not conform to sex role stereotypes. Examples of this nonconformity included going to a bar without a male escort, drinking, hitchhiking, willingly entering the offender’s property or engaging in premarital or extramarital sex. Although these factors influenced police decisions of arrest, they did not influence the victim’s decision to prosecute. Police officers were also less likely to make an arrest if the victim delayed reporting the crime to the police. LaFree’s analysis further found that arrests were more likely if the victim and

offender were acquaintances. Initially, this finding seemed to contradict previous research; however, knowing the offender makes identification of the suspect and arrest easier. Problems are encountered at the prosecution level because a consent defense is more likely when a prior relationship is present (LaFree 1989).

Additionally, charges were more likely to be filed and to be of a serious nature when a weapon was used and when penile-vaginal penetration was part of the offense. Serious charges were also filed when the victim was under age 18, when the victim was White, and the suspect was Black. Less serious charges were filed for incidents not promptly reported to police. Assaults that involved more than one assailant typically did not result in felony charges. LaFree found that detectives were more suspicious of accounts of multiple assailants and this suspicion was particularly salient if there was also more than one victim, if the victim(s) and offenders knew each other and if all were young (LaFree 1989).

Campbell and Johnson (1997) conducted a multi-method study with police officers from a mid-sized city in the Midwest and officers from a large Midwestern university. One aspect of the study asked how police officers defined rape/sexual assault in their own words. Three “clusters” of definitions emerged from the results, with each cluster comprised of conceptually similar definitions. The first cluster, offered by 31% of the sample, was named the “Consent Definition of Rape.” This group defined rape in terms of penile penetration and lack of consent. However, consent was not part of the legal definition of rape in the state under study. Only 30% of this cluster mentioned the use of force, which was a defining feature of the state statute. The second cluster, given by 19% of the sample, was the “Force Definition of Rape.” It defined rape in roughly the same terms currently comprising the legal definition of rape in the officer’s state. These factors included penetration (84%), the use of force (95%), and the threat of force (58%).

The third cluster, offered by the remaining 50% of the sample, provided a “Mixed Definition of Rape.” This definition contained old and new legal components along with rape myths. The mixed definition focused around penile-vaginal penetration (42%), rape as sexual gratification (40%) and consent (51%). However, only penetration is currently part of the legal definition in this state. These officers attributed more blame to victims and were more conservative in their views about women, as measured by Spence et al. (1973) Revised Attitudes toward Women Scale. It is not known if these beliefs and opinions translated into actual behavioral responses in the treatment of rape cases and victims of rape (Campbell and Johnson 1997).

Several additional studies have compared police officer attitudes with the attitudes of citizens, other criminal justice employees and/or social service personnel. Field (1978) endorsed LeGrand’s (1973) view that societal attitudes not only inform laws, but that the constructions represented in law inform societal attitudes. With that notion in mind, Field administered a questionnaire designed to assess attitudes toward women and rape along with a rape knowledge test to patrol police officers, community members, female counselors in rape crisis centers, and committed rapists in a state

hospital. Unfortunately, police officers and rape crisis counselors were unable to complete the portion of the questionnaire assessing attitudes toward women due to time constraints. Results showed that police officers who had participated in rape processing training were more likely than those who had not attended training to view resistance as a primary responsibility of the victim during a rape. White officers were more likely than Black officers to perceive rape as caused by the victim's appearance or behavior. Interestingly, Field found that police officers were more similar to rapists than to rape crisis counselors in their attitudes toward rape.

Feldman-Summers and Palmer (1980) administered closed-ended surveys to police officers, staff members of two rape crisis counseling centers, prosecuting attorneys and superior court judges. The surveys contained questions about beliefs regarding the causes of rape, ways to prevent rape, beliefs about certain rape complaints being "true" or "false" and circumstances pertaining to each type of report. The groups were opposed on the questions about the causes of rape. Social service personnel attributed rape to social factors (e.g., "men have been taught to believe that when a woman says 'no' she means 'yes'") and the overall socialization of men. Criminal justice personnel, however, tended to view the cause of rape as women's poor judgment, dress and demeanor.

