

#WhyIDidntReport: Exploring victim accounts of non-reporting

Criminology and Criminal Justice

Author: Dr Stephanie Fohring, Northumbria University

stephanie.fohring@northumbria.a.cuk

Abstract: Following the controversy surrounding the 2018 appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the United States Supreme Court, hundreds of thousands of victim/survivors of sexual violence took to social media to share their reasons for not reporting their experiences to the police. A sample of these tweets was collected and thematically analysed to identify the main reasons cited for the decision to not report. Results suggest that the decision to report is complex and influenced by multiple factors both within and beyond the criminal justice system including a vulnerable victim, varied types of fear, shame and blame. These findings are discussed in light of the existing literature on rape myths and the ideal victim.

Keywords: Rape, Rape Myths, Reporting, Hashtags, Victim-Blaming, Stigma

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Dr Christine Blasey-Ford, for inspiring hundreds of thousands of women to share and own their stories.

Introduction:

In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, the attack on the Capitol building on the 6th of January, 2021, and the spectacle of a former president thus far amassing no fewer than thirty-four criminal convictions, the events of the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings seem distant, and one of the lesser controversies of the Trump presidency. Since Justice Kavanaugh's inauguration, we have also borne witness to the tragic passing of feminist icon Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, and the subsequent rushed Republican replacement of her by Amy Comey Barnett, sealing the rightward swing of the American Supreme court. The Court, with a new Conservative majority of 6-3, has now overturned *Roe vs. Wade*, and abortion is now banned or severely restricted in 21 states in the US as women worldwide look on in disbelief.

The continual eroding of women's rights seems to be one of Trump's foremost legacies. Perhaps not surprising given the President himself has been found liable for the sexual abuse of one woman (E Jean Carroll) and accused of no fewer than 26 incidents of "unwanted sexual contact" and 43 instances of inappropriate behaviour (Graves and Morris, 2021). Another grim legacy we may credit the former president is the continued decline in the

reporting and prosecution of sexual violence, and the continued use of rape myths to silence, retraumatise, and deny justice to victims. Rape myths are ‘prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists’ (Burt, 1980: 217). The concept was developed in the 1970s, by sociologists (e.g., Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1974) and feminists (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975) who used it to explain a set of false cultural beliefs that were thought to underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women. These myths are many but tend to centre around victim blaming (she was asking for it), perpetrator absolution (he was drunk), minimisation or rationalisation of sexual violence (it is not that bad) (Payne et al., 1994). Acceptance of these myths has been shown to predict men’s engagement in sexual violence (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2013) and to discourage reporting/service uptake by victim/survivors (Edwards et al., 2011). A number of these myths can be observed in Trump’s defence of Kavanaugh and his attack on Dr Ford during the confirmation hearings.

These hearings took place following Associate Justice Kavanaugh being nominated by then President Trump in July, 2018 to succeed retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy. Over the course of a four day hearing, Kavanaugh was questioned and numerous witnesses testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. However, the vote of the committee was postponed when, after becoming aware of Kavanaugh’s pending appointment, Dr Christine Blasey-Ford, now professor of psychology at Palo Alto University in California, wrote a letter to Senator Dianne Feinstein accusing Kavanaugh of sexual assault while they were both in high school in 1982. Both Kavanaugh and Blasey-Ford were then invited to appear at a public hearing. Kavanaugh was further accused by two other women, Deborah Ramirez and Julie Swetnick, of separate past instances of sexual assault.

Dr Blasey-Ford provided a harrowing testimony before the Committee on September 27, where she described being "corralled" into a bedroom at a party by Kavanaugh and his friend Mark Judge. She describes being pinned to a bed, groped, ground against, forcibly had her clothes removed, and her mouth covered when she tried to scream (Blasey-Ford, 2018). Like many victims of sexual assault and rape (Calhoun et al., 1982) Blasey-Ford reported fearing for her life during the attack. Kavanaugh issued a statement on September 17, denying Ford's allegations, saying he has ‘never done anything like what the accuser describes — to her or to anyone.’ Despite this testimony, and an investigation into the allegations by the FBI, the Senate voted 50–48 to confirm Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court. Throughout the hearings Trump expressed his complete confidence in Kavanaugh, and at a rally in October 2018, openly mocked the testimony of Dr Blasey-Ford, specifically the gaps in her memory about the assault and that claiming her accusation had ‘left a man's life in tatters’ (McCarthy, 2018). Several myths can be identified in Trump’s mockery. Firstly, that a ‘real’ victim will

report rape immediately to the police, secondly, that a victim will always fightback, and finally that a real victim will consistently remember what has happened.

