



A SURVEY OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

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Contents

List of Tables	3
Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	5
1. Purpose and Background	7
2. Methodology.....	8
3. Findings.....	9
3.1 Demographics.....	9
3.2 Child Sexual Abuse.....	9
<i>3.2.1 Reporting Child Sexual Abuse</i>	<i>10</i>
3.3 Adult Sexual Assault	11
<i>3.3.1 Reporting Adult Sexual Assault</i>	<i>11</i>
3.4 Emotional and Psychological Effects.....	12
3.5 Coping Mechanisms	13
<i>3.5.1 Positive Coping Strategies.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>3.5.2 Negative Coping Strategies.....</i>	<i>15</i>
3.6 The Criminal Justice System	16
<i>3.6.1 Learning about the Criminal Justice System</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>3.6.2 Confidence in the Criminal Justice System.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>3.6.3 Staying Informed throughout the Criminal Justice Process</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>3.6.4 Trial Information and Disclosure of Third Party Records</i>	<i>17</i>
3.7 Suggestions	17
<i>3.7.1 What Survivors Need to Know about the Criminal Justice System</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>3.7.2 Informing Survivors</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>3.7.3 How the Criminal Justice System can Better Meet the Needs of Survivors.....</i>	<i>18</i>
4. Conclusion.....	19
References	22
Appendix A.....	24

List of Tables

TABLE 1. COMMON REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE TO POLICE	10
TABLE 2. COMMON REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING ADULT SEXUAL ASSAULT TO POLICE	11
TABLE 3. SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM	16
TABLE 4. PARTICIPANTS' LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM	17

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Executive Summary

Child sexual abuse (CSA) and adult sexual assault (ASA) are among the most underreported crimes in Canada. What is known about these crimes is that the victims are most often female, representing 87% of police-reported sexual assaults in 2012. It is also known that Canada's northern territories have the highest rates of violent crime and sexual assault in Canada. A large majority of the residents of the territories are Aboriginal and Aboriginal individuals in Canada, especially women, experience violence and sexual assault at an extremely high rate.

Because of the high levels of sexual assault and low frequency of reporting, it is important to understand the experiences and needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in the North. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal survivors of CSA and ASA in Canada's northern territories in terms of reporting practices, coping strategies and experiences with the criminal justice system.

Methodology

This study involved interviews with 34 survivors of child sexual abuse and/or adult sexual assault from three communities in the Northwest Territories. The Research and Statistics Division worked closely with a sexual assault centre in the Northwest Territories to develop the interview tool, which was a 76-item survey that included both categorical and open-ended questions (please see Appendix A for a copy of the survey). The sexual assault centre recruited participants and a counsellor with the sexual assault centre conducted the interviews.

Findings

All but one participant in this study was female. The participants were between 17 and 57 years old and 88% self-identified as Aboriginal. More than two thirds of the participant had an annual income of less than \$15,000.

Twenty participants stated that they experienced both child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault.

The majority (n=30) of the participants experienced child sexual abuse, with 24 of these individuals reporting that they experienced multiple incidents of abuse. Many of those who experienced sexual abuse as a child were abused by a relative or an individual in a non-biological father role (e.g., step-father). Only eight participants reported the child sexual abuse to the police or told another individual who reported the abuse. Most of those who did report the child sexual abuse said that they did so because they felt that they needed to take action or that they wanted to address negative feelings. Twenty participants stated that they did not report the abuse and many indicated that this was because they were ashamed or embarrassed, or because they did not know that they could report the abuse.

Twenty-four participants experienced adult sexual assault and many of these participants (n=14) experienced multiple incidents. The majority (n=22) of the participants said that they knew their offender, who included individuals such as intimate partners, acquaintances and relatives. As was the case with CSA, very few participants said that they reported adult sexual assault (n=10).

Those who reported their assault provided similar reasons as those who reported CSA, as did those who did not report the adult sexual assault(s).

Almost all of the participants stated that they experienced emotional and/or psychological effects as a result of their victimization. Some of the emotional and psychological effects described included depression, anxiety and difficulties with trust. Many participants experienced multiple effects and many struggled with their trauma throughout their lives.

The participants were also asked to describe mechanisms that they use to cope with the effects of their trauma. The majority of the participants described using multiple approaches to coping, which were both positive and negative. Positive coping strategies included religion and spirituality, natural and professional supports, and volunteering and helping others. Negative coping strategies included addictive behaviours, self-harm and attempting suicide.

