



Police Perceptions of Using Alternative and Anonymous Reports of Sexual Assault to Improve Responses to Sexual Offending

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of alternative reporting options for policing responses to sexual assault drawing on interviews and roundtables with specialist police officers in Australia ($n = 22$). Alternative reporting options in this study were defined as written interview protocols that can be submitted by victim-survivors to police anonymously. We found that alternative reporting options can assist police with intelligence gathering and proactive policing and help prevent delayed reporting. However, police also identified several limitations of alternative reporting options for policing responses to sexual assault, including the challenges for police in safeguarding victim-survivors' anonymity in particular situations, the limits of policing systems in effectively capturing and utilising intelligence contained in reports, and the potential legal implications if victim-survivors later wish to make a formal statement and proceed with an investigation. We conclude by discussing the implications for policing of sexual assault and making recommendations as to the investments policing agencies should make to maximise the potential of alternative reports.

Keywords Sexual assault · Alternative reporting options · Policing · Intelligence gathering

Introduction

Governments and police departments across Australia are taking significant steps to address the barriers to reporting sexual offences and improve victim-survivors' experiences of engaging with police and the criminal justice system (see for example, VLRC, 2021, Attorney-General's Department, 2022). These efforts reflect a growing recognition of the barriers to sexual assault¹ reporting and the need for more empathetic and victim-centric systems. One such effort is the creation of alternative reporting options,

allowing victim-survivors to report experiences of sexual assault without having to make a formal report or initiate a formal police investigation. This includes the option for victim-survivors to remain anonymous but have their report sent to police for intelligence gathering purposes and, in some cases, being connected with support services. Presently, four Australian police jurisdictions—New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory—have established alternative reporting platforms. Victoria and the Commonwealth Government are also exploring these initiatives, signalling their expanding scope and importance.

Whilst there is a growing interest in alternative reporting options, little is known about how police utilise anonymous and confidential information from these reports to address sexual offences. Recent research shows strong support

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¹ In this article, we use a legal definition of sexual assault, where a person is forced, tricked or coerced into sexual acts without their consent, acknowledging that there are cross-jurisdictional differences in this definition in Australia. We also acknowledge criminological definitions such as sexual violence, which encompass a broader range of sexually harmful acts—some of which would meet the criminal legal threshold for sexual assault and rape, whilst others are civil offences, such as sexual harassment and other unwanted harmful sexual behaviours. We use the legal definition throughout this article as it is relevant to police and law enforcement policy advisors.

amongst victim-survivors of sexual assault in Australia for alternative reporting options, as these tools allow them to document their experiences without the fear and intimidation associated with formal reporting (Heydon et al. 2023). Completing an alternative report may also enable them to regain some power and control in the process (AUTHORS – redacted for peer review). This research also found that victim-survivors were motivated to report anonymously for the purposes of community protection, hoping that their report would help police stop offenders and prevent future assaults. However, Heydon et al. (2023) found that it is unclear whether any action is taken after an alternative report is made, with a lack of transparency on how police respond to these reports. Whilst alternative reporting options work to counter barriers to reporting, the efficacy of anonymous and confidential information in addressing sexual offences by police remains poorly understood.

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault and the Place of Alternative Reporting Tools

There are alarming rates of sexual violence amongst people in Australia. According to the 2021–2022 Personal Safety Survey, 14% of people in Australia have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15; this includes 22% of women and 6.1% of men. Rates have demonstrated to be higher amongst LGBTIQ people in Australia, with almost half (48.6%) of respondents to Australia's largest national survey on LGBTIQ health and wellbeing reporting having ever been coerced or forced into sexual acts they did not want to engage in (Hill et al., 2020). These higher rates of sexual violence amongst LGBTIQ people are also reflected in the international literature (Hindes et al., 2025). Sexual violence is understood to have significant individual and interpersonal negative impacts, including trauma-related disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, substance use, suicidality, and interpersonal difficulties such as social isolation and strained relationships (Stockman et al., 2023).

Despite these high rates and significant impacts, there are low rates of reporting to police, with only 8.3% of women in Australia who were sexually assaulted by a male in the last ten years contacting the police about the most recent incident (ABS, 2023). There are well-documented barriers for victim-survivors reporting sexual assault to the police, including rape myths, shame, stigma, fear of not being believed, and potential retaliation from the perpetrator (Heenan & Murray 2006; Jordan 2008; Rich & Seffrin 2012; Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). Rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes remain deeply entrenched in community perceptions of sexual violence, shaping how it is understood, responded to, and discussed. These harmful beliefs not only perpetuate stigma but also contribute to a culture in which

victim-survivors may question whether their experience was 'serious enough' to report—particularly when the perpetrator is known to them—and may internalise blame for what occurred (Tidmarsh & Hamilton; 2020). This environment of judgment and disbelief creates significant barriers to disclosure, help-seeking, and engagement with formal support systems, ultimately silencing many victim-survivors (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017; Ceelen et al. 2019; Coumarelos et al. 2023; Minter et al. 2021). Certain communities, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, LGBTQ + people, sex workers, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, for example, also face additional barriers to reporting sexual assault to the police due to historical police violence, distrust, and societal stigma (Mitra-Khan et al., 2016; Mortimer et al. 2019; Connelly et al. 2021).

Victim-survivors reporting to the police frequently describe negative experiences, feeling further victimised or blamed for the sexual assault (Campbell 2006; Rich 2014), with justice systems' interactions referred to as a form of secondary victimisation (Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Taylor & Gassner 2010). Given this, and the broader cultural context where sexual assault allegations against high-profile figures like Donald Trump and Brett Kavanaugh failed to impede their rise to power, and the media's poor treatment of their accusers (Rosewarne 2019), it is understandable that victim-survivors may choose not to formally report to the police and seek alternative avenues for reporting.

