

The impact of sexual violence can be severe and long-lasting. Victims often suffer a range of harmful outcomes, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidal behavior, and chronic physical health problems.¹ Efforts are therefore underway to improve these outcomes, by increasing the support victims receive from both *formal* sources (i.e., professionals) and *informal* sources (family members, friends, faith communities, etc).

Informal Support

After a sexual assault, victims make many decisions, including whether and how to seek help.

- Most sexual assault victims (58-94%) seek help informally from family members or friends.²
- Especially for adolescents, this first disclosure is typically made to a friend or family member, not a formal service provider.³

The response survivors receive will then greatly impact whether they disclose to anyone else, including reporting to law enforcement or other forms of help seeking.

Formal Support

A smaller percentage of sexual assault victims also access formal support systems.

- About 5-20% report the sexual assault to law enforcement.⁴
- Less than half of sexual assault victims seek medical care or obtain a medical forensic exam (27-40%), and estimates vary widely for accessing mental health services (16-60%).⁵

Adolescents may be even less likely to access formal support than adults. For example, research estimates that 8-13% of sexual assaults of adolescents are reported to law enforcement.⁶

Barriers to Reporting

Many barriers prevent sexual assault victims from reporting or reaching out for help.

- In one study, the most common reason for not reporting was fear of reprisal (68%).
- 63% didn't report because they feared they would be blamed for their sexual assault.
- 57% stated they didn't want others to know about their sexual assault.
- 43% cited fear of the justice system.
- 51% were concerned there was not enough proof of the crime.⁷
- In another study, 6% cited the simple fear of not being believed if they reported.⁸

Criminal Justice Engagement

Social support is critical for assisting in victim recovery, but it is also a key requirement for survivors to engage the criminal justice system and hold offenders accountable.

- One study found that sexual assault victims were more likely to report the crime if they consulted with others or if they were specifically encouraged to report it by others.⁹
- Another study documented that survivors contacted an average of 2-3 support providers, either informal (family, friends) or formal (professionals), before reporting to police.¹⁰
- Again, this may be especially true for adolescents, who need support to report their sexual assault and remain engaged with the criminal justice process.¹¹

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