



[Original Article]

Characteristics of people who do not report sex crimes: considering a hypothetical situation

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Abstract

This study determined the characteristics of people who do not report sex crimes using a hypothetical scenario. We conducted a web-based survey of adult men and women regarding whom they would report to if you or your family member were sexually victimized. To encourage participation, the question was hypothetical. Participants (N = 2,208; 51.5% men) could choose from nine people to report a hypothetical victimization. These response options included family members, coworkers, and friends as examples. Multiple choices were allowed. Participants' social support, awareness of victim services, and confidence in social institutions were compared between those who chose and did not choose to report the hypothetical victimization. We conducted logistic regression analyses controlling for gender, age, and other demographics. Compared with those who would report, those who would not report had significantly lower social support ($p < .001$). Participants who would not report victimization also had less knowledge of victim consultation services and less confidence in social institutions.

Although it is under a hypothetical situation, we also proposed that improving community awareness of crime victim support and reporting services can increase the likelihood that people will report sex crimes. The study also identified the need for training on support for victims of sexual crimes for the youth generation, who are considered to be less likely to report victimization than other generations.

Key words: sexual criminal victimization, social support, victim support, crime victim

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I . Introduction

Sex crimes are a major social problem with many victims worldwide. According to national statistics, in the United States, approximately one in five people experience sexual victimization, making sexual victimization a common crime. However, only an estimated 21.4% of rape victims report the incident to the police (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs>). The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power was adopted in 1985. In 1996, the United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime issued a handbook on justice for victims for applying the principles of the 1985 Declaration. The handbook introduces the physical, economic, psychological, and social harms suffered by victims of sexual crimes and has raised awareness regarding victim support in many countries worldwide.

In Japan the Basic Act on Crime Victims (BACV) was established in 2004. Through the BACV, crime victims in Japan have been supported socially, economically, physically, and mentally. However, to receive these benefits, crime victims often must report the criminal victimization to the police or a counseling organization, which is the same for victims of sexual crimes. In Japan, according to a 2019 survey of crime victims conducted by the Ministry of Justice, approximately 85% of victims do not report sex crimes to the police, a higher percentage than other crime victims. The challenge is that many victims choose not to report their sex crimes to anyone. According to the World Population Review (2024. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country>), the number of rape victims in Japan in 2019 was 5.0 per 100,000, compared to 43.5 in the United States. At first glance, the number of rape victims in Japan seems to be lower than in the U.S. However, the definition of sexual violence is ambiguous from country to country, making a unified international comparison difficult. Considering that Western countries with higher awareness of sexual crimes have a higher number of cases, it is more likely that countries with

fewer victims of sexual crimes are the ones who are not being reported. The fact that sex crimes are not reported and accurate statistics are not available is in itself very problematic. It is necessary to create a society where people feel comfortable discussing sex crimes.

This study explores the psychosocial characteristics of those living in Japan who do—and do not—report sexual victimization.

Reporting of Sexual Crime Victimization and the Psychological Impact on Victims

The decision to report to the police is influenced by distrust that the police will not accept the report and fear of victim blaming, and many victims choose not to report because they may be hurt by the police [1,2]. Victims are less likely to report or seek help if they receive a negative response from police or victim support agencies[3]. Moore and Baker[4]surveyed college students and identified that when students were assaulted by a stranger off campus, their trust in police was higher and the more likely they were to report the incident to the police. Furthermore, the decision to file a report is largely influenced by the victim's own perception of the severity of the violence[5]. Moreover, Spencer et al.[6]surveyed college students who had been sexually victimized and found that participants who (1) had positive feelings about school and (2) had taken a course on sex crime victimization were more likely to report their sexual victimization to their university.

In other words, it is necessary for victims themselves to be knowledgeable about sexual crimes victimization when consulting with public institutions, to have a sense of trust in the institutions they consult with, and for the support institutions they consult with not to react negatively.

Victims fear being blamed or not being understood when they speak about their victimization[7,8]. The most frequent consultants among them are family and friends[9-11]. Ahrens et al.[12]investigated the reactions and subsequent impact of family and friends with whom victims reported victimization. Although the negative reactions of those with whom the victim

spoke at the time can influence subsequent trauma reactions, receiving informal help from family and friends after sexual victimization can reduce the victim's emotional burden and make it easier to seek appropriate subsequent support. Furthermore, many friends and family members of victims recommend that they report their victimization to public authorities such as the police [13,14].