Literature

The enduring impact these myths have on victims is significant. A growing literature clearly highlights how victim survivors are aware of the stigma they will face, and the further trauma that will likely follow the reporting of sexual assault (Fohring, 2020). This body of work has identified numerous factors that prevent victim-survivors from reporting, including both cultural and psychological reasons. Following a brief summary of rape prevalence and reporting rates, these reasons will be further outlined below.

Of all personal crimes, rape/sexual assault has been considered the most serious and traumatic short of homicide (Koss and Harvey, 1991). Despite this, it remains ubiquitous. Estimates of lifetime prevalence suggest 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men will experience sexual violence (Breiding et al., 2014). According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), some 773,000 adults aged 16 to 74 years were victims of sexual violence in the year ending March 2022, the vast majority of them (618,000) women and girls (ONS, 2023). In the UK, an estimated 94% of sexual assaults never come to the attention of the criminal justice system with estimates from the CSEW for the years ending March 2017 and March 2020 combined, showing that fewer than one in six victims (16%) had reported the assault to the police. In Scotland, it is estimated that only one in five rapes are reported to the police (Scottish Government, 2016), and a similar picture has emerged in other European countries (Kelly, 2002), Canada, (McGregor et al., 2000) and the United States (US Department of Justice, 2020). Whilst early research exploring the reasons behind victims' reporting decisions largely relied on crime survey data and focused on incident characteristics such as perceived seriousness (Skogan, 1984) later work outlined a rational decision-making process (Greenberg & Beech, 1992). More recent revelations, drawn largely from qualitative exploration, have highlighted both social and psychological mechanisms behind non-reporting (Fohring, 2020).

Rape has been described by some as 'social death' or 'social murder,' a trauma that 'severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity' (Brisson, 2003: 40). The severing of the self from the social group is largely down to the ongoing influence of rape myths and is consistent with the 'ideal victim' theory (Christie, 1978). The theory posits that only those who are vulnerable and/or unable to defend themselves, completely innocent, have no connection to the accused, and are in possession of 'acceptable' identity and behaviour prior to the incident, will be acknowledged as 'real' victims. Accordingly, research repeatedly shows

that women who report tend to be younger, single, sexually inexperienced, have not been previously sexually assaulted, resist the assailant, and show visible signs of emotional trauma (Golding et al, 1989; Tomlinson, 2001). Those who do not fit the 'ideal', including minority ethnic women, women who have an existing relationship with the perpetrator, and those who have no physical injuries, are more reluctant to involve the police (McGregor et al, 2000). More recently, Ceelen et al., (2019) also have found that reporting was significantly less likely when the rape happened in theirs or the perpetrator's home, where there was an existing relationship with the perpetrator, the age difference between themselves and the perpetrator was small, and victims voluntarily used alcohol or drugs. Engaging in 'high risk behaviours' such as drinking or using drugs is not considered 'acceptable' behaviour and is still used to blame many victim/survivors for the violence they experience (Stewart et al., 1996; Norris et al., 1992). Victims who have been drinking at the time of their attacks are more likely to question their recollection of events or worry that their drunkenness contributed to their sexual victimisation (Weiss, 2010).

Other rape myths further exacerbate the impact of having been under the influence at the time of assault. The expectation that all events will be clearly recollected, that the incident will be reported immediately, or that the victim will have fought back are unrealistic. Additionally, there is an emerging narrative which portrays victim/survivors as 'loose' women who have engaged in alcohol fuelled sexual activities, who then 'cry rape' to avoid the shame of their promiscuousness (Barn and Kumari, 2015). The impact of these myths is consistent with results from the National Women's Study (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2010) which indicated that most rape victims were concerned about being blamed by others, being concerned about their families knowing, and their names being made public. They may also fear negative reactions from friends and family (Logan et al., 2005), including damaging personal relationships because of reporting (Gutner et al., 2006). In her research, Tomlinson found that 9 out of 10 survivors of sexual assault felt that reporting to the police would mean that a woman's personal life would be 'dragged through the mud' and 70% stated that her 'actions and decisions would be judged as inappropriate' (2001).