The groups also differed somewhat on their beliefs about rape complaints. Social service personnel believed that approximately 70% of rape complaints reflect "true" rapes, with the assailant correctly identified. Criminal justice personnel as a whole believed that about 50% of rape complaints were "true," with the assailant correctly identified. Police officers stated that only 36% fell into this category. Both groups agreed that very few innocent people are convicted of rape. Although the groups disagreed on the percentage of credible rape complaints, there were no statistically significant differences on the characteristics that comprise credible complaints. It is possible that the lack of statistical significance stems from the low number of participants comprising each group. Both social service personnel and criminal justice personnel cited the following characteristics of credible rape complaints: the victim has physical injuries, waits fewer than forty-eight hours to report the crime, is consistent in her account of the rape, is willing to take a lie detector test, does not engage in premarital or extramarital relations and is seen by others as having been raped (Feldman-Summers and Palmer 1980).

Similar to Field (1978), Brown and King (1998) compared police officers' attitudes toward women and rape to those of college students. They administered a closed-ended questionnaire containing indexes to assess hypermasculinity, hyperfemininity, attitudes toward women, general attitudes toward rape and the acceptance of interpersonal violence. In general, women were significantly more likely to have positive attitudes toward women, but were significantly less accepting of rape myths and interpersonal violence (e.g., "being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women"; "a wife should move out of the house if her husband hits her"). Interestingly, female students were significantly more accepting of interpersonal violence than male students, but there was no significant difference between male

and female police officers. Conversely, male and female students were not significantly different in their acceptance of rape myths and interpersonal violence, but female police officers were significantly less accepting of rape myths than male police officers.

Brown and King (1998) suggest that the differences in attitudes among male and female police officers may have to do with a stronger adherence to gender identity than occupational identity when choosing not to accept rape myths. They found that male and female police officers were not any more inclined to hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity, respectively, than male and female college students.

Few studies have assessed police officers' attitudes since the enactment of rape law reforms and those that have employed scales constructed prior to the reform, did not reflect changes to state rape laws (for example, those concerning spousal rape). Most studies used small sample sizes (i.e., under 100) with the exception of LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985), which constitutes the only national sample of law enforcement personnel. This study sought to evaluate attitudes toward rape held by police officers in two states in the Southeast United States. It was hypothesized that the level of rape myth endorsement affects decision-making about pursuing a rape investigation, such that police officers who score high on the RMA-R will be less likely to believe rape victims who do not adhere to characteristics of a "genuine" victim (i.e., the victim was a virgin, the victim and offender were strangers, etc.). Spears and Spohn (1996) found that the more a rape victim conformed to the genuine victim characteristics, the more likely it was that a prosecutor would file rape charges. Research on police officers (e.g., Galton 1975; Hazelwood and Burgess 1995) also indicates the use of a genuine victim ideal when assessing the merits of a rape case.

Methods

The current study was designed to assess police officers' attitudes using revised measures of rape myths using a closed-ended questionnaire. Demographic information was also collected and used to make within-group comparisons. Participating agencies were identified using a snowball sampling method. A colleague who works with a private training academy supplied the names of several Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs in two states in the Southeastern United States who were willing to participate in the study. Those individuals, in turn, supplied additional names of Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs. I contacted all referred Chiefs of Police, Sheriffs or contact persons and requested assistance. All police departments willing to participate were included in the population. Seven police departments and four sheriff's departments agreed to participate in the study. Four police and sheriff's departments declined, citing time constraints or the belief that few officers would be willing to participate.¹

Procedures

A census of the 11 identified police departments and sheriff's offices was conducted, meaning that every police officer in the department was provided a survey packet. These agencies were located in two states in the Southeast United States. Participants were told that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could elect not to complete the survey with no career, occupational or training repercussions since no one would know whether or not they participated. The participants were advised that all their responses would remain anonymous. The departments were also notified that neither individual nor department names would be referenced in any written report. The officers were informed that the research staff would not have access to names of individuals, nor would any characteristics of the departments be released. Whereas this sample is not necessarily representative of police officers throughout the United States, findings will shed light on the attitudes of sworn police officers in the surveyed areas. This study represents a census in that every member of the identified target sample had the option of completing a survey. Those who responded to the survey represented one-third of the population of interest. Only one wave of surveys were distributed and collected, since there was no way to determine who completed a survey and who chose not to do so.