In response to persistent barriers to formal reporting, there has been a shift towards alternative, informal and anonymous reporting options for sexual assault in Australia and internationally. These include institutional reporting mechanisms within universities, the military, and the police. For instance, the US Department of Defence has provided confidential and unrestricted informal reporting options for sexual assaults occurring between military personnel since 2005 (Carson & Carson 2018; Friedman 2007; Rosenstein et al. 2018). Grassroots initiatives like Project Callisto have emerged, which launched independently from university administration systems in 2016, enabling college students to informally and confidentially disclose sexual assault, aiming to support victim-survivors and promote social justice. The project also submits the names of alleged offenders to a central database where repeat offenders are identified (Lilley & Moras 2017). Similarly, the National Ugly Mugs (NUM) scheme in the U.K., developed by grassroots sex worker advocacy organisations, provides a mechanism for sex workers to share information about unsafe or violent clients ('ugly mugs') with each other, and if requested by the sex worker making the report, with police (Connelly et al. 2021).

Some police departments have developed alternative reporting tools acknowledging the challenges faced by victim-survivors in formal reporting. Research shows that such

options, which do not require direct contact with the police, offer significant benefits to victim-survivors. They allow them to share their experiences, seek support, and access help and information (Heffron et al. 2014; Heydon et al., 2023; Loney-Howes et al. 2022). Heydon et al. (2023) found that whilst most victim-survivors prefer not to undergo a formal police investigation, a key reason for using alternative reporting is to prevent the perpetrator from harming others. As a result, victim-survivors in their study expressed hope that law enforcement could use information from anonymous reports for this purpose. In the next section, we outline the current options available in the Australian context and what we know about the potential for a police response from alternative and anonymous reports.

Current Law Enforcement Sexual Assault Alternative Reporting Tools in Australia

In response to the barriers to formally reporting sexual assault, four Australian law enforcement agencies have established alternative reporting systems, all with different designs in terms of questions asked and varying levels of anonymity afforded to the victim-survivor. The most well-known is the *SARO (Sexual Assault Reporting Option)*, by New South Wales (NSW) Police. Initially launched in 2012 as a paper-based form, it has since transitioned to an online form in 2021 and was redesigned in early 2023 to include multiple language translations. The SARO asks questions about the details of the offenders(s), details about where, when and how the offense happened, whether the victim/survivor disclosed to anyone or visited a hospital, and optional questions about the victim-survivor. Reports are securely stored on a NSW police force database (NSW Police, n.d.), and an average of 335 reports per month have been made to SARO since the 2023 relaunch (Pers.Comm. NSW Police, 2023).

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Queensland, and Western Australian police forces also have alternative reporting mechanisms. ACT Policing, administered by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), facilitates a *Reporting Historic Sexual Assault* form, specifically for historical abuse that occurred more than six months ago, within the ACT jurisdiction (Australian Federal Police, n.d.). It is mandatory for the victim-survivor to input their details, and the form primarily uses open text boxes to ask details about the sexual assault and when it occurred. It also asks whether the victim-survivor told anyone or previously contacted authorities. It does not have specific questions about the offender. Queensland Police Service provides the *Alternative Reporting Option (ARO)*, allowing victim-survivors to share information with police without initiating a formal investigation (Queensland Police Service, n.d.). This form includes

optional questions about the victim-survivor, detailed questions about the offender and offence details as well as an open text box for the victim-survivor to describe what happened to them in their own words. In Western Australia, the police introduced *Safe2Say* in July 2023, an online platform run by Western Australia Crime Stoppers for reporting a range of sexual offences, including sexual assault and child sexual abuse, anonymously. People can report their own experiences or information about other victims (bystander or witness report), and they are forwarded to specialist investigators (Western Australia Police 2023). Questions on this form are mostly open text box, asking the victim-survivor to describe in their own words details of the offence and the offender. Unlike the other reporting forms, it also asks the victim-survivor whether they know of any other victim-survivors from the same offender and what outcome they would like to see as a result of making the alternative report.

Victoria previously had an alternative reporting tool called *Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA)* developed and hosted by a specialist sexual assault service that shared anonymous, de-identified reports with Victoria Police. Despite increased usage, this was closed in 2020 due to insufficient resources. Since that time, the Victorian government has taken steps to improve victim-survivors' experiences of reporting sexual assault, including a major inquiry into the justice system's responses to sexual offences, and a suite of recommendations to improve responses, with a key recommendation to create more reporting options for sexual assault, including online and anonymous reporting options (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2021). Similarly, the Federal Attorney General's Department is undertaking a five-year (2022–2027) workplan to strengthen criminal justice responses to sexual assault, which includes a scoping study investigating the potential of implementing alternative reporting mechanisms nationally (Attorney General's Department, 2022).