From a psychological perspective, victim/survivors non-reporting has been ascribed to cognitive processes such as self-blame, guilt, shame, embarrassment or wanting to keep rape a private matter, humiliation, fear, helplessness, and denial (Bachman, 1993; Starzynski et al., 2005). In one piece of recent research, Mulder et al., (2021) found that the most common reason for non-reporting was that victim/survivors experienced a conflict of emotions. While being aware of the severity of the assault and desiring to see justice done, many victims simultaneously blamed themselves to some extent. Such conflicting emotions were perceived by victims as an obstacle to reporting. This conflict of emotions was clearly demonstrated by Dr Blasey-Ford, quoted as saying:

‘As the hearing date got closer, I struggled with a terrible choice: Do I share the facts with the Senate and put myself and my family in the public spotlight, or do I preserve our privacy and allow the Senate to make its decision without knowing the full truth of his past behaviours?’

The choice is stark, and is clearly one that many victim/survivors struggle with: do I protect myself or all women? Herman (2005), in a study of 22 victims of sexual offenses, found that participants primarily reported to see incapacitation and exposure of the offender. The main purpose of exposing offenders was to seek validation from friends, family and community of the harm inflicted. As there is compelling evidence to suggest the majority of rapists are recidivists (Drury et al., 2020; Bradford et al., 2021), unreported rapes present a significant public safety issue. An Australian study with more than 30 survivors of sexual assault identified the safety of themselves and other women as key factors in reporting (Lievore, 2005) while some participants in Brooks-Haye’s (2019) research described their reasons for reporting as a feeling of broader social responsibility or movement for change. Dr Blasey-Ford herself gave such reasons, saying *‘When I came forward last September, I did not feel courageous. I was simply doing my duty as a citizen’* (cited in Pengelly, 2019).

Although for Dr Blasey-Ford, the public duty ultimately outweighed the personal harm, for others the perceived harm that would come with reporting is too great. None of the survivors in Huemmer et al.’s (2019) research reported being raped to the police, but still communicated a story of personal transformation, healing and hope. For them, reporting would have caused a further loss of control during a time when regaining a sense of agency was of paramount importance. Instead, the survivors in this study found agency by constructing a narrative that included an “old” self toward whom blame for the rape was directed. For them, the decision to report was perceived as a course of action that would expose them to the judgement of others which would ultimately leave them permanently attached to the rape.

A women’s judgement about the ‘costs and benefits’ of legal intervention might be shaped by her perceptions of institutional reactions to violence against women (Gartner and McMillan, 1995). It is well known that some rape victims have been subject to humiliation in the form of embarrassing questioning by the police and prosecutors to verify that a crime has occurred, and the handling of rape victims in the courtroom has sometimes been unethical, with questioning about the victims previous sexual history, the provocative circumstances relating to the rape, and the extent to which the victim employed physical resistance (Spohn and Horney, 1992). Further recent research from the UK using focus groups with both police officers and Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVA) reported that victims felt they lacked voice, had little control over proceedings, that officers used jargon laced, inaccessible language, and did not take the time to understand victim/survivor wishes (Hohl, Johnson and Molisso,

2022). It is practices such as these that have led some victim/survivors to describe the criminal justice process as more traumatic than the initial rape (Fohring, 2020). The trauma inflicted by the system should not be underestimated, as it has the potential to be lethal as is evidenced by such cases as that of Lindsey Hamilton, who took her own life following a brutal cross examination at the trial of her rapist in 2000.

Herman (2005) argues that the legal process is in fact ‘diametrically opposed’ to the well-being of the victim-survivor, with research dating back to the 1980s evidencing reluctance to report sexual assaults due to a lack of confidence in a CJS that assigns blame to victims rather than to offenders (Williams, 1984). This long-standing failure of the CJS to address the needs of those who have experienced sexual violence is well documented to cause additional stress to rape victims, creating secondary victimisation. This is whereby the investigative and prosecutorial process exacerbates the trauma of rape through reliving the experience, having to face the abuser, encounter disbelief, and endure a traumatic cross-examination process (Adler, 1987). The likelihood of a successful prosecution is also slim, as prosecutions for crimes of sexual violence have nearly halved since 2016, when 5,190 were brought. What’s more, of cases where charges were brought, just 1,733 resulted in convictions, a figure equal to just 0.03% of all reported rapes (let alone unreported). It is figures such as these that have led to recent suggestions that rape and sexual abuse have been effectively decriminalised (Centre for Women’s Justice et al., 2020).

