



Study examines sexual assault survivor experiences

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and Katherine H. TePas

Questions of justice

What is justice? Whether posed in the classroom, workplace or community, this question elicits numerous responses. Does justice mean holding an offender accountable for their actions? Does it mean punishing the offender, regardless of accountability? Ensuring a fair trial, where a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt? Is justice procedural, where fair and respectful treatment is an outcome in itself? Is it all, many, or none

of the above? If justice is multifaceted, are certain forms of justice more important, and should they be prioritized over others?

Although these questions make for lively theoretical discussions, they also have practical implications.

Two overlapping functions of state-sanctioned criminal



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justice systems are to deter crime and to acknowledge and reaffirm the legal values of society (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988). However, victimization surveys have consistently found that rates of reporting crimes to the criminal justice system are low, with the 2017 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) finding that only about half of victimization experiences were reported to

police (Morgan & Truman, 2018). When our criminal justice system only has the possibility of meting out justice for half of crimes committed, its ability to deter crime and enforce values is called into question (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988). It is therefore worth asking: What is justice for victims of crime, and

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Editor's note

I'm pleased to share the latest issue of the *Alaska Justice Forum*, and to introduce myself as the publication's new editor. After a year-long hiatus, all of us at the Justice Center are happy to be moving forward with the *Forum* again, and continuing its tradition of research and analysis on Alaska-focused criminal justice issues.

I look forward to guiding the *Forum* as it builds on its strengths and expands in new directions. In this spirit of change, the publication will be transitioning to an all-digital format starting with this issue. You will begin to receive issues of the *Forum* exclusively by email, and you can also read new articles on the [Justice Center website](#) at any time.

Our move to an all-digital format gives us more flexibility to shape the future of the *Forum* — and, ultimately, helps us ensure that it continues to be valuable for practitioners and policymakers in our state. With this in mind, we will be looking at other potential changes to the publication in the near future, which I am excited to share with you.

I also want to acknowledge that this issue comes at a time of change for the University of Alaska Anchorage, which is home to the Justice Center and the *Forum*. Regardless of the potential challenges we face, our intention is to continue adapting this publication so that it best serves its ultimate purpose: helping our readers make informed, evidence-based decisions in justice-related policy and practice. This is what makes the *Forum* such a unique resource in Alaska, and it is why we strongly believe in its enduring value.

I invite you to help us along the way. One of the best ways you can support the *Forum* is by providing your input about what you think of the current issue, which articles you find useful and relevant, and what you would like to see in this publication going forward. Please feel free to contact me at hcrandolph@alaska.edu with your ideas and feedback.

Sincerely,
Henry Randolph
Editor

what role do our contemporary systems of criminal justice play in victims' perceptions of justice? Answering these questions could open a discussion of how criminal justice systems might be modified or expanded to better create justice for victims of crime.

A limited body of research finds that that victims have varied perspectives on justice. These perspectives often diverge from "traditional" notions of justice (such as arrest, conviction and incarceration) and instead include factors such as community and official acknowledgement of victims' experiences, as well as procedural justice elements such as being treated with dignity, being given a voice, and having control in the justice process (Clark, 2010; Herman, 2005; Holder, 2018; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2018).

SAKI research in Alaska

Alaska has been presented with the opportunity to explore these questions through the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI). The Alaska Department of Public Safety has been awarded one of numerous BJA SAKI research grants across the country and is working with the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center to answer three research questions:

1. What are key stakeholders' experiences with how Alaska State Troopers (AST) sexual assault cases are handled (including investigations, prosecutions, and

victim engagement and support), and how do those experiences compare to their perceptions of just outcomes (i.e., justice)?

2. For victim-survivors, how common are these experiences and perceptions?
3. Which factors shape the likelihood of achieving these just outcomes?

Although the national SAKI focuses more exclusively on the role of sexual assault kits (SAKs) in the just resolution of sexual assault cases, the Alaska SAKI (AK-SAKI) project focuses on sexual assault case processing more broadly. This is because SAK submission decisions may often be made based on the overall strength of a case above and beyond the SAK evidence, which in turn may be influenced by gender, race, and class biases (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2018; U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Therefore, recommendations for policy, practice, and/or training which are focused too narrowly on SAKs may risk addressing only one symptom of larger, more systematic problems in how sexual assaults are handled by formal agencies (Mulla, 2014).

In January 2019, the UAA Justice Center's Assistant Professor Ingrid Johnson began collecting data to answer the first research question for this project. These data are qualitative (non-numerical) and are derived from semi-structured interviews (i.e., one-on-one, confidential conversations) with key stakeholders involved in adult sexual assault cases reported to the AST. Key stakeholder interviewees are divided into two different



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groups: first, adult sexual assault victim-survivors who reported a sexual assault to AST between 2006 and 2016; and second, system stakeholders, including Alaska state troopers, village public safety officers, victim

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Table 1. Research questions, respective utility, and data sources for the AK-SAKI research project