The participants were also asked several questions regarding the criminal justice system. Participants stated that they learned about the criminal justice system through a number of different sources and formats, including the media and the police. The participants were also asked about their confidence in various elements of the criminal justice system, including the police, the court and the criminal justice system in general. The majority of participants indicated that they were not confident in these elements of the criminal justice system.

Participants provided suggestions to other survivors of CSA and ASA about what they need to know about the criminal justice system. Many of the participants encouraged other survivors to report the abuse and to know that help is available, but to also be aware that it can be a lengthy and difficult process. The participants provided several ideas on how this information could be shared with survivors, with many suggesting that school programs and school counsellors can share this information with students.

Finally, the participants provided a number of suggestions on how the criminal justice system can better meet the needs of survivors. Three main themes emerged: survivors need more support; survivors need more help with navigating the criminal justice system; and survivors would like to see a balance in how survivors and accused are treated.

Conclusion

This study provides an overview of the experiences of survivors of sexual violence in one of Canada's northern territories. Many of the survivors experienced both CSA and ASA throughout their lifetime. Consistent with previous research on sexual victimization, the study found that few reported their abuse and/or assault to the police. The survivors also described a number of psychological and emotional effects of their traumatic experiences, as well as several positive and negative coping strategies, which were also consistent with previous research findings. In addition, the survivors provided their perspectives on the criminal justice system and on how the criminal justice system can work to better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence. It is hoped that the information in this report can be used by stakeholders in their work to better respond to the needs of survivors of sexual violence.

1. Purpose and Background

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) and adult sexual assault (ASA) in one of Canada's northern territories in terms of reporting practices, coping strategies and experiences with the criminal justice system. It is difficult to determine with accuracy the true nature and prevalence of CSA and ASA, as these crimes are among the most underreported violent crimes in Canada. Indeed, in 2009, it is estimated that 88% of victims of self-reported sexual assault, aged 15 and older, did not report the incident to the police (Perreault and Brennan 2010). What is known about these crimes, however, is that the victims of both are most often female. Females represented the majority (87%) of survivors of police-reported sexual assault (Levels 1, 2 and 3) in 2012¹ and 70% of self-reported sexual assaults in 2009 (Perreault and Brennan 2010).

What is also known is that Canada's northern territories have the highest rate of violent crime and sexual assault in Canada. In 2010, the rate of police-reported sexual assault in the territories ranged from 2 to 6 times greater than Manitoba, the province with the highest rate of police-reported sexual assault.²

A large proportion of residents of the territories are Aboriginal.³ Aboriginal individuals in Canada experience victimization at a much higher rate than non-Aboriginal individuals in both the provinces and the territories (Perreault 2011; Perreault and Hotton Mahony 2012). For example, in the Canadian provinces in 2009, the rate of self-reported sexual assault was almost 3 times higher among Aboriginal individuals compared to non-Aboriginal individuals (Perreault and Brennan 2010). In the territories in 2009, the rate of self-reported violent victimization (including sexual assault, robbery and physical assault) was higher among Aboriginal individuals (252 per 1,000 population) than among non-Aboriginal individuals (145 per 1,000 population) (Perreault and Hotton Mahony 2012). Aboriginal females, specifically, experience violence at an extremely high rate. In 2009, the rate of self-reported violent victimization perpetrated against Aboriginal women in the provinces was three times that of non-Aboriginal women (Brennan 2011).

Aboriginal females in the territories are among the most vulnerable populations in Canada, in terms of violent victimization and sexual assault. Because of the high levels of sexual assault and low frequency of reporting, it is important to understand their experiences, as well as those of non-Aboriginal women in the North, to ensure that their needs are understood.

In the Northwest Territories, there are a number of services available to victims of crime. Victim Services provides a number of services, including information, referrals to community programs, support and assistance with victim impact statements and attending court.⁴ Victim Services programs are available in a number of communities around the territory. In rural and remote areas, services are provided via telephone and there are outreach services available in some

¹ These data are based on data obtained from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

² Data were obtained from a special request to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

³ The largest representation of Aboriginal individuals in Canada is seen in Nunavut at 85%, followed by 50% in the Northwest Territories, and 25% in the Yukon (Statistics Canada website 2010).

