

Research Revelations

Helpful or harmful?: The impact of service use on sexual assault victims

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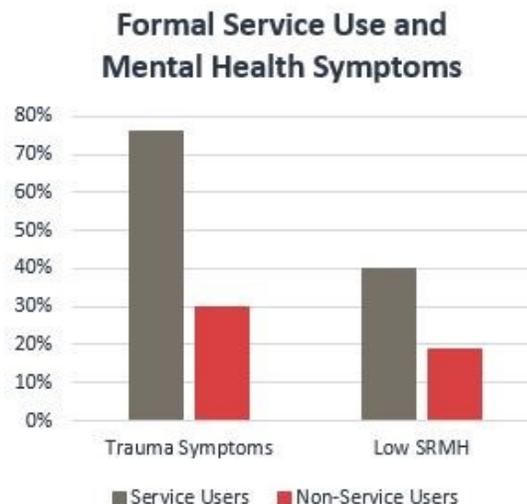
WHAT DID WE DO?

In the aftermath of a sexual assault, very few victims choose to disclose the assault to a formal support service (e.g., police, lawyers, physicians, psychologists, crisis centres). In fact, only about 30% of victims tell anyone other than friends or family. Research suggests that this reluctance may be justified; interactions with formal support services can increase symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and may lead to psychological distress in the form of anxiety and depression (Campbell, 2008). To date, no research has been done to determine if these findings would be similar in a diverse sample using Canadian services. The present study analysed 242 Canadian adults (aged 15+) who had described a sexual assault within the previous year. The sample was drawn from the 2014 General Social Survey. Based on their answers to several multiple choice questions, we looked at the relationship between mental health symptoms and whether or not victims used a formal support service.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

In line with previous findings, only 22% of people in this study had reached out to formal help services. This help-seeking group reported significantly higher levels of trauma symptoms, and had lower self-rated mental health (SRMH) scores compared to those who did not use a service. While 76.5% of those who disclosed to a service reported trauma symptoms, only 30% of the nondisclosure group reported the same symptoms. Similarly, more than double the proportion of those who disclosed to a formal service reported low SRMH compared to those who did not disclose 39.6% of the sample and 18.5% of the sample,

respectively). Conversely, disclosures to family and friends were not related to significant differences in trauma symptoms.



KEY MESSAGES

- Most victims of sexual assault do not report their experience to a formal support service
- Those who do report to a formal service experienced significantly more mental health issues compared to those who didn't
- Important for service providers to understand the trauma experience and ensure efforts to contact support services do not re-traumatize victims

KEY TERMS

- **Formal Support Service:** Services designed to help victims of sexual assault (e.g. police, counsellors, etc.)
- **General Social Survey:** A phone survey the Canadian government conducts every year to see what a diverse, representative group of Canadians' perspective is about a specific topic

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WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The study's findings suggest that the present model of treatment and justice for sexual assault victims may be more harmful than helpful, and that further research and service reform should take place to ensure that victims efforts to contact service providers does not enhance or exacerbate symptoms of trauma. We recommend that future studies compare psychological outcomes by type of service used and the outcome of the service use. Furthermore, future studies should break down specifically which aspects of disclosing to formal support services are traumatizing and work with those service providers to improve victim outcomes with evidence-based changes.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS?

This research, in combination other studies of its kind, sheds light on the importance of reactions to trauma as predictors for recovery. For service providers, it is crucial to understand this relationship as well as how to mitigate negative outcomes and reactions from victims. Trauma-informed training and advice may be key to providing meaningful and positive support to victims.

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