Key research questions	Useful for understanding...	Data sources
1. What are key stakeholders' experiences with how Alaska State Trooper sexual assault cases are handled (including investigations, prosecutions, and victim engagement and support)? How do those experiences compare to their perceptions of just outcomes (i.e., justice)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether policies and procedures are being followed uniformly at the ground level (i.e., in practice). • Potentially unintended implications of policies, procedures, and/or practices. • The range of stakeholders' experiences/perceptions of policies, procedures and practices. • The range of stakeholders' perceptions of just outcomes (i.e., justice). • Potential intersections and conflicts among stakeholders' experiences and perceptions. 	Semi-structured, qualitative interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-survivor stakeholders • System stakeholders
2. For victim-survivors, how common are the experiences and perceptions identified in Research Question 1?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How commonly victim-survivors experience and perceive just outcomes (i.e., justice) in sexual assault reporting processes and resolutions. • How commonly valued these just outcomes are. 	Quantitative data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-survivor surveys • Electronic records from Alaska's departments of Public Safety and Law
3. Which factors shape the likelihood of achieving just outcomes (i.e., justice)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas to be addressed in improving sexual assault investigations, prosecutions, and victim engagement and support processes. 	Quantitative data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-survivor surveys • Electronic records from Alaska's departments of Public Safety and Law

Table 2. Measurement and analysis examples

Data sources	Measurement examples	Analysis examples
<p><i>Semi-structured, qualitative interviews with:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-survivor stakeholders • System stakeholders 	<p><i>Victim-survivor interview questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you have an exam in which evidence was collected, sometimes known as a SART or forensic exam? • If yes: What was that like? What do you remember the most? Do you know if they learned anything from your exam? <p><i>System stakeholder interview questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me more about the forensic exam process, also known as a SART exam? 	<p><i>[Not applicable]</i></p>
<p><i>Quantitative data:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-survivor surveys 	<p><i>Potential victim-survivor survey questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you have an exam in which evidence was collected, sometimes known as a SART or forensic exam? (yes/no) • Do you believe that justice was done in your case? (yes/no) 	<p><i>Potential victim-survivor survey analysis:</i></p> <p>Does conducting a SART exam increase the likelihood that a victim-survivor feels that justice has been done in their case?</p>
<p><i>Quantitative data:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alaska Department of Public Safety and Department of Law electronic records 	<p><i>DPS electronic records:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was a SART exam conducted? (yes/no) <p><i>DOL electronic records:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the case accepted for prosecution? (yes/no) 	<p><i>Potential electronic record analysis:</i></p> <p>Does conducting a SART exam increase the likelihood that a case will be accepted for prosecution?</p>

SAKI
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advocates, sexual assault nurse examiners, sexual assault response team coordinators, prosecutors with the Alaska Department of Law, public defenders, judges, and Alaska State Crime Detection Laboratory forensic analysts. A total of approximately 80 key stakeholder interviews will be conducted (40 with victim-survivor stakeholders, and 40 with system stakeholders).

The one- to two-hour interviews focus on interview participants’ experiences with the

viders, and other partners across the state to reach as many victim-survivors as possible. They have used multiple mediums to disseminate information about the study, including recruitment flyers at physical locations, email and social media, and local media coverage. Potential participants contact Johnson, who screens them for eligibility and, if they are eligible, conducts the interview.

Understanding experiences and perceptions

After interviews are recorded and transcribed, research technicians identify and cross-validate themes and concepts. The goal

answering these questions requires different, quantitative data to supplement the qualitative interview data used in the first portion of the project (see Table 2). Electronic records of incident reports from the Department of Public Safety and Department of Law will provide some of these quantitative variables, such as victim-survivor demographics (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity) and the relationship between the victim-survivor and suspect. Other variables, such as whether survivors are treated with dignity, will be gathered through surveys of sexual assault victim-survivors who have reported to AST. The research team will use these quantitative data to address two questions: first, how common the experiences and perceptions identified in the first portion of the project are for victim-survivors, and second, what factors influence the likelihood of achieving just outcomes.

This is one of the few projects directly incorporating victim-survivor voices in Alaska research. The findings will be used to develop a framework for agencies across the state to improve sexual assault investigations, prosecutions, and victim engagement and support.

Find full citations on page 9.

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What is justice for victims of crime, and what role do our contemporary systems of criminal justice play in victims’ perceptions of justice?

reporting and investigation process, their perceptions of why and how the case (or cases) was handled the way it was, and what the participant wanted out of the process in order to achieve justice. For victim-survivors, the questions are framed in reference to their specific case. For system stakeholders, the questions are framed in reference to AST sexual assault cases more broadly.

While system stakeholders were randomly selected for interviews, victim-survivor recruitment required a more varied and sometimes personal approach. Johnson’s research team is working with advocacy and tribal groups, health care and victim service pro-

is to understand what key stakeholders’ experiences are with how Alaska State Trooper sexual assault cases are handled (including investigations, prosecutions, and victim engagement and support), and how those experiences compare to the stakeholders’ perceptions of just outcomes, or justice. The data collected in this portion of the project will be useful for better understanding several aspects of sexual assault reporting processes and resolutions (see Table 1).

The research team will use the findings from the first research question to determine which factors to measure and assess in the second and third research questions. An-

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