In other words it is mentally effective for victims of sexual crimes to receive informal help from family members and friends if the helpers do not react negatively toward the victim, and furthermore, it is effective in the sense that it makes it easier for the victim to give official help.

Caron and Mitchell [7] found that two-thirds of women who did not report sexual crime victimization to anyone regretted not reporting it.

While it is ideal for victims to be connected to public assistance, the hurdle is high. The first step to avoid regretting not talking to anyone is to talk to someone close to you, such as a family member or friend, about your victimization. This is because, in addition to emotional support, they will often recommend that you consult the police or a public institution.

Ahrens et al. [12] found that the non-disclosing group of sex crime victims had more symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than the disclosing group. Moreover, in the United States, studies have shown that 17%–65% of victims of sexual crimes develop PTSD, which is also associated with depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder [15], and 30%–50% of rape victims develop PTSD [16,17]. However, appropriate psychological care at a relatively early stage may reduce the incidence of mental illnesses following sexual victimization [18-20]. Therefore, reporting sexual victimization and receiving appropriate support soon after victimization is crucial for the prevention of PTSD.

Talking about sex crimes in Japan

It is difficult to speak out about sexual crime victimization: in 2017 in the U.S., an actress complained about her own sexual crime victimization and called on

people who had suffered similar victimization to send out messages with “#me too” on social networking sites, which spread around the world [21]. In Japan, a freelance journalist also complained about her own sexual crimes around the same time, and although the number of people speaking out about their victimization is increasing, it is still a small number. Numerous studies on reporting sex crime victimization have been conducted in other countries, but none have been conducted in Japan since [22]. Eri and Jerry [22] conducted face-to-face surveys only with university students, and it is difficult to say that the survey was conducted as the intention of a wide range of people. Although it is necessary to survey a wide range of people, not only university students, about victimization by sexual crimes, few surveys have been conducted in Japan as of 2021. It is considered difficult to survey a large number of people about sexual crime victimization because of the invasiveness and secondary damage issues [23,24], and surveys to study the actual situation have not been conducted.

Sunyoung et al. [25] reveals that the Japanese culture values the worth of others more than self-worth. Because it is difficult for victims to voice their own victimization, the judgment of family and friends, whom victims of sex crimes most often turn to for advice, is a particularly important factor in Japan, more so than in other countries.

Research Aims and Hypotheses

The primary purpose of this study was to compare the psychosocial and demographic characteristics of Japanese individuals who said that they would—or would not—report their criminal victimization. In particular, a study focusing on those who did not report criminal victimization of sex crimes in Japan has not been conducted. Stephens et al. [9] found that there are national and cultural differences in the reporting of sex crimes; therefore, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of those who did not report criminal victimization of sex crimes in Japan. On the other hand, it is difficult to ask a large number of people in Japan about their experiences of victimization by

sexual crimes or to ask detailed questions about sexual victimization through a web-based survey, considering the psychological burden on the survey participants. Therefore, in consideration of the invasiveness and secondary damage of conducting the survey, we will broadly survey a large number of people, not only those who have been victimized, but also a wide range of people, to find out who they would consult with if they or their family members were victims of sexual crimes, and to find out the characteristics of those who do not consult with others about sexual crimes.

We hypothesized that people who perceive themselves to have little social support would not report their sexual victimization to anybody. Furthermore, Spencer et al. [6] found that individuals who had more positive feelings about school and who had taken a course on sex crime victimization in college were more likely to report their own victimization. Therefore, when applied to society in general, we predicted that Japanese participants who had more trust in institutions and knowledgeable about many social services would be more likely to report their own victimization.

II. Method

Study Design

Using the survey implementation company Macromill, we recruited 2,208 men and women (51.53% men) aged 20–69 ($M_{age} = 45.33$; $SD_{age} = 13.41$) living in Chiba Prefecture. The survey was conducted in collaboration with the prefecture's administrative agencies and the local police as part of a social research class at a university in Chiba Prefecture. As the students were required to present the survey results at the administrative agencies of the prefecture, the participants were limited to those living in Chiba Prefecture. Chiba Prefecture is located next to the capital city of Tokyo, Japan.

The personal attributes of the survey respondents were taken from a preexisting database held by the survey company. The database included only two gender options—male and female; therefore, we were limited to conducting this survey with individuals who identified

as men or women. Before answering the web survey, the participants provided informed consent.

This study was approved by the Shukutoku University Research Ethics Review Committee (2021-201).