To summarise, victim/survivors face numerous barriers to reporting including but not limited to: a fear of retaliation and stigmatisation, shame and self-blame, distrust of the CJS, concerns around impact on relationships and privacy, secondary victimisation, a sense of powerlessness, and societal/cultural factors such as rape myth acceptance. Given the number and complexity of these factors, research which goes beyond categorical responses to survey questions, or which collects data only from victim/survivors who have engaged with some the CJS in some way (such as via self-referral to victim support services) is necessary. That said, this is not an easy group to access for research purposes, therefore, creative approaches to researching this topic are needed. The ‘tweetstorm’ that materialised following the former president’s comments created just such a perfect opportunity.

Methodology

Following Trump’s mockery of Dr Blasey-Ford, the #WhyIDidntReport went viral, with over 720,000 tweets recorded in the first weekend. In a heart-breaking watershed, thousands of women took to social media to challenge Trump and the rape myths he supported. They shared how the blame, shame, abuse, and stigma faced by victim survivors has kept them from reporting their assaults. In the weeks following the hashtag going viral a

sample of these accounts were copied and downloaded from Twitter. An initial sample of 1000 tweets was taken, which after extensive data cleaning, resulted in a sample of 734. The cleaning removed retweets, repetitions, and any tweets which did not directly explore a person's reasons for not reporting sexual violence to the police. Ethical scrutiny and approval was provided by the author's departmental research integrity committee.

Although using Tweets as data is not a new practice in criminological research, it does carry certain methodological implications including issues surrounding representativeness, generalisability, and authenticity, as well as ethical issues surrounding anonymity. These issues therefore also affect the current study where, due to the nature of the data – publicly available tweets, little can reliably be said about the demographic nature of the sample. It is however safe to assume that most of the sample is composed of women, though some tweets may be attributed to men based on their content. Given the context of the Kavanaugh controversy, it is also a relatively safe assumption that most of the data will come from American sources, but we are not able to put a number on this. Theoretically, the profile of each tweeter could have been explored, but with the aim of promoting anonymity of the data used, this seemed counterproductive. Anonymity was sought, as although the data collected was in the public realm, tweeters could not be asked to participate in the research or give consent to their tweets being used in such a way. Therefore, in line with what the Association of Internet Researchers refers to as contextual privacy, that is, recognizing that simply because something is publicly searchable it is not necessarily intentionally public (Markhem et al, 2012, cited in Serisier, 2018), handles or any other identifying information is not included with the tweets reported here. Where authenticity is concerned, the truth of the reports shared via these tweets is not questioned but accepted as the story and interpretation offered by the writer. According to Serisier (2018) 'this does not mean simply accepting all interpretations offered and presenting them as empirical artifacts but engaging with the authors as experts on their experience.' This phenomenological approach further avoids questioning the narratives of victim/survivors, an issue highlighted in this research as a major contributing factor to non-reporting.

Once the data had been cleaned and anonymised data was coded using Nvivo, and a thematic coding process. This process followed the seven-stage model as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) where familiarisation with the data is followed by initial coding and then the generation and reflexive reviewing of broader themes. In this case, initial coding categorised tweets based on content. For example, a tweet saying '*because I'm a minor and I'm embarrassed to tell my parents*' would be coded into two nodes, one representing the age of the person, the other noting embarrassment. Following this, larger thematic codes were developed, taking into account that many of the tweets reported multiple reasons for non-reporting. Reflexivity is a major component of the TA approach as

outlined by Braun and Clarke and given the emotive nature of the data used here, a tool also important for the preservation of the researcher's own well-being. As such, the analysis was carried out over a relatively lengthy period, with the researcher spending no more than a couple of hours with the data at any one time. This approach aimed to prevent burn out, vicarious trauma, and empathy fatigue – a real threat when reading hundreds of reports of rape and child abuse, which despite the character limit of the tweets used, still had (in this researcher's opinion) amazing ability to convey so much raw emotion and the impact of sexual violence across the life course.