There is a clear appetite from police departments and governments to understand and further implement alternative reporting options for sexual assault. However, to our knowledge, research has yet to consider how police respond to reports made through these platforms, particularly anonymous reports. We do know that, more broadly, receiving anonymous and confidential reports is commonplace within policing practices. Around the globe, police work closely with organisations like Crime Stoppers, where members of the public can leave anonymous information about alleged criminal activities. Whilst the Australian Crime Stoppers website says that anonymous calls and online reports have “helped to identify drug labs and dealers, catch wanted fugitives, solve arsons, thefts and robberies, and apprehend criminals wanted for violent assaults and murders”, Crime Stoppers programmes have been rarely studied (Lippert & Walby 2018), and therefore the methods through which law

enforcement utilises anonymous information remain unclear. This ambiguity is especially important to consider in cases of sexual assault, which, contrary to popular myths about strangers in public spaces, predominantly occurs in private settings with perpetrators known to the victim-survivor (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). Consequently, it is important to policing policy development to examine whether anonymous reports can be efficacious in apprehending offenders without formal reports from victim-survivors and without creating a risk to victim-survivors who may be known to the offender.

Emerging research sheds some light on the potential use of alternative reporting methods by police and the criminal justice system. Markham (2015) found that approximately 15% of confidential reports to the US Department of Defence are later converted into official reports, suggesting anonymous reporting may lead to formal reporting pathways. However, the impact of initial reports on subsequent sexual assault trials remains uncertain. Hope et al. (2013) demonstrated that self-administered interviews in the UK can be used in courts to verify the accuracy of victim-survivor statements during police interviews. Heydon and Powell (2018) suggest that well-designed written response options, including confidential and online self-reports, can improve evidence completeness and reliability by enhancing victim-witness recall. Additionally, Loney-Howes et al. (2022) analysed 483 anonymous reports of sexual harm² submitted via an online tool developed by a rape crisis centre and received and responded to by sexual assault support workers from 2013 to 2016, with their analysis indicating these reports provided sufficient detail for police crime mapping and intelligence gathering.

The Current Study

Whilst evidence suggests that victim-survivors are looking for alternatives to starting a formal police investigation (Heydon et al., 2023), there remains a significant gap in our understanding of how police handle anonymous and confidential reports and the actions they can take based on information received without a formal report. In this article, we work towards filling this gap by analysing interview and roundtable data with specialist police officers in four jurisdictions across Australia to understand how they approach the use of alternative reports of sexual assault. In doing so, we provide evidence of the opportunities that alternative reporting options currently provide to police to strengthen

their responses to sexual assault as well as some of the key limitations, as articulated by police themselves.

Method

This article draws on data from two studies on alternative reporting mechanisms for sexual assault, including qualitative interviews ($n = 14$) and focus groups ($n = 8$) with specialist police officers (total $n = 22$). Ethics to conduct these studies was received from [university redacted for peer review] institutional ethics board in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.³ The first study investigated the use, purpose and potential of alternative reporting mechanisms in Australia (see: [redacted for peer review] for the full study report). As part of this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with specialist police officers in two Australian jurisdictions ($n = 14$).

Participants were recruited through contact with the police organisation who sent us a list of relevant police officers with expertise in alternative reporting pathways. The researchers then contacted those individuals directly and invited them to participate in an interview. Each individual police officer provided their informed consent to participate. 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. Interviews were conducted in person ($n = 6$) and online ($n = 8$) over Microsoft Teams. Interviews ran for approximately 60 min and covered a range of questions about the participant's organisational engagement with anonymous reporting of sexual assault. 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). Interviews were based on the following themes: 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 second study was a scoping study into the current alternative reporting pathways available in Australia investigating best practices and areas for improvement. As part of this study, we conducted three roundtables with specialist police officers in Australia, with 1–4 participants

² Reports to this tool included a wide variety of sexually harmful experiences, including rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, unwanted sexual touching, and historical experiences of child sexual abuse.

³ Police ethics compliance was also approved for interviews undertaken as part of the first project.

in each roundtable ($n = 8$). We recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, reaching out to police contacts with relevant expertise in sexual assault and, in some cases, first-hand experience in receiving and responding to alternative reports submitted to police. Each individual police officer completed a consent form before participation. Roundtables ran for approximately 90 min, and participants were asked a range of questions regarding the benefits and use of alternative reporting pathways, including any challenges police face in responding to anonymous and confidential reports. Questions included: sector stakeholders' knowledge of former and current alternative reporting mechanisms; the benefits of alternative reporting pathways for sector stakeholders' organisations/jurisdictions; best-practice implementation of alternative reporting mechanisms for different organisations/jurisdictions; and the potential role of the Australian Government in developing or supporting alternative reporting mechanisms. All of the data gathering across both studies was conducted by the same researcher.

Upon completion, interview and roundtable recordings were sent for transcription. The research team then anonymised the transcripts, removing any identifying details, and all participants were assigned a code name. To safeguard the identity of participants, the states and policing departments that police officer participants belong to have been anonymised for this article. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 software and coded for thematic analysis by the research team. Thematic analysis is a process whereby researchers search for common themes or patterns in qualitative data to answer their research questions (Braun & Clark, 2006). The coding scheme was inductive and deductive: developed by considering the key research questions for both projects, including what action police can take in response to alternative reports, as well as emerging themes identified during the initial coding phase. To maintain uniformity in the coding process, all the researchers coded a single transcript to validate the coding scheme's effectiveness in capturing the participants' perspectives accurately and enabling us to address the research queries and recognise any unanticipated themes. It also provided an occasion to ensure that the interpretation of concepts was consistent amongst all the researchers. Due to the interpretive nature of this coding scheme and it being a small sample used to generate initial insights into an under-explored topic, 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 comparative coding was used to ensure we were conceptually engaging with the data in a similar way, and to agree consensually on ways to interpret the data if any discrepancies arose (O'Connor & Joffe 2020).