Study Method

For this study, we asked a group of participants, "If you or a family member living with you were sexually victimized, would you report it to any of the following people or institutions? Please select all you think you would report it to." The options were family and relatives; people at work or school; friends; the police, municipalities, consultation services, and specialized agencies; lawyers and other legal professionals; counselors and other mental health professionals; psychiatrists and psychosomatic physicians; and posts on Twitter and other social networking sites. In this study, we wanted to survey men who might receive counsel as family members or friends of victims of sexual crimes; hence, I did not limit myself to my victimization but assumed that I or my family had been victimized. The survey asked about social support, knowledge of victim support services, confidence in social institutions, as well as collecting the essential attributes such as gender, age, marital status, presence of children, and highest level of education.

Measures

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

We measured social support with the Japanese version Iwasa et al. [26] of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MPSS) scale developed by Zimet et al. [27]. The MPSS is a self-rated, subjective assessment of a person's social support measured with 12 items in three subscales, each item is rated on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). The total score ranges from 0 to 48, and higher scores indicate more social support.

Knowledge of Victim Support Services

As an indicator of the amount of knowledge of

crime victim services, we used the number of victims of sexual crimes who are aware of support services for victims of sexual crimes. We based our victim support service options on the Cabinet Office’s Public Opinion Survey on Policies for Criminal Victims. We selected 14 items through discussions between Shukutoku University social research interns and the Crime Prevention Division of the Chiba Prefectural Life Safety Department (Counseling Service for Phone Fraud, Juvenile Center Consultation Services, Municipal consultation services for victims of crime, Consumer Center, Legal Support Center, Consultation Service by Lawyer, Support Center for Victims of Sexual Crimes, Police consultation phone, Sex Crimes Consultation Phone, Consumer Center Consultation Phone, Abuse Consultation Call by Child Guidance Center, Domestic Violence Counseling Phone, Children’s Rights Consultation Phone and Telephone counseling service). Participants were asked to report whether they knew about each contact point and received one point for each service they knew about.

Confidence in Social Institutions

As an indicator of trust in social institutions, we used the “Trust in Lawmakers, Bureaucrats, Large Corporations, and Police” survey conducted by Chuo Research Co. This survey has been conducted continuously since 2000 and has been used as a great reference in confidence surveys. Individuals were asked about the trustworthiness of 14 community institutions rated on a 5-point scale (1 = unreliable, 2 = somewhat unreliable, 3 = cannot say, either way,

4 = mostly reliable, 5 = reliable). The 14 communities are as follows. Self-Defense Forces, Media and Presses, Medical Institutions, Banks, Scholls, Policies, Government Offices, City Council Members, Neighborhood Associations, Lawyers, Courts, Diet Members, Large Companies and Governments.

Statistical Analysis

We used SPSS Statistics 29 for statistical processing and divided our analyses into respondents who would and would not report a hypothetical sex crime to someone. We conducted chi-square tests for gender, marital status, presence or absence of children, and education (e.g., college or otherwise). We performed t-tests for age, social support, knowledge of victim support services, and confidence in social institutions. Furthermore, for items that were significantly different after the t-test, we performed a binominal logistic regression analysis after checking for multicollinearity.

III. Results

Characteristics of Survey Participants

Two thousand two hundred-eight men and woman, aged 18 to 65, answered all of our questions. Due to the survey company’s system, the number of those who stopped answering in the middle of the survey is not known. We received responses from 2,208 participants, 1,138 (51.54%) men, with a mean age of 45.3 years (SD = 13.4). Regarding marital status (married or not), 1,372 (62.14%) were married, and 1,202 (54.44%) had children. There were 1,078 (48.82%) college