Survey packets were mailed to the participating police departments and sheriff's offices for distribution in October 2003 and were collected in December 2003. Each survey packet contained a statement of anonymity, a questionnaire and a blank envelope. The questionnaire stated that consent to participate in the study was given by returning the completed survey. The individual police officers were instructed to complete the survey, place it in a blank envelope and return the sealed envelope to a drop box. Police officers also had the option of placing a blank survey in an envelope and placing it in the drop box. The contact person collected the sealed envelopes from the drop box and mailed them to the researcher. Placement of completed surveys in the sealed envelopes ensured the anonymity of responses, as the researcher did not have access to any names of sworn officers.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed to measure police officers' perspectives on sexual assault and included two attitudinal scales: (1) a Rape Myth Acceptance Scale-Revised (RMA-R); and (2) a Non-Genuine Victim Scale (NGVS). The RMA-R was adapted from Burt's (1980) rape myth acceptance scale. Her scale contained 14 items and assessed levels of endorsement of myths about rape, rapists and victims of rape. A rape myth is a stereotyped belief about rape that places blame for the crime on the victim. Burt's (1980) scale was altered by removing items that seemed superfluous or outdated. The "hitchhiking" item was deleted because this practice no longer appears as common, at least among women, as it was during the early 1980s. The "stuck-up" and "drunk at a party" items were deleted both because they were

double-barreled items and their meaning was unclear. Several other original items that were double-barreled were made into separate items or shortened. For example, the item “When women go around braless or wearing short skirts or tight tops, they are just asking for trouble” was shortened to “Women who dress provocatively are inviting sex.”

In addition to the aforementioned changes, several items that were not legally relevant to the study of rape at the time of Burt’s (1980) study were added to the scale. For instance, the item “Any man can be raped” was included in the revised scale. When Burt created her RMA, rape was defined in criminal law as a crime against a woman. Rape law reforms led to the adoption of gender-neutral language in some states, making it legally possible for a male to be raped, although the FBI still identifies only women as victims of rape.

The Non-Genuine Victim Scale (NGVS) was based on opposing characteristics of the “genuine” victim ideal. The genuine rape victim, based on Spohn and Horney’s (1996) research, is seen as a virgin who was not acquainted with the assailant, who screamed and physically resisted during the rape and/or who reported the rape to police within 24 hours. The NGVS offered respondents the opposite of these characteristics. The response set ranged from “Very Unlikely” to “Very Likely” and used a five-point scale. The NGVS had a Cronbach (!) coefficient of 0.94.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is a technique used to determine groupings of similar constructs. A correlation matrix is created for groupings of interrelated quantitative variables, or “loadings.” For each grouping, variables within each factor are more highly correlated with one another than with variables in another grouping. Factor analysis using principal components revealed that several items adapted from Burt’s (1980) rape myth acceptance scale, did not “load with” the other items in the revised scale. That is, they did not appear to measure the same constructs as the items that did “load.” They were removed from the scale and treated as separate items. The removed items were “In your opinion, what percentage of women who report a rape are lying?”; “In your opinion, what percentage of reported rapes are by women who discovered they were pregnant?”; and “In your opinion, what percentage of reported rapes are by women who want to provide an excuse for having a sexually transmitted disease such as HIV, AIDS or herpes?” These items used the following responses: “76 to 100%, 51 to 75%, 26 to 50%, 10 to 25% or Less than 10%.”