Findings: The Potential for Alternative Reporting Options in Aiding Police Responses to Sexual Assault

Our analysis finds that the police saw alternative reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors as having the potential to inform their practices in various ways. Firstly, we examine the role of anonymous reports in intelligence gathering. Secondly, we explore their role in proactive policing measures. Thirdly, police participants also told us that anonymous reports can serve as a pathway to formal reporting, and we consider the potential for victim-survivors to convert their initial anonymous reports into formal police investigations. Finally, we discuss the barriers and limitations police identified in their ability to use reports effectively. It is important to note that whilst many police officers were talking from first-hand experience, other police officers spoke hypothetically about the potential they saw in using alternative and anonymous reports.

Intelligence Gathering

Police participants told us that anonymous and confidential reports can contribute significantly to intelligence gathering in sexual assault cases. Information such as the time, date, location, and offence details aids law enforcement in discerning patterns, modus operandi, and reoccurring instances of sexual offending. In particular, law enforcement said this intelligence can help to identify serial offenders by linking reports where they believe it is the same offender, as discussed by these two police officers:

We could have multiple victims to one offender. We could link that. It gives us information about modus operandi if we have, for example, a stranger attack, and then we've got a similar MO for someone who has reported something and knows who that person is. (Police Officer 7)

...the locations of the offences, the MO of the offender, what words are said, what clothes are worn by the offender, the actions made by the offender, the words said, all of that sort of stuff is really important in linking serial offenders... (Police Officer 4).

As one officer stated, particularly if there is an ongoing investigation against an alleged offender, having other victim-survivors submit anonymous reports against the same offender can aid them in their active investigation:

...the value of the receipt of that information is that it might potentially augment or complement other active investigations that are going on. (Police Officer 17)

Even if victim-survivors do not name the alleged perpetrator, one police officer said they could use other information such as the date, time, location, and description of the perpetrator to build a profile of the offender and work towards identifying them from that anonymously submitted information:

Police can start to look at [reports] and say, righto, we've identified that in the last month there have been three offences that have occurred at that time in that place. They've all identified a Caucasian male, about 6 foot tall, in his early 20's. So, police can start looking at that [and] start building a profile... and they'll have police there whether be uniformed or plain clothes... Over time they'll hopefully be able to identify an offender. (Police Officer 8)

As noted by Police Officer 19, the ability to identify a specific *modus operandi* (MO) is considered valuable intelligence. One officer also told us that their intelligence database is sophisticated enough that intelligence from anonymous reports can be used in innovative ways to link up cases:

It's difficult to prosecute without an actual complainant or a survivor of sexual abuse... but words spoken, descriptions, *modus operandi* are very important [intelligence] to us now with these [intelligence database] searching capabilities, especially when it comes to a stranger offending. You might be able to link up a particular word spoken by an accused, identifying [an] information report that suggests this person commonly uses this phrase or whatever it may be and it can ultimately lead to identification of an offender... the intelligence is pretty valuable. (Police Officer 9)

In addition to gathering intelligence on specific offenders, police emphasised that information from anonymous reports provides them with a more comprehensive understanding of the landscape of sexual assault. Police Officer 10 highlighted the reality that police likely only become aware of a small fraction of sexual offences. The receipt of anonymous reports could enable them to enhance their understanding of sexual offences.

As Police Officer 22 said, they also receive a lot of historical reporting from adults reporting their experiences of child sexual abuse through their existing alternative reporting tool. Whilst they may be unable to investigate these reports, it helps them to understand "why wasn't it reported, what might have been the barriers, or what might be something that we could overcome for other children to be able to report in the future, or for it to be detected in the future." In the next section, we discuss how these anonymous intelligence reports can contribute to proactive policing measures.

Proactive Policing

Police participants highlighted the potential of anonymous reports in bolstering proactive policing efforts. Reports can provide valuable intelligence that enables law enforcement to undertake targeted actions aimed at addressing and preventing sexual offences. For instance, one participant emphasised that if enough victim-survivors submitted anonymous reports regarding a particular offender, it might enable law enforcement to investigate and prosecute the repeat offender through alternative means without necessitating formal reports from victim-survivors (however, other officers pointed to limitations in the use of anonymous reports, as we explore in detail later in this article). This underscores the potential for anonymous reporting systems to accumulate a databank of information that could be instrumental in pursuing criminal prosecution against repeat offenders.

If we have an anonymous system and then, all of a sudden, the victims and survivors start to trust that system, we may be able to bring up a databank of information that gives us an ability to conduct potentially an investigation on someone whose name continues to appear. So, we may not be able to bring them to justice for those particular offences, but we do have other methodologies that we could utilise that may lead to a prosecution against particular people. So, I think that's something of real value. [...] I think that is another way we could bring perpetrators to justice without [involving] the victims. (Police Officer 12)

According to Police Officer 15, the information can guide other investigations against the same offender if a serial offender is identified through an anonymous report. Additionally, this participant said that police can leverage knowledge of serial offending to encourage other victim-survivors to come forward through media announcements. This strategy may prompt some victim-survivors to formalise their complaints upon learning that others are also reporting against the same offender.

Other ways in which information obtained from anonymous reports facilitates proactive policing measures include deploying surveillance or patrols in areas where sexual assaults have been reported, conducting safety checks on identified hotspots, and implementing targeted disruption operations. Police Officer 22 highlighted the role of alternative reports in contributing to proactive policing efforts, where these reports are forwarded to the relevant police command for review, enabling the identification of trends and specific hotspots associated with sexual assault. According to Police Officer 3, the analysis of such reports enables police commands to disrupt offending behaviours in identified hotspots by increasing the police presence in those areas and conducting patrols. Notably,

anonymous reports allow law enforcement to recognise emerging patterns in offending, facilitating a more proactive response compared to the traditional reactive nature of policing sexual assault, which typically responds to formal complaints:

...the biggest benefit for [alternative reporting pathways] is intelligence gathering for police and allowing police to be more proactive in our responses [...] 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.