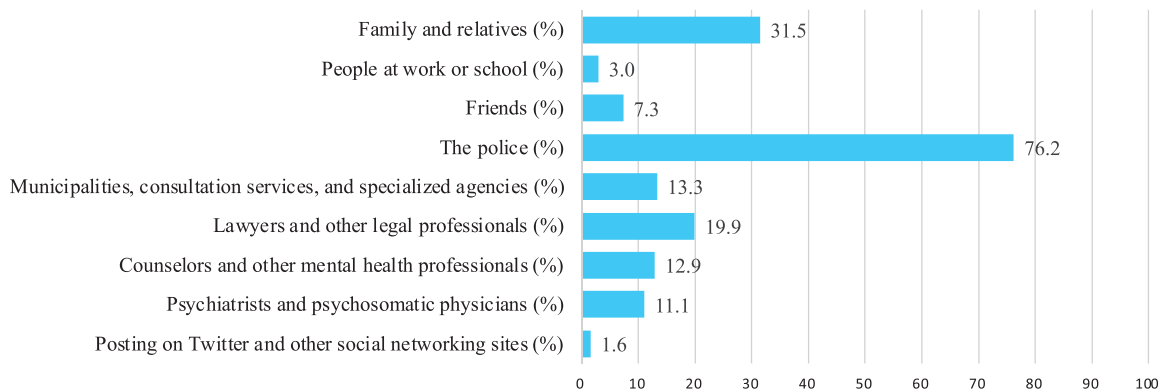


Fig. 1 Person with whom people consult with at the time of sex crime victimization

graduates. In terms of reporting, 2,010 (91.0%) of the participants stated that they would report a hypothetical sex crime to someone. Figure 1 shows the percentages of those who selected each consultation.

Characteristics of Those Who Would Not Report

Participants who said they would not report sexual victimization were significantly younger than those who would report sexual victimization ($t(2206) = 4.68, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 13.35$) and were more likely to be men ($\chi^2(1) = 14.35, p < .001$). More unmarried people than married people ($\chi^2(1) = 47.82, p < .001$) and more people without children responded that they would not report ($\chi^2(1) = 48.97, p < .001$). Moreover, more people who had not graduated from college said they would not report than people who had graduated from college ($\chi^2(1) = 9.49, p < .01$).

Relationship Between Each Scale and Availability of Victim Support

The mean score for all subjects on the MPSS was 32.83 (SD = 8.52). The mean score for those who would report sexual victimization (M = 33.46; SD = 8.11) was statistically higher than those who would not report (M = 26.47; SD = 9.82), $t(224) = 9.70, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 8.28$. These numbers indicate that participants who would report hypothetical sexual victimization perceived greater peer support compared to those who would not report.

The mean score for knowledge of victim support services was 2.54 (SD = 2.73). Participants who would report sexual victimization displayed significantly

greater knowledge of victim support services (M = 2.70, SD = 2.75) compared to those who would not report (M = 0.97, SD = 1.94), $t(281) = 11.43, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.69$.

The overall mean score for the trustworthiness of the social institutions was 42.34 (SD = 9.70). Participants who would report a hypothetical sexual victimization reported significantly higher trust in social institutions (M = 43.08, SD = 8.93) compared to those who would not report (M = 34.82, SD = 13.33), $t(215) = 8.53, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 9.41$.

Binominal Logistic Regression Analysis

Chi-square tests were conducted for gender, marital status, presence of children, and education (e.g., college), and t-tests for age, social support, knowledge of victim support services, and trust in social institutions, all of which showed significant differences, so Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated to check for multicollinearity in these items. We performed binominal logistic regression analysis using forced entry method with the presence or absence of sexual offense reporting as the dependent variable, controlling for age, gender, marital status, presence of children, and education (Table 1). The results revealed that those who would not report a sexual assault to anyone had significantly lower scores on the social support scale (OR = 0.96, CI: 0.94-0.98, $p < 0.001$), significantly less knowledge of victim support services (OR = 0.77, CI: 0.70-0.85, $p < 0.001$), and significantly less confidence in social institutions (OR = 0.95, CI: 0.94-0.97, $p < 0.001$) than those who said they would report to anyone.

Table 1 Multicollinearity and Logistic Regression Results between Respondents Who Would and Would Not Report to Someone

Exposure	VIF	B	OR	95%conf. Interval		P	p-value
				min	max		
Social support scale	1.32	-0.04	0.96	0.94	0.98	0.94	<.001
knowledge of victim support services	1.09	-0.26	0.77	0.70	0.85	0.70	<.001
Confidence in institutions	1.18	-0.05	0.95	0.94	0.97	0.94	<.001
Gender	1.11	-0.30	0.74	0.52	1.05	0.52	0.09
Age	1.30	-0.02	0.99	0.97	1.00	0.97	<.005
Marital status	1.77	-0.23	0.79	0.51	1.25	0.51	0.31
Presence or absence of children	1.81	-0.52	0.60	0.37	0.95	0.37	<.005
Academic background	1.08	0.31	1.36	0.97	1.90	0.97	0.07

Abbreviations: VIF, Variance Inflation Factors (VIF); B, partial regression coefficient B (B), OR, odds ratio (OR)