Results and Discussion

A simple quantitative analysis of the data suggests numerous reasons for non-reporting. Most report multiple reasons, including: 36% of the sample cited they were children at the time of the assault/s, 11% reported that the abuser was a family member or close family friend, 13% told someone and endured negative consequence as a result, 10% were too afraid, 11% didn't tell anyone until a significant period had passed, and 13% thought they would not be believed. Further qualitative analysis revealed that in addition, many also report multiple incidents of sexual violence or abuse. Therefore, an overarching theme of Multiplicity and Complexity will be discussed first, followed by three sub-themes each discussed in turn below, these are: Vulnerability, Shame and Blame, and Fear. These themes possess fuzzy boundaries and are not necessarily clearly distinct; multiple reasons for non-reporting are compounded by the fact that many tweets also reported multiple assaults where reasons for not reporting one assault may vary from another.

Multiplicity & Complexity

In the data cited above reflecting the early onset of abuse, it is already apparent that the abuse tends to be ongoing rather than a single incident. This pattern continues with many of the tweets included in the data listing multiple assaults over childhood and the life course. It also becomes clear that for many victim/survivors, there are multiple factors working together to prevent reporting. These include but are not limited to: age and a relationship with the perpetrator, power imbalances such as abuse by an employer, fear and the use of threats, blame, shame and stigma, fear of not being believed, impact on career prospects, wanting to spare others from harm, an unjust CJS, and changes in identity and relationships. These three tweets exemplify this pattern:

1. *'I was four years old. He was my grandpa. I was 16. He was my boss. I was 18. He would have hurt me even more. I was 32. He was my boss. So many hurting people'*

2. *'Because I knew I wouldn't be believed. Because I was ashamed. Because I was afraid. Because he was married with kids and I didn't want to hurt them. Because I didn't want my friends to look at me differently'*
3. *'I was in denial that it happened. I didn't want to relive it. I knew no one would believe me & I'd be blamed. I feared it would hurt my future career. I knew that the backlash, shame and consequences would be worse for me than for him'*

The phenomenon of multiple victimisation is well established and clearly evidenced in large scale victimisation surveys such as the CSEW. This body of work has made clear that while most of the population is free from criminal victimisation, a small proportion of victims experiences the bulk of crime. For example, in England and Wales 60% of the population is free from crime, while 4.3% experiences 43.5% of all incidents reported in the survey (Farrel and Pease, 1993). Granted, this reflects victimisation of all crimes, but further exploration of this data also reveals that reported incidents of child sexual abuse (CSA) tend to be part of a series rather than one offs, with more severe abuse such as that involving penetration, being the most frequently repeated (ONS, 2023).

What is less clear is how experiencing a single incident of sexual violence predisposes one to further victimisation. Being sexually assaulted greatly increases the risk of future assaults, with one study purporting that being sexually assaulted once meant a woman was 35 times more likely than others to be revictimized (Basile et al., 2022). Explanations for the phenomenon focus on blurred boundaries for victims, negative associations with sex and relationships, trauma, and substance abuse. The problem with these explanations is the focusing of responsibility for repeat victimisation with victims rather than with society or perpetrators. Instead, returning to the ubiquitous nature of rape myths and the ideal victim may be more fruitful. In the multiple reasons reported by victims/survivors above what is clear is the knowledge that survivors face an uphill battle for acknowledgement and justice. Several rape myths could be applied to the select few tweets presented here, most obviously the myths that persons who report multiple rapes should be viewed with suspicion, that rape is always reported immediately, that most rapists are strangers and violent, that victims are in some way responsible for their victimisation, and that they should be ashamed as a result. This type of secondary victimisation is likely to have an impact on the reporting of any future abuse. Research focusing on poor police treatment, specifically treatment that lacks the components of procedural fairness, has been shown to undermine trust in the police, and police legitimacy making any future engagement unlikely (Hohl, Johnson, Molisso, 2022; Tyler, 2006).