As one participant said, even when the prosecution of an offender is hindered by the anonymity of the reporter, the information gathered can still be used to create what they call a 'disruption plan' where that offender may be monitored and disrupted by police:

...we have what are called information reports which is primarily intelligence leads collated by our tactical intelligence officers. They will build profiles on, it could be people, suspects, witnesses or whatever it may be. It at least provides us with collated information about any particular person. Anonymous reporting can actually build a profile on that. If we identify a pattern in a particular area at least we can identify perpetrators, repeat perpetrators and be able to provide a disruption plan I suppose, that's the ultimate possibility. (Police Officer 9)

As highlighted by some officers we spoke to, this information proves especially valuable when incidents are reported in specific locations, enabling them to deploy additional officer patrols and enhance police presence in targeted hotspots:

...this [report] is indicating it happened at a railway station at a certain time of night, or it might be that the TIO [tactical intelligence officer] can identify that this is probably maybe the third or fourth one that's occurred in that area at railway stations over the same period of time. So it's not just about the incident and what information is in it, it's about the theme of that indicated offence, if you know what I mean. So they send that back to me, I'll have a look at that and say, well there's something here that perhaps we need to allocate some patrols... (Police Officer 13)

...[we] would be able to see [that] we've got a problem at a particular nightclub... we've got a report about drink spiking, or whatever it might be, women or men being preyed upon at the end of the night when they're alcohol-affected... [we] could direct the local police to start doing some operations in that area, to have a higher police presence. (Police Officer 4)

One officer spoke about ways that they already use disruption techniques to stop sexual offending in residential care settings when they receive reports from services, pointing to the potential for them to use similar techniques in responses to anonymous reports by victim-survivors in similar situations:

...for example, the DFFH [Department of Families, Fairness and Housing] if they're aware that a young person is being sexually exploited for example [...] in consultation with DFFH, [we] try and disrupt that activity... there's other ways we can hold that person accountable or keep them away from [the victim-survivor] where we don't need that young person to tell us. We can go through certain avenues of inquiry to see that someone is breaching a particular order or things like that, so we can prosecute that person for unrelated, not the sex stuff, if that makes sense. It's sort of getting around it and disrupting that activity. (Police Officer 14)

An 'In-Between' Option, a Tool for Preventing Delayed Complaints, and Pathways to Formal Reporting

Alternative reporting can also serve as a tool for preventing delayed complaints, allowing victim-survivors to initiate the reporting process without an immediate commitment to a formal investigation. This flexibility is advantageous, as it allows victim-survivors to record time-sensitive evidence and information whilst still giving them time to decide whether to proceed with a formal investigation. This can be used for future investigations, even if the victim comes forward years later.

...if they change their mind and want it investigated, they can come back to the [alternative reporting option]...and then go to a police station and say, "I want it investigated," then the police also have access to that [alternative] report and can link it up. (Police Officer 5).

As Police Officer 22 told us, they have seen an increase in victim-survivors converting alternative reports into formal police investigations. This participant told us that 9.8% of those using the alternative reporting platform run by their policing department went on to ask for a full police investigation. This is up from 3.8% in 2022.

If a victim-survivor chooses to proceed in making a formal statement, an alternative report can somewhat streamline subsequent investigations as police can access the stored information, expediting the investigative process. The statement collected can allow the victim-survivor to record the details at the time of the incident, thus minimising the need

for them to re-tell their story and providing corroboration for the police investigation. Some police participants noted that capturing this crucial information closer to the event could benefit any later court process, as statements made closer to the incident are generally more reliable than those made later.

[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... (Police Officer 3)

Recording an incident promptly after it occurs is crucial to capture details before a victim-survivor's memory fades (Hope et al., 2013), and this benefit was identified by this participant as follows:

...memory evolves over time [...] so, the more detail that we get... as close to the offence as what we can get, I definitely do find that beneficial. (Police Officer 1).

However, it is important to note that currently, it is unclear whether an alternative report could be subpoenaed in court and used to discredit the victim-survivor if any of the details differ in any way from their testimony in court. This is an area that needs further investigation, though some participants also noted that managing conflicting details between courtroom testimony and other sources (diary notes, text messages and emails for example) is already part of the job of the prosecution. We cover this in more detail in the final findings section.

Some police also said they may be able to gather time-sensitive evidence in response to an anonymous report, even if the victim-survivor has not indicated that they want to proceed with a formal investigation. For example, they could collect CCTV footage which may expire to ensure that this evidence is available in case the victim-survivor does choose to proceed with a formal report in the future:

...if someone reports that [they were] sexually assaulted at a particular public location, then we would immediately follow up to see if there's CCTV or conduct a canvas to identify and gather evidence in a crime scene. (Police Officer 7)

In addition, one participant said that, particularly in the case of serial offending, an anonymous report might provide evidence that allows police to capture DNA evidence from the accused which aids in the prosecution of other offences.

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 prosecu-

tion but to me that's very narrowminded. This actually provides us more intelligence on a person's - their modus operandi, and obviously gives us an ability to seek forensic samples based on an intelligence lead by application to a Court. (Police Officer 9)

Two police participants shared instances where alternative reports proved instrumental in supporting formal investigations and identifying serial offenders. These stories emphasise the significance of alternative reports, providing victim-survivors with the autonomy to decide when and how to proceed. Furthermore, these examples showcase the capacity of alternative reports to link victims targeted by the same offender, potentially motivating victim-survivors to formalise their reports if they learn of the offender's multiple victims.