IV. Discussion

First, the results regarding whom to consult differed from previous studies. A higher percentage (76.2%) consulted the police, which contradicts the results of the research by Lorenz and Jacobsen[1]and Murphy et al.[2]. The percentages of consultation with family and relatives and friends, which are considered the most common sources of consultation, were low at 31.5% and 7.3%, respectively. This finding also contradicts the results of the research by Stephens et al.[9]and Rich et al.[10]. One possible reason for this is that the question was formatted to ask about family victimization and the assumption of the individual's sexual victimization, which may have resulted in a higher percentage of respondents who did not view the victimization as their own but rather as that of a family member. The results supported[13]study in which a high percentage of respondents were encouraged to consult the police when they were asked about sexual victimization of a family member or close friend. Alternatively, even if they would consider consulting the police in a safe situation where they have not been sexually victimized, their behavior may be different because of unexpected feelings that arise when they are actually victimized. This is an issue to be addressed in the future.

On the other hand, it made a certain amount of sense to use a web-based survey to ask a wide range of people about the victimization of sex offenders. Compared to other general Web surveys, the survey did not take long to collect or cause any problems. The results indicate the possibility of using Web surveys in Japan in the future to conduct surveys that go into the details of sexual crime victimization and victimization history.

For this study, we administered a survey asking participants whom they would report to if a family member or them were sexually victimized. We supported some of our predictions. Participants who would not report a hypothetical sexual victimization self-reported less social support, less knowledge of victim support services, and less confidence in social institutions, compared to participants who would report a hypothetical sexual victimization. Considering that

Stein and Nofziger[13]determined that people first report sexual victimization to someone close to them, it is understandable that those who felt that they had little social support were less likely to report victimization.

This study's findings align with Spencer et al.[6], who found that college students' decision to report their own sexual victimization to the university was influenced by their positive impression of the university, greater knowledge about sex crimes, and greater knowledge about help available. That is, both awareness of victim services and high levels of trust in social institutions lead to seeking support for victimization. Our survey's results further illustrate the importance of educating the public in Japan about available national consultation services for sex crimes and other criminal victimization.

Training courses related to sexual victimization may be especially important for younger individuals. Younger people are more likely to be sexually victimized compared to older people (RAINN, 2023). We also determined that younger people in our sample were significantly less likely to report a hypothetical sexual victimization, highlighting the importance of training courses for this age group. In turn, courses on sex crimes by the police and other public institutions could help to increase trust in those institutions. At minimum, these findings suggest the need for greater efforts to make the public aware of what reporting and consultation services are available for victims of sexual crimes.

Limitations

This study had the following limitations. First, we asked participants about a hypothetical rather than real experience. Second, we asked if they would report a sex crime against themselves or against a family member. While considering the mental burden in Japan, this was to determine whether a wide range of people would report sex crime victimization; however, it is likely that people would respond differently if asked about themselves alone. It could also be difficult to determine how you might respond if something were to happen to you rather than reporting on things that did happen

to you. To clarify these issues, future research should survey sexual violence victims and attempt to replicate our patterns. Furthermore, although we conducted this survey to ask about attitudes broadly, future research should also examine the attitudes of support workers, government officials, and police personnel who actually provide support. Finally, the scope of this survey was limited to Chiba Prefecture, Japan. Given the differences in city size and regional differences in Japan, future research should conduct the survey nationwide.

Conclusion

Although these results are based solely on hypothetical sexual victimization, we established some important conclusions from this survey. Participants who felt limited social support were less likely to report sexual victimization to anyone. These participants also had less knowledge of available victim support services. Moreover, participants who would not report a sex crime also had less trust in local institutions. Public service announcements and other campaigns may increase awareness of the availability of these services, trust in local institutions, and a greater sense of social support. The results suggest that communicating knowledge of available victim support services and increasing the level of trust in social institutions may promote counseling behavior for victims of sexual crimes, which is very meaningful and could serve as an argument for continued efforts to promote public awareness.

Contributors

I.Y., R.S. and E.S. were involved in study design and data interpretation. R.S. and E.S. were involved in the data analysis. All authors critically revised the report, commented on drafts of the manuscript, and approved the final report.

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Conflict of interest

E. S. is a member of the Editorial Board of the Chiba Medical Journal.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Shukutoku University Research Ethics Review Committee (2021-201).

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from R.O., upon reasonable request.

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