Vulnerability

A vulnerable victim, typically seen as innocent and incapable of defending themselves, is a key criterion of Christie's 'ideal', and a theme throughout tweets both in isolation and in combination with the other themes of fear, shame and blame. Perceived vulnerability shapes societal perceptions of victimhood, with those considered more vulnerable deemed more worthy of sympathy, support, and justice. Children, the elderly, or disabled persons often fit this mould because their vulnerability is readily apparent, though this does not necessarily translate into successful reporting of abuse. Although the most prevalent type of vulnerability mentioned in tweets is that the victim was a child at the time of the abuse, vulnerability on the part of victim/survivors is apparent in numerous tweets where there is another clear imbalance of power. A small selection of these tweets below list serving police officers, legislators, coaches, doctors, and Air Force Colonels as the perpetrators of abuse.

1. *Because my coach watched as my "doctor" sexually abused me. Because when I told a therapist she told me I was embellishing.*
2. *I was a medical student when women medical students were 10% of class He was a Col in Air Force & Senior Surgeon in the school Going to police was not an option*
3. *He was a sitting legislator.*
4. *Because I was 14 and two of my three rapists (each grown men) were Sheriff's deputies. In the back seat of the car I was raped in, lay the crisp white uniform shirt and the dark green windbreaker with Sheriff's Office seal on it*

Imbalances of power are central to the dynamics of rape, with some (see Buchhandler-Raphael, 2011) suggesting that rape should be reconceptualised as 'sexual abuse of power.' As seen here, the imbalance can be based on gender, social status, physical strength, authority, or patriarchy more broadly. These power disparities organise social relations and inform social and personal identities across gender, race, class, and sociopolitical lines and persist over time despite social movements and larger structural shifts (Metz et al., 2021), and manifest in environments where the more powerful individual can coerce or force the less powerful one into non-consensual sexual acts. These disparities of power contribute to the silencing of victims, discouraging them from reporting in combination with shame, blame and fear.

When vulnerability is due to the victim being a child, the age of the abuse is cited as early as 4 years of age:

1. *'My dad (step-dad) sexually abused me from the time I was almost 5'*
2. *'Because I was so young the first time it happened I didn't even know there was a word for it'*

These reports are consistent with the existing literature which indicates CSA is widespread (Barth et al., 2013). Also consistent are the number of tweets reporting that the abuser was a family member, or someone close to the family (*Because I was 12 and he was my dad's best friend; I was raped for years until I was 8 by my mother's husband*). Like sexual violence more generally, research has long suggested that most CSA is committed by someone close to the victim, with figures suggesting as few as 22% of assaults are committed by strangers, while husbands (9%), fathers (11%), boyfriends (10%), other relatives (16%), and other non-relatives, such as friends or neighbours (29%) making up the bulk of offenders (Kilpatrick et al., 1992; Johnson, 2004).

In contrast to adult victim/survivors, children are unlikely to be aware of the difficulties they face from the police or wider CJS, meaning motives for non-reporting exist independently of police mistreatment. A child victim and a related perpetrator together will make reporting less likely for numerous reasons – many further reflected in the data. Perpetrators may use threats of violence towards the victim or their family, shame, intimidation and other tactics to ensure silence on the part of victims, reasons discussed in more depth in the ‘fear’ section below. Additionally, for particularly young victims, it may not be clear that the behaviour is abusive. Kenn et al., (2008) found that children in the United States are often not socialised adequately about sexuality and sexual abuse. More specifically, the investigators found that most children report little knowledge of the medical names of their genitals and were unable to label a potentially abusive situation as such or define the activity, a phenomenon clearly reflected in the second quote above (Tilman et al., 2010).

Blame & Shame

The phenomenon of victim blaming is well documented in the literature (Kilpatrick et al, 1992; Starzynski et al., 2005) as well as popular culture. The myths that a woman’s style of dress, behaviour, whereabouts, or sexual history make women responsible for their sexual victimisation persist despite advances in research and feminist activism. The quotes presented below represent just a few of the hundreds which reported some aspect of being blamed/shamed as a reason for not reporting.

1. *‘Because I knew I’d be blamed. I knew what people would say. He is a grade school teacher. I was too considerate. I didn’t want drama. I didn’t want to have to say the story a million times. I still don’t want my family to know. I’m embarrassed, It still hurts.’*
2. *‘When asked if I was “out whoring around” that night, I gave up. That’s why we don’t report.’*

3. *'Because I was drinking. Because I was somewhere I shouldn't have been. Because I knew him. Because I kept my baby.'*

The certainty with which victim/survivors assess the likelihood of being blamed is telling. The first tweet in particular demonstrates the knowledge that victims have of the hurdles they will face should they report. It appears there may in fact be a type of cost-benefit analysis taking place, as in those discussed previously (Greenberg & Beech, 1992). Sadly though, it seems the costs, in the form of blame, stigma, fear and loss far outweigh any positives or social responsibility that may come about because of reporting.