The Revised Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMA-R) consisted of ten items (see Table 1). The response set for the scale varied from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” and used a five-point scale. High scores on the RMA-R indicate endorsement of rape myths. The RMA-R had a Cronbach (α) coefficient of 0.75.

Analytic Techniques

For the sake of testing the posited hypotheses, data for the scales were first tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk statistic. This statistic tests the null hypothesis that the data are normally distributed. Results showed that none of the scales were normally distributed, meaning that parametric statistics could not be used to test hypotheses. Given the construction of the response scales – ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” with “Neither Disagree or Agree” as the midpoint – one would not expect the data to be normally distributed. Measures of attitudes toward rape are topics that elicit definitive opinions in one direction or another. They are not neutral in nature. Therefore, one would expect data to be loaded on either end of the response scale.

Table 1 Item percentages for the rape myth acceptance scale-revised (N=869)

Item	SD	D	NDA	A	SA
Any woman can be raped.	2.1	2.4	1.5	30.6	62.6
Any victim can resist a rapist if s/he really wants to.	22.3	35.4	18.5	16.6	6.1
Women who dress provocatively are inviting sex.	20.3	33.3	25.4	15.6	4.5
Any man can be raped.	5.9	13.5	13.4	40.9	25.5
Many women secretly wish to be raped.	52.6	26.8	15.6	2.5	1.6
A woman is responsible for preventing her own rape.	28.4	35.0	21.5	11.9	2.0
A woman that goes to the home of a man on their first date implies she is willing to have sex.	32.7	43.8	16.6	4.4	1.6
Women falsely report rape to call attention to themselves.	10.0	30.9	38.4	17.1	2.6
In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation.	19.3	46.0	27.6	5.9	0.7
It is a woman's fault if she makes out with a guy and lets things get out of hand.	20.2	52.7	19.3	6.1	1.0

Note. SD = *Strongly Disagree*, D = *Disagree*, NDA = *Neither Disagree or Agree*, A = *Agree*, SA = *Strongly Agree*.

The Spearman Rank Correlation, the Kruskal-Wallis test and the Mann-Whitney test were used to test the hypotheses. These non-parametric statistics do not make assumptions about the distribution of data and are also less sensitive to uneven groupings of data. The Spearman Rank Correlation tests the relationship between variables using the rank order of frequencies of observations rather than the recorded value. Such ordering makes the statistic less vulnerable to asymmetrical distributions or outliers. The Kruskal-Wallis test is the nonparametric equivalent of the one-way analysis of variance for independent samples. It is calculated based on the sums of the ranks of combined groups and tests the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between the means of the groups being tested. If a significant difference is found using the Kruskal-Wallis, the Mann-Whitney test can then be used to make comparisons

between two specific groups. The latter is the equivalent of the independent samples t-test. The Mann-Whitney is computed by ranking the combined scores of both groups from smallest to largest. It tests the null hypothesis that group means are not significantly different.

Results

The study had a 30.7% response rate, meaning that data were available for approximately 30% of the identified population. A total of 2,898 survey packets were distributed to the population and 891 completed surveys were returned.

The majority of respondents represented local city police departments (80%), while 12% were from county sheriff's departments. Eighty percent (716) of respondents were male and 17% (150) were female. Three percent (27) of respondents chose not to identify their gender. Respondents ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-seven, with an average age of thirty-seven. Sixty-four percent (571) of respondents identified their race as Non-Hispanic or White, 24% (213) identified themselves as African American, 1% (10) as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 2% (18) as Native American and 1% (8) as Latino/a or Hispanic. Three percent (27) classified their race as Other and 5% (44) chose not to identify their race. Nationally, local law enforcement personnel are comprised of 11% female, 12% African American, 9% Hispanic and 3% who classify their race as Other (U.S. Department of Justice 2006).

As shown in Table 1, the majority of police officers agreed "any woman can be raped" (93%) and "any man can be raped" (66%). The majority of officers also disagreed with statements that would blame the victim, such as "in the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation" (65%) or "many women secretly wish to be raped" (79%). This item analysis would indicate that police officers might be less accepting of rape myths than was found in earlier studies².