A report that I took, it would have been maybe 10 years ago, 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. Six or seven years ago she finally felt well enough to be able to report the matter, and from the original [alternative report] and all the contact that I had with her 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 [redacted] police station. 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 [alternative report]. (Police Officer 4)

...there was a previous [alternative report] report which had been received and we saw that she was willing to be contacted... We actually received a formal complaint that was made against a particular person, and given that we saw the [alternative] report on the system and that she was willing to be contacted, through our rapport building and our contact with her 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. (Police Officer 1)

Limitations and Barriers to Using Alternative Reports

Whilst police described the potential value of information from alternative reports as we have explored, they also highlighted some significant challenges and barriers to using these reports. Firstly, some police participants highlighted the anonymity of victim-survivors as a significant limitation. Although, as described in the previous sections,

police described possible actions they could take even when a victim-survivor remained anonymous, other participants viewed anonymity as a significant constraint. They stated that anonymous reports are difficult to validate and could be regarded as ‘hearsay’ unless there is a formal complaint against the same perpetrator:

...it’s difficult to validate when it’s an anonymous report. That’s the reality, I suppose. (Police Officer 12).

...there’s no guarantee that we’d be able to do anything with that information... Generally, we can’t do anything unless we’ve got a complaint. It’s all hearsay. We just have to say “righto this person’s got an issue” and hope that somebody does make a complaint. (Police Officer 10).

Police Officer 14 said without a formal complaint, it is a “case-by-case basis” in terms of what they can do with the information. Some police participants also pointed to the difficulties of responding to alternative reports when there is limited or missing information. As Police Officer 8 observed, “the number of forms I’ve had to submit back to victims and to counsellors just saying, look, I need more information”. Indeed, there may be a tension between the information victim-survivors are comfortable providing and the information police need to use alternative reports effectively. All alternative reporting forms in Australia only have a small number of compulsory questions victim-survivors must answer. However, many of the questions asked are check-boxes rather than free-text boxes. Faced with a list of options, victim-survivors may not feel their experience matches the policing language or description of their experiences, or they may not feel comfortable or able to answer the questions posed. Moreover, there may be a clash between having optional questions instead of mandatory questions: optional questions maximise the autonomy and choices of the victim-survivor, and this is a more trauma-informed approach (Heydon et al., 2023); however, the police’s ability to respond can be constrained when there are missing details. As Heydon et al. (2023, p. 66) suggest, alternative reporting forms need to maximise victim-survivor autonomy through question design that prioritises free narrative questions, but it is vital users are given clear instructions about why certain questions are being asked to maximise the quality, quantity and reliability of the information provided, and how police could or will use the provided information. In doing so, forms may be returned more complete and could mitigate the tensions between police and victim-survivor needs.

However, even if a victim-survivor report does contain sufficient detail, a considerable limitation identified by police participants was having the staff and resources to enter the data from the reports into intelligence systems.

As Police Officer 22 told us, whilst they have had a large influx of alternative reports since 2023, converting them into intelligence reports needs to be done manually, making the process resource-intensive and slow. Whilst this policing agency is seeking funding for permanent staff and an automated system, inputting these reports is currently a strain on resources. This general point was agreed upon by police participants, with an officer commenting in relation to informal or anonymous information that “the reality is I don’t have the staff or the time or anything else to investigate everything or create an investigation for everything”. (Police Officer 13).

As another officer told us, whilst acknowledging this was a key area that needed to change, police do not apply the same resources and processes to victim-survivors of sexual assault as they do to other crimes, and this can be a barrier to anonymous information being used to its full potential:

I would say it’s indicative of an intelligence mindset or police mindset across the country, probably internationally, that we just don’t apply the same tools or processes or analytical thought to victims of sexual assault and sexual crimes. (Police Officer 2)

As discussed in the previous section, police participants also raised concerns about the potential for alternative reports to be subpoenaed in court if a victim-survivor does later proceed with a formal investigation. In particular, if any details of a victim-survivor’s story in court were different from the one they had written down in their alternative report, the defence could use this to discredit the victim-survivor.

...it definitely would be an issue at court if there were any differences in the original [alternative report] and then whatever happened at court. (Police Officer 4)
...it does make it very challenging to proceed to court when we’ve got to explain why there’s certain differences. (Police Officer 21)

However, as Police Officer 22 said, this can be mitigated by identifying the inconsistencies early on before a report is entered into evidence in court so that the victim-survivor has time to formulate a response to any inconsistencies:

As police, we’re recognising that... it’s not coming to them when they’re sitting in the [witness] box, and it’s not looking like victim-blaming, or trying to make out that they’re lying; it’s about answering those inconsistencies earlier when they’ve got time to think about it and formulate a response.

Some police participants also thought that whilst inconsistencies in stories could be an issue for court proceedings, having the initial report made through an alternative reporting system could also act as a crucial piece of evidence that helps to corroborate their story. Therefore, having

a well-designed form that minimises the risk of evidence contamination is essential (Heydon & Powell 2018; Heydon et al., 2023).