These experiences of blame and shame are likely the most frequent experience of secondary victimisation experienced by victim/survivors, with research suggesting at least 13% of victim/survivors experiencing shame following their assault (Weiss, 2010). It is important to note that these experiences of blame/shame come not only from within the CJS, but also from the victim's own family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. The potentially deadly impact of this secondary victimisation has already been mentioned in the literature review (Lindsey Hamilton) and has led to the introduction of measures such as rape shield laws designed to prevent a victim's sexual history from being used against her. The success of these laws is however questionable with research showing that this evidence is often included without permission of the judge, and that jurors are still prone to support many rape myths (Cohen, 2023).

The theory of the ideal victim explains this particular form of secondary victimisation well – as very few real world victims will be able to meet the strict criteria to be recognised as an ideal victim, and many, if not most, will fail due to pre-existing relationships with their attacker, or from participating in a non-respectable behaviour prior to the assault (i.e. drinking alcohol). As they are not ideal, they may then, according to the theory, be considered responsible in some way for what has happened to them. Blaming victims, particularly victims who have similar characteristics to ourselves, is useful for bystanders as it reduces the fear and cognitive discomfort that arises when someone like us experiences something terrible. This creates fear and anxiety as it suggests something horrible could also happen to us. In other words, it challenges our underlying assumption that 'bad things don't happen to good people.' The role of these foundational beliefs is described in Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980), and Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986). People will go to extreme lengths to protect these beliefs, including blaming victims, for if the victim is somehow responsible for their misfortune, it implies one can protect themselves from the same fate by avoiding the behaviour/characteristic of the victims that led to the misfortune.

Fear

Fear is a powerful emotion that, in addition to causing secondary victimisation and blaming behaviour in bystanders, also directly impacts victim/survivor's decisions to report. While giving her evidence Blasey-Ford stated that *'I am here today not because I want to be: I am terrified'* a powerful example given, that even after thirty years, her fear was still palpable. Although only 10% of tweets mentioned fear specifically as a reason for their non-reporting, those that did made explicit that different types of fear are operating together to prevent reporting,

'Fear of reprisals, fear you won't be believed, fear you will be vilified, FEAR is the number 1 reason victims of sexual assault, and/or abuse don't report'

The subtypes of fear mentioned in this tweet, fear of the perpetrator, fear of not being believed and vilified were frequently repeated in others, as were other fears such as a fear of loss or losing, mostly in relation to self-identity and close relations but also more tangible losses such as a job or promotion. Given the nature of the sexual violence and abuse reported in the sample, it is not surprising that fear of the perpetrator would be a frequent experience. CSA and rape may inflict significant trauma on victim/survivors who often report a fear of death/dying during the attack, which in turn is a precursor to ailments such as post-traumatic stress (APA, 2013). Other tweeters shared that they cared deeply for their perpetrator and were worried about what could happen to that person if they disclosed. Violence and threats may also be used by abusers to instil fear and keep victims from disclosing. Where victims are children research (Foster and Hagedorn, 2014 p253) suggests they may fear getting in trouble and feel like they had done something wrong or were to blame for the abuse, patterns also evident here:

'BC I was 12. I was so scared. I grew up thinking it was my fault. I told my mom, I told my teachers, everyone told me I was lying. Because I was, and to this day, am still terrified of my abuser. I'm still too terrified to set the record straight.'

This example also demonstrates some earlier themes, including the victim being a child, blame and disbelief, but stands out as one where the victim did in fact report to *someone*, albeit not the police. Research suggests that when child victims do report abuse, they are most likely to tell their mother/the non-abusing parent (McNeish and Scott, 2018), sadly here we see that this by no means guarantees an end to the abuse or further reporting to authorities. The lack of support from family, friends, and significant others can lead women to blame themselves for the assault (Ahrens, 2006), and may reinforce negative feelings about their self-worth (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011). The decision to report is particularly complex when the abuser is a family member as victim/survivors risk the

breakdown of family relations, potentially sending someone they care about to prison, and also the hurt of not being believed by one's own family, a result reported in many tweets.