Whereas the RMA-R assessed general attitudes toward rape, the NGVS assessed the credibility of the victim and the alleged rape (see Table 2). Police

Table 2 Item percentages for the non-genuine victim scale (N=861)

Item	VU	U	NUL	L	VL
How likely would you be to pursue a rape investigation if the:					
Victim was not a virgin?	0.9	0.6	15.6	48.0	32.3
Victim and suspect had a prior relationship?	1.5	4.2	22.6	47.5	21.8
Victim did not physically resist during the rape?	1.2	2.4	18.2	46.7	28.6
Victim did not scream during the rape?	1.3	1.2	17.4	47.0	30.4
Victim waited more than 24 hours to report the rape?	1.7	5.6	18.5	48.4	23.2

Note. VU = *Very Unlikely*, U = *Unlikely*, NUL = *Neither Unlikely nor Likely*, L = *Likely*, VL = *Very Likely*.

officers in this study indicated they would likely believe a victim who was not a virgin (80%), even if the victim and suspect had a prior relationship (69%), s/he did not physically resist (75%) or scream (77%) during the rape. The officers also stated that they would be likely to believe a victim who waited more than 24 hours to report the rape (72%).

Another aspect of victim credibility was tapped by three questions that did not factor load with the RMA-R. These questions asked the police officers what percentage of rape victims they believe are lying about being raped, are trying to explain a pregnancy, or are trying to explain a sexually transmitted disease. As shown in Table 3, the majority of police officers believed less than 25% of rape allegations are due to women lying (72%) trying to cover up a pregnancy (83%) or trying to provide an excuse for a sexually transmitted disease (81%).

It was also hypothesized that police officers who accept more rape myths would be less likely to believe rape victims who do not adhere to characteristics of a “genuine” victim. Spears and Spohn (1996) found that the more a rape victim conformed to genuine victim characteristics, the more likely it was that a prosecutor would file rape charges. Research on police officers (e.g., Galton 1975; Hazelwood and Burgess 1995) also indicates the use of a genuine victim ideal when assessing the merits of a rape case. Responses on the RMA-R were recoded and classified as either High Rape Myth Acceptance or Low to Moderate Rape Myth Acceptance³. The Mann-Whitney test was used to see if a significant difference existed between the level of rape myth acceptance and scores on the Non-Genuine Victim Scale (NGVS). There was a significant difference between high rape myth acceptance and low to moderate rape myth acceptance and scores on the NGVS ($U=34380.5$, $p<.001$), such that police officers with high rape myth acceptance were less likely to believe a victim who did not match the genuine victim characteristics than police officers with low to moderate rape myth acceptance. Accordingly, police officers who endorse rape myths are influenced by the victim’s adherence to genuine victim characteristics.

Table 3 Item percentages for police officers' opinions about false reports of rape

	Women Lying	Women Pregnant	Women have STD
Less than 10%	35.5	57.0	54.1
11% to 25%	36.1	25.9	26.7
26% to 50%	17.1	9.7	10.3
51% to 75%	8.4	3.7	5.1
76% to 100%	1.7	1.5	1.7

Training and Policing of Rape Cases

The majority of police officers (70%) stated that their department offered a training program related to the investigation of sexual assault cases. Five percent claimed that training is offered more than once a year, while a sizable minority (38%) claimed that it is offered once per year. Four percent stated that training is offered every two to four years and 3% declared that training is offered only upon request. Thirteen percent of the respondents were unsure how often training was offered. Of particular note is that there was disagreement among police officers within the same department as to whether or not training was offered and how often training was offered.

