

Critical Policy Brief: *Models of reporting sexual assault to police*

This briefing draws upon the expertise of RMIT's Gendered Violence and Abuse Research Alliance (GeVARA) to inform policy makers and the wider community on critical challenges in sexual assault reporting facing Victoria's policing, health and workplace sectors.

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Statement of the Issue and Impact/s

Sexual violence and harassment are the focus of public attention which has highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with current responses to these problems. In particular, the reporting of sexual assault requires reform, given the consistently low rates of reporting (only 15% of all sexual assaults are reported to police according to reliable estimates).

Informal or anonymous methods of reporting are increasingly popular. For instance, many victim-survivors are using social media to disclose sexual offences.

Police services are coming under pressure to provide alternative reporting options for victim-survivors. This way, victim-survivors can have their experience documented, be connected to support services and provide valuable intelligence data to police.

Until recently, Victoria Police received anonymous reports (up to 1,200 annually) via the **Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA)** website, hosted by South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA). The SARA website was **not sustainable** because it was run by a regional Centre Against Sexual Assault which does not have the resources to maintain such a service for the whole state.

Some stakeholders are calling on Victoria Police to replicate the NSW Police initiative announced in March 2021 (Operation VEST), which promotes the use of the existing **Sexual Assault Reporting Options (SARO)** alternative reporting form.

Both NSW Police and Victoria Police are **currently working with our research team** to examine these alternative reporting options and identify opportunities for improvement.

Key Messages

- The SARA website offered users the chance to be connected to counselling services directly and was a survivor-centred approach.
- Research indicates that implementing the NSW SARO model in Victoria might not provide sexual assault victim-survivors with the best model of

care and work is required to develop a best-practice model for police intelligence gathering (see more below).

- Our current research will provide data on how informal reporting of sexual assault can be utilised to improve police responses to sexual offending and offer support for survivors.
- Research planned for 2022 will establish the features and policy framework for the implementation of a best-practice model of informal reporting of sexual assault.
- Our research findings can be utilised by all branches of government involved in:
 - justice and health responses to sexual assault;
 - responses to workplace sexual harassment; and
 - gender equality initiatives that prevent violence against women.
- Any government responses to sexual assault reporting need to be coordinated across all states and territories to ensure consistency in practices and capacity for police to respond effectively to cross-jurisdictional offending.

Overview

The research supports the use of informal reporting as a mechanism for victim-survivors to maintain control of their story, be connected to therapeutic support and fulfill their justice needs. Informal reporting also has the potential to provide a pathway to formal reporting to police. Regardless of whether a formal complaint is eventually made or not, the information in the informal reports is valuable for police responses to sexual offending (e.g., crime mapping and matching reports from earlier cases). However, there are many aspects of reporting that need to be taken into account when designing such a scheme, including the impact of questions on the victim-survivor, the duty to provide a suitable response when a report is lodged, and the accessibility of the scheme to all members of society, including speakers of languages other than English and Indigenous community members. Our earlier research has indicated that inappropriate questions can contaminate the evidence provided in the form, leading to intelligence failures for police and, where the case eventually proceeds as a formal complaint, inconsistencies across witness statements, potentially undermining prosecution in court.

NSW Police, Victoria Police and sexual assault support services in Victoria, NSW and Queensland are seeking an evidence-based approach to informal reporting and have committed time and resources to our current research project. Government policy responses to the issue need to be consistent with this approach.

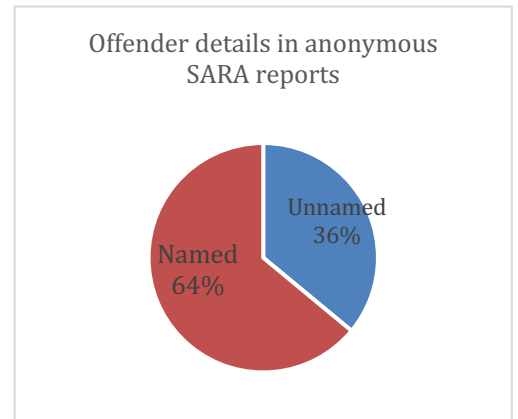
SARO vs SARA

The current political debate is focused on the establishment of an informal or alternative reporting model in Victoria to replace the now defunct SARA website. Some stakeholders are calling for Victoria to follow the path of NSW Police and provide a form like the SARO form. The research comparing the SARO form with the SARA model shows a number of points of difference:

- **Initial point of contact:** the SARO model requires the person to start with the police. This means they have to be considering a police report and then they might find the SARO form on the NSW Police website as an alternative. But only 15% of sexual assaults are estimated to be reported

to police, so the SARO model risks losing the 85% of people who are unlikely to even visit the NSW police website. The SARA model, on the other hand, started with a sexual assault support centre and provides an indirect option to report anonymously to police.

- **Quality of information:** the SARO form asks users to complete 10 pages of specific questions (two additional pages are provided for a free narrative). Research is clear that specific checkbox questioning is less likely to elicit reliable information than a free narrative. In short, it is too easy to "tick and flick" and start guessing "correct" answers if a set of options are presented that might be only partially consistent with the victim-survivor's experience. In contrast, SARA focused on the victim-survivor's well-being and autonomy. There are a few specific questions but, where possible, responses are free text. The bulk of the information is elicited in free narrative format, which allows victim-survivors to maintain control of the information and tell their story in their own words. Analysis shows that overwhelmingly, users still choose to provide details about the alleged offender (name, address) and offence (location, order of events, timing) and research tells us that this information is more likely to be accurate.



- **Accessibility:** SARO is in PDF format that has to be downloaded and completed using PDF editing software, or printed, completed by hand and then scanned and emailed or posted to NSW Police. This makes it largely inaccessible to many people, especially young people. SARA was available on a website that allowed users to complete and submit the form online.
- **Meeting justice needs:** SARO is designed as a police tool and prioritises the information that police need for crime mapping. SARA was designed to meet the justice and therapeutic needs of victim-survivors first and provide information to police via SECASA. SARA therefore prioritises the victim-survivor and places them at the centre of the process. Victim-survivors have reported that they felt better when they could tell their story in their own words, and knowing the information will go to police is also important.
- **Provision of services:** perhaps most importantly, the SARA model provided an option for victim-survivors to leave contact details (not passed on to police) to allow SECASA to contact them and provide counselling. In contrast, SARO provides information about support services on the form but does not proactively reach out to provide support (as far as we know) because the point of SARO is that it is anonymous. The SARA model is better designed in this respect because users can leave their contact details with a non-police agency (for support) but still have the information in their report passed on anonymously to police if they wish.

Government agencies can contact the research team for a briefing on sexual assault reporting issues relevant to their portfolio. We can also provide regular updates on our progress towards an informal reporting solution and put government representatives in touch with our key project contacts within the police and sexual assault support partner agencies.

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Resources:

Georgina Heydon & Anastasia Powell (2016): Written-response interview protocols: an innovative approach to confidential reporting and victim interviewing in sexual assault investigations, Policing and Society, [DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2016.1187146](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2016.1187146)

<https://theconversation.com/sexual-assault-what-can-you-do-if-you-dont-want-to-make-a-formal-report-to-police-155948>

<https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/all-projects/improving-response-justice-system-sexual-offences>

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/surge-in-sex-assault-reports-but-hundreds-may-remain-hidden-20210417-p57k1l.html>

[CASA Forum Annual Report](#) (see pages 25-26 for SARA statistics)