The fear of not being believed is frequently cited in the literature on reporting and is a common rationale for not revealing the abuse sooner.

'Because I feared I wouldn't be believed. Because I was afraid I would be punished and humiliated. Because I had already learned that men almost always get away with it.'

Here we can see the link between not being believed and punishment and/or humiliation. In the context of Dr Blasey-Ford's experience, who was not believed and mocked by a sitting president, such fears are far from irrational. Time and again we are witness to sensationalised court cases where complainants are not believed, humiliated, 'outed' online, harassed and threatened. After her disclosure, Dr Blasey-Ford had to hire security guards and move home no fewer than four times after receiving a barrage of abuse including threats to her life. Humiliation of victims in the courtroom is not uncommon. In 2018 in Cork, Ireland defence attorney Elizabeth O'Connell suggested *'look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front*, leading to protests and #ThisIsNotConsent and #EndVictimBlaming both going viral in the following days. More recently, the abuse of the actor Amber Heard during a civil trial with her former partner Johnny Depp, reached such proportions that her claims of abuse have been made into memes, and the trial has led to what some have termed 'the end of #MeToo' (Kantor & Twohey, 2022).

Conclusions

The rich data presented here was shared by thousands of victim/survivors in an unprecedented wave of anger, frustration, acknowledgment, and wanting to set the record straight. Victim/survivors are all too aware of the repercussions faced by women who report sexual violence, of the rape myths that perpetuate these outcomes, and the stigma, biases and secondary victimisation that await them should they choose to report. The variety and depth of the reasons given in this sample is unexpected given the character limits on Tweets but shows how creative approaches to data collection and research with so called 'hard to access' populations can be incredibly rewarding. This data set, potentially the largest ever source of data from survivors who do not report, reveals a far more in-depth and varied set of reasons for non-reporting than survey-based research would suggest, leading to the conclusion that more qualitative work is needed with victims/survivors who do not report sexual victimisation to the police – which in turn requires the need for novel approaches to collecting data from this group.

The main takeaway from this analysis may be, frustratingly, that there is no simple explanation for non-reporting. The decision to report/not will have potentially profound and life-long ramifications for victim/survivors and will not be taken lightly. That decision is influenced by many complex and interacting factors as outlined above, and includes the victims age, the likelihood of being shamed and blamed, as well as many interlinked types of fear. Secondly, as has been suggested elsewhere (see Fohring, 2020) the impact of high-profile trials and public victim blaming combined with dismal rates of successful prosecution is real and deterring women and girls from reporting. Rape myths and unachievable ‘ideal victim’ standards are still having an impact in that women and girls know they won’t be believed. The very real prospect of a second Trump presidency and the ensuing negative impact on women’s rights would no doubt only add to current deterrents to reporting.

What’s more, these enduring phenomena are persistent both within the criminal justice system and society at large; it is not just the procedural fairness within the system that is important, but the response of victim/survivor’s friends, family, and social networks more generally. Research and activism have led to major steps forward in how police investigate and respond to victim/survivors, with many forces in England and Wales now implementing the suggestions made by Operation Soteria (Hohl and Stanko, 2022). In the UK, spikes in domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic and the killing of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer has led to a renewed focus on violence against women and girls with the newly elected Labour Government promising to halve this violence within ten years.

However, more needs to be done to address the treatment of victim/survivors outside of the CJS – most don’t report, so it is not down solely to their treatment by the police. For those few victims who do report, a procedurally just approach is certainly required, and may go some way to reducing rates of attrition within the system. Sadly though, these steps will have little impact on the enduring impact of rape myths and the ideal victim in the wider world.

That said, in the words of Vermont senator Patrick Leahy to Blasey-Ford,

‘Bravery is contagious. Indeed, that’s a driving force behind the #MeToo movement. And you sharing your story is going to have a lasting, positive impact on so many survivors in our country. We owe you a debt of gratitude for that, Doctor.’ (Rep. Leahy VT, 2018)

By speaking out Blasey-Ford inspired hundreds of thousands of other women to do the same, an action which has the potential to help victim/survivors find acknowledgement, power, and ownership of their experience.

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