Similar discrepancies were seen in police officers' responses to questions about discretion for handling sexual assault cases within their department. Police officers within the same departments responded in different ways when asked about whether or not they had individual discretion, or conversely, guidelines (written or informal) specifying how and when to pursue a rape investigation. Overall, 90% of the respondents stated that they did not have individual discretion when deciding which rape investigations to pursue. 75% of the police officers reported that there were no written guidelines provided by the departments for choosing which rape investigations to pursue. Finally, 77% of respondents claimed that their department did not communicate any guidelines pertaining to which rape investigations to pursue. These findings appear to contradict one another. If the majority of police departments fail to provide formal or informal guidelines for investigating reports of rape, some degree of discretion must come into play.

Police officers were also asked how much influence the prosecuting attorney's anticipated actions have on their decision to pursue a rape investigation, as assessed by the item, "How much influence does the prosecuting attorney's anticipated actions have on your decision to pursue a rape investigation?" Fifteen percent of police officers claimed that the prosecuting attorney's anticipated actions were very influential in their decision-making, while 19% stated they were somewhat influential and 13% claimed they were slightly influential. Thirty-eight percent stated that they were not influential at all and 12% were unsure. These findings suggest that the courtroom workgroup may play some role in deciding whether and

how to pursue a rape investigation.

Finally, police officers were asked how influential limited resources were in deciding whether to pursue a rape investigation. Eight percent believed resources were very influential in their decision to pursue a rape investigation, while 13% believed resources were somewhat influential and 13% believed they were only slightly influential. Forty-six percent stated that the amount of resources did not influence their decision at all and 19% were unsure.

Discussion

Despite the differences in scores on the RMA-R, it is quite possible a social desirability effect was operating. Rape is a highly charged and sensitive topic, especially when discussed in an occupational environment like policing. Even though officers were assured anonymity of their responses, my name and contact information were provided on the survey. Therefore, participants were aware of my gender and this knowledge may have influenced their responses.

A related measure of social desirability was the use of three questions that did not factor load with the RMA-R or the NGVS. These questions asked police officers about the percentage of women whom they believe lie about being raped; report being raped because they discovered they were pregnant; and report being raped because they discover they have a sexually transmitted disease. Although Ward (1995) cited that the actual incidence of false reports for rape is between 1 and 4%, the police officers I surveyed rated this percentage much higher. For example, 10% of the officers believed that between 51 and 100% of women lie about being raped. Fifty-three percent of officers alleged that between eleven 11 and 50% of women give false reports of rape. These figures indicate that although the actual percentage of false reports is comparable to that of any other crime, police officers in this study believe that, at a minimum, more than three times the percentage of reports are false.

Apart from social desirability, the police officers represented in this study may differ from the larger population of police officers in the United States. All attitudes and beliefs are grounded in a particular social context, such that there may be something different about the attitudes of police officers in the southeastern United States compared to other regions of the country. It is feasible that police officers in the surveyed states are more conservative in general, and hold more stereotyped attitudes toward women and rape than officers in other states.

A related concern with generalizability is the fact that this study had a 30% response rate. A response rate of 50% is generally deemed acceptable (Babbie 2007) and therefore the present study's response rate falls short of this standard. Police officers are a notoriously difficult population to study, especially when the topic of study is considered controversial. Despite the low response rate, a sizable sample

(n=891) was obtained. Nevertheless, the results must be interpreted with caution.

Additionally, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) noted the problems with the operationalization of the term rape myths as well as psychometric issues with studying this concept. This study utilized quantitative scales to gather information about attitudes. These scales may have overlooked subtle nuances that a qualitative interview would have captured. Despite these statistical limitations, this study represents a good first step towards understanding police officers' attitudes toward rape since the inception of reforms and can inform future research in this area.

This research provided a measure of the acceptance of rape myths via a scale that incorporated targets of rape law reforms, including male rape and spousal rape. It is a means by which to broaden our awareness of how police officers view the crime of rape and its victims. Attitudes and beliefs held by new recruits may be especially important, as they have grown up in a time where women experience more equality and rape law reforms have existed in some form. Results from this preliminary analysis show that police officers may accept fewer rape myths than previously studied samples.