Police participants also spoke to some limitations in terms of balancing policing obligations and victim-survivor wants and needs. As one participant said, police need to think carefully about any actions they take in response to a report when a victim-survivor wants to remain anonymous so that their information is kept confidential:

...Anonymous needs to be... we actually need to stand true to that, and how we do that will be really, really important. It's kind of like the white line fever thing, when police think they can go and catch someone, they will do whatever they can to make that happen, and not necessarily understand the harm that they might be doing to a victim. That doesn't even come into their thinking. It is just, "Let's get this guy off the street." I think if we're saying we're going to be doing anonymous reporting, then we really need to be making it anonymous. (Police Officer 11)

This can be difficult for police who may wish to protect the community or a victim-survivor from an alleged offender, but this risk to the reporter cannot be managed if a person remains anonymous:

The concern with anonymous reports is if there's a risk to that person, if they're not forthcoming with details of who the alleged perpetrator is, for example, we're restricted in how we can intervene to ensure their safety. (Police Officer 14).

Likewise, police participants highlighted challenges arising when a case involves domestic violence as, in some jurisdictions, police are obligated to investigate and safeguard individuals under domestic and family violence legislation (see: Northern Territory Government, n.d). Reports of sexual assault frequently occur within domestic and family violence (Hamilton et al. 2023), thereby complicating the police's ability to honour victim-survivors' preferences for a non-response when their reports involve domestic violence.

Police participants also spoke about the risk associated with children using the mechanism to report. Whilst a reporting portal might stipulate that it is for adults⁴ only, there is little police can do to stop minors from using the system. In some instances, police have a mandatory obligation to investigate, which may be against the reporter's wishes or may not be possible if they have left insufficient information. Similarly, police participants from one jurisdiction said they had received anonymous reports about teachers who have sexually abused children within schools, but without an official report, this is unsubstantiated. This creates

difficulties for them in terms of managing risk, measured against victim-survivors' desires for anonymity and community safety, and due process for the alleged offender. As Police Officer 22 said, "you're holding a lot of risk because potentially, you have data about people that have committed criminal offences, and you're not going to act on it."

Discussion: Implications for Policing Practice and Responses to Sexual Assault

Increasingly, alternative reporting tools for sexual assault are being considered by law enforcement stakeholders to provide a viable means of addressing the significant under-reporting of sexual assault. These tools provide an informal pathway for victim-survivors to report their experiences without engaging directly with police. However, little has been published on how police perceive their use and potential in combatting sexual offending. This article has provided insights from police in four Australian jurisdictions, drawing on interviews and roundtables with sworn and unsworn officers, offering insights from those with direct operational knowledge and reflections based on a police operational context that lacks any such tool or had previously included an alternative reporting tool.

Our analysis significantly contributes to the evidence base for alternative reporting tools in policing. The findings highlight the potential benefits of anonymous and confidential reports and identify three main ways that reports are either currently being used or could be used, according to officers. However, we also identified some key limitations and challenges arising from alternative reporting. In this final section, we reflect on the implications of these findings for policing, lawmakers and future avenues of research.

Our findings suggest that data from alternative reporting tools can contribute to policing practices in several important ways. Overall, the majority of police participants in both studies were supportive of providing alternative reporting options to victim-survivors and identified several benefits both to the victim-survivors and to law enforcement functions. Police participants valued the capacity or potential to use data from alternative reports for intelligence gathering to build profiles about offenders and locations where offences occur. This can enhance police knowledge and understanding of sexual offences in the community helping improve their responses and provide better support to victim-survivors. Data from alternative reports could also assist with proactive policing and creating "disruption plans" where officers can be deployed to identified hotspots to prevent sexual assault in these locations, such as licensed venues or public spaces. Additionally, alternative reports are also perceived as valuable tools for preventing some of the problems associated with delayed complaints by providing an

⁴ Anyone aged 18 and older.

opportunity for victim-survivors to record their experiences informally for future use when they may not yet be ready to make a formal police report. This could, in some instances, enable police to act on certain information, such as collecting CCTV footage and DNA evidence in response to the intelligence lead in case a formal statement is made later.

However, we found that police actions in response to alternative reports overwhelmingly apply to more stereotypical forms of sexual assault, for example, those occurring in public spaces and violence perpetrated by strangers. Whilst this may have the benefit of extending to institutional sexual assault and abuse, such as in nursing homes, group accommodation, youth homes or residential accommodation, there is still limited action police can take in terms of incidents that occurred in private residences unless a formal report is made. This is not to say that police intervention in these situations is necessarily wanted or appropriate; however, it does leave a large proportion of people who experience sexual assault with limited criminal justice options if they do not want to make a formal complaint. This highlights the need for alternative reporting options to connect with other support services, such as sexual assault services (see Loney-Howes et al. 2022). However, we also suggest that policing agencies should consider ways they can utilise broader alternative reporting data outside of these stereotypical instances.

Police indicated that the anonymity and the unsubstantiated nature of alternative reports pose challenges, especially when information is missing and cannot be validated. This can limit the ability of police to act on alternative reports. We suggest that policing agencies consider innovative ways to utilise information from alternative reports. A major obstacle is the lack of resources—both human and data management systems—necessary to adequately use the data contained within alternative reports, potentially leading to poor outcomes for victim-survivors who expect the information they have provided to be used (see Heydon et al., 2023).

The resourcing deficiencies for maximising the value of alternative reports of sexual assault may point to the poorer treatment of sexual assault complainants (Sleath & Bull, 2017) compared to other criminal investigations that also draw on alternative reporting tools and anonymous information to solve or prevent criminal activities. It is notable that, according to the Australian Crime Stoppers website, anonymous tips have been instrumental in various criminal investigations such as identifying drug labs and dealers, apprehending fugitives, solving arsons, thefts, and robberies, as well as capturing individuals wanted for violent assaults and murders. Despite these successes, there appears to be hesitancy amongst some police officers to utilise anonymous information with the same vigour in sexual assault investigations. This reluctance, as suggested by some officers, raises questions about police treatment of sexual assault as compared to other crimes.