The ambiguity of certain responses, however, also indicates a strong need for continued education on the topic of rape, especially for those entering and currently in law enforcement. The form and range of education related to the topic of rape should be well-planned and assessed for its effectiveness. Several studies have shown the current level of training and education related to rape and sexual assault to be ineffective in altering negative attitudes about rape. Muram, Hellman and Cassinello (1995) conducted pre- and post-test measures of attitudes about rape for an in-service training session on sexual assault at the Memphis Police Academy. All officers are required to attend in-service sessions once a year. A total of 510 police officers completed a survey, with 482 completing the pre-test and 495 completing the post-test. There were no significant differences in the acceptance of rape myths prior to and following the training session. In fact, the training changed preconceived ideas about rape in fewer than 10% of the respondents.

More recently, Lonsway, Welch and Fitzgerald (2001) studied the effectiveness of an experimental training session on sexual assault investigation in a Midwestern police academy. Recruits (n=161) were divided into three groups (one control and two experimental) and administered pre- and post-training surveys. The experimental training sessions included knowledge, attitudinal and behavioral measures. Interestingly, the researchers found no change in cognitive or attitudinal variables and no difference between the groups. However, the experimental groups retained more of the interview skills learned in the training sessions and thus, outperformed the control group in the sexual assault interview. This finding indicates that behavioral patterns can change with training. In a second study used to confirm the original findings, all new recruits (n=447) participated in the experimental training and were tested before and after the training occurred. Recruits displayed improved interview and knowledge skills about rape following the training. When tested

several weeks later, however, knowledge scores decreased, indicating that the changes may be short-lived.

Research has shown that limiting the rape education and training programs of police officers only to the topic of rape is relatively ineffective (Muram, Hellman and Cassinello 1995; Lonsway al. 2001). However, these findings do not support the elimination of training and education programs. Rather, new and innovative training methods (such as those featuring hands-on interview techniques) should be devised and evaluated for effectiveness. Perhaps a more expansive training program is needed, where sexual assault, civil rights, affirmative action, sexual harassment and sensitivity training are combined and discussed as interrelated topics rather than separate issues. Or perhaps no discrete training module can effect change in a subculture or culture. We need to alter the existing schemas for gender and sexuality in the larger culture. Ideally, one would seek to advance such broad changes in attitudes and beliefs of the public concerning women and rape, which would filter into all social institutions.

Conclusion

The results of the present study echo studies in Britain and New Zealand that assessed the experiences and satisfaction of rape victims with police following reforms. Temkin (1997) and Jordan (2001) found that although improvements had been made within police culture resulting in greater satisfaction among rape victims who reported their crime to police, a sizable minority of dissatisfied victims remained.

Goldberg-Ambrose (1992) noted that the effectiveness of rape law reforms is difficult to gauge. Arguments center on whether effectiveness is indicated by an increase (Bachman and Paternoster 1993) or decrease (Berger et al. 1994) in reported rapes. Since laws and the attitudes of legal agents are reflexive constructs, rape law reforms should alter the way criminal justice personnel, specifically police officers, view women and rape. The present study found that despite reforms to traditional rape laws, police officers have not significantly altered their attitudes toward women and rape. Rape law reforms have not had as much impact as reformers had hoped.

Individual discretion enters at each point in the criminal justice system (e.g., police, prosecutors, judges and juries). The enactment of legal reforms does not guarantee compliance with them. Nor apparently, have legal reforms altered the way individual agents within the criminal justice system view women and rape. Indeed, to accomplish broad and real change, we must address the attitudes of the broader culture.

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Footnotes

¹ It was later discovered that at least two of the four police departments that declined participation had launched sexual assault or domestic violence investigations against a police officer within the department.

² This portion of the data was reported in an earlier article by Page (2007).

³ Responses of Agree and Strongly Agree on the RMA-R were coded as High Rape Myth Acceptance and responses of Disagree and Strongly Disagree on the RMA-R were coded as Low to Moderate Rape Myth Acceptance.