Indeed, lack of action taken in response to submitting alternative reports may reflect the myths about rape that still persist within broader society (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020) and within police culture—such as assumptions that false reporting is common, or that ‘real’ victims will always come forward and participate in formal investigations (Taylor & Gassner 2010; Daly & Bouhours 2010). These attitudes can undermine the legitimacy of alternative reporting mechanisms in the eyes of law enforcement, leading to limited investment in their development and implementation. In contrast, the enthusiastic uptake of anonymous tips in other crime categories suggests that when police view a form of intelligence as credible and actionable, they are more likely to pursue it. The discrepancy in responses points not only to resourcing issues but to deeper epistemological and cultural biases about which kinds of crime and victims are considered worthy of police time, energy, and belief.

Given the strong desire to develop alternative ways of reporting sexual assault, both from victim-survivors and government agencies (Heydon et al., 2023), we recommend that police agencies invest in the necessary resources to efficiently and proactively respond to the intelligence information gathered from alternative and anonymous reports of sexual assault. This may include improving data input systems and information sharing capabilities across jurisdictions as well as across relevant agencies within jurisdictions, allowing police to better utilise intelligence information and, for example, link reports about the same perpetrator. Additionally, a well-designed platform would provide opportunities for users to consent to data sharing.

Although police were enthusiastic about the potential for victim-survivors to convert alternative reports of sexual assault into formal reports, participants also highlighted concerns about discrepancies between information contained within alternative reports and statements made in court. However, some officers believed this was not an insurmountable barrier to their evidentiary use. We recommend that clarity is needed regarding how reports made through alternative reporting tools would be treated in terms of existing legislative requirements. This may require a review of legislation that considers whether alternative reports to such platforms could be regarded as protected communications and thus not subject to subpoena by the courts, or, more generally, how alternative reporting would be considered at the evidentiary level across Australian states and territories. In parallel, increased awareness of how trauma can affect memory and disclosure is critical. Targeted training and education for police and legal professionals (see for instance <https://sakitta.org/toolkit/index.cfm?fuseaction=tool&tool=48>) and the engagement of expert witnesses to provide specialist knowledge about the impact of trauma on recall could help contextualise perceived inconsistencies in victim-survivor accounts, thereby reducing the risk that

discrepancies are used to undermine credibility or halt investigations prematurely.

We also identified potential conflicts in terms of what police say they can do with confidential and anonymous reports and victim-survivors' wishes to remain anonymous. For instance, the process of collecting evidence from anonymous reports, such as DNA and CCTV footage, risks inadvertently identifying the victim-survivor to their alleged attacker. Further research is needed to understand these implications and how alternative reporting of sexual assault might fit within existing anonymous reporting methods, such as Crime Stoppers and whistle-blower mechanisms, and the ways reporters' identities can be protected whilst still enabling police to enhance community safety through investigation of anonymous reports. We recommend that the same level of consideration is given to the anonymity of those anonymously reporting sexual assault that is given to other whistleblowing mechanisms.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small ($n = 22$) and limited to specialist police officers in a small number of Australian jurisdictions. Whilst the insights offered are valuable, they may not be representative of all police views or practices across Australia and indeed globally. The perspectives of general duties officers, detectives outside of specialist sexual offence units, or police in jurisdictions not included in the study may differ.

Second, participants were recruited through police organisations and via purposive and snowball sampling, which may have introduced a degree of selection bias. Officers who were more familiar with or supportive of alternative reporting mechanisms may have been more likely to participate, potentially skewing the findings toward more favourable views of these pathways.

Third, whilst anonymisation procedures were employed to protect participants' identities, the sensitive nature of the topic and the small number of experts in some jurisdictions may still raise concerns about re-identification, which could have influenced how candidly some participants responded.

Finally, this research focused exclusively on police perspectives. Whilst their insights are crucial to understanding the institutional and operational dimensions of alternative reporting, they represent only one part of the picture. Future research—and any actions taken to implement alternative reporting mechanisms—should incorporate the views of victim-survivors, frontline support workers, and legal professionals (see for example: Loney-Howes et al. 2022; Heydon et al. 2023). Their perspectives are

essential to developing a more holistic understanding of how these mechanisms are understood, used, and experienced in practice, as well as their views on the appropriate role of police in such systems moving forward.

Conclusion

The majority of police participants in our research expressed confidence that alternative reporting pathways for sexual assault, where victim-survivors can report anonymously, could not only counter some of the barriers faced by victim-survivors in formally reporting sexual assault but could be effectively used by police in meeting some of the desired needs expressed by victim-survivors, such as community safety and assault prevention (see Heydon et al., 2023). However, police participants also emphasised that there is a need for further investment by policing agencies to maximise the information contained in anonymous reports. Further, there is a need to investigate and invest in safeguarding mechanisms to ensure that victim-survivors' anonymity is protected and that any future court proceedings are not compromised by reports submitted previously by the victim-survivor through an alternative reporting mechanism. Given the relative recency of alternative reporting tools, these concerns are yet to be tested or manifested to our knowledge. As such, the findings from this article offer police and lawmakers an important opportunity to consider the potential implications and develop a robust system of alternative reporting that ensures these challenges are accounted for and mitigated.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All the procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (clinical trial number: not applicable).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all the participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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