⁴ <http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/victimservices/documents/VictimServicesCard.pdf>

communities. Victims can also obtain services from Crown Witness Coordinators (CWCs) who are federal employees of the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. CWCs “locate, support, and prepare crime victims and witnesses for their role in the prosecution of crimes. CWCs act as liaisons between the Crown Prosecutor and victims/witnesses, keeping both parties apprised of developments and situations which impact the case. CWCs encourage the use of Victim Impact Statements, assist in the arrangements of testimonial aids, attend court with victims/witnesses and follow up with them as necessary” (Levan 2010, 4). In addition to Victim Services, the Northwest Territories has a number of other non-governmental organizations that provide services to victims including the centre involved in the current study.

The current study builds from a survey of sexual assault survivors conducted in the late 1990s (Hattem 2000) which posed questions about the production and disclosure of third party records.⁵ In addition to the questions about disclosure of third party records, this study also asked survivors about their confidence in the criminal justice system, how they obtain information about the justice system, and sought suggestions on how to improve understanding of the criminal justice system and how the justice system can better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence.

2. Methodology

This study involved interviews with 35 survivors of sexual violence in the Northwest Territories. One individual was not able to complete the questionnaire; as such, the analyses below reflect the data collected from 34 individuals. Data were collected in three communities across the Northwest Territories. The interviews were conducted in 2009.

The specific research questions that guided this study included:

1. What were the experiences of sexual abuse and sexual assault as children and/or as adults? To what extent did participants experience both types of sexual violence?
2. What was the impact of the sexual assault/abuse on the participants? What kind of coping mechanisms did the participant employ?
3. What factors facilitated and/or impeded reporting to the police?
4. What are the experiences of survivors with the criminal justice system in cases where they did report the sexual assault to the police? What is the participant’s overall level of confidence with the criminal justice system?
5. What are the main sources of information from which survivors learn about the criminal justice system?
6. What are the main suggestions provided by the participants in terms of what survivors of sexual violence need to know about the criminal justice system and in terms of how the criminal justice system can better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence?

⁵ During the 1980s and 1990s, there were significant changes to Canadian sexual assault laws through both legislation and the courts (see McDonald et al. 2004). One such change involved the amendment of the *Criminal Code* that added provisions around the disclosure of third party records, which resulted from the passing of Bill C-46 in 1997 (McDonald et al 2004). This legislation was upheld in the 1999 Supreme Court of Canada case of *R. v. Mills* (*R. v. Mills*, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 668)

The interview tool was a 76-item survey that included both categorical and open-ended questions (please see Appendix A for a copy of the survey). The survey consisted of questions relating to demographic information and experiences of CSA and ASA. The survey also included questions on the psychological effects of abuse, coping, reporting practices, and experiences with, and confidence in, the criminal justice system. The survey was based on that used in Hattem's (2000) study⁶ and was further developed in collaboration with several sexual assault centres. A sexual assault centre in the Northwest Territories was also involved in the development of the survey and provided feedback regarding the consideration of important cultural factors that exist in Northern communities. Interviews were conducted by a counsellor with the centre in the Northwest Territories

The centre in the Northwest Territories recruited participants by contacting other service provider agencies, as well as current and former clients, through telephone, email, and in person. These contacts were invited to participate in the study through a written invitation describing the purpose and nature of the study. Participants received \$50 to cover transportation and childcare costs. Prior to the interviews, the participants were provided with information regarding the study (including information regarding the confidential nature of the survey), as well as a list of counselling and support services. Participants were also screened for levels of distress prior to the survey to ensure that they were prepared to participate and to assess the potential impact of participating in the survey.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographics

All but one participant in this study were female. The participants were between 17 and 57 years of age and the median age was 40. The majority of the participants self-identified as Aboriginal (n=30), while the remaining participants self-identified as Caucasian. Many of the participants were single (n=15), six were in a common-law relationship, and the remainder were married, dating, separated, or divorced. Fourteen participants had completed some high school, while the remainder had some post-secondary education (n=11), had completed high school education (n=5), or had completed elementary school (n=4). The annual income of the majority of the participants (n=22) was less than \$15,000.

3.2 Child Sexual Abuse

This study explored participants' experiences with CSA and ASA. Previous research has found that those who experience CSA are at an increased risk of being re-victimized (e.g., Classen et al. 2005; Ogloff et al. 2012), including experiencing sexual victimization as an adult (e.g., Desai et al. 2002). Many participants (n=20) in this study reported experiencing both types of victimization. In this section and in Section 3.3, the two types of experiences are explored in detail separately; in the remainder of the report, the experiences are considered together, unless otherwise specified.

⁶For a copy of this report, please visit: http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr00_4/rr00_4.pdf

Many of the participants in this study defined adult sexual assault as having occurred when they were teenagers. In the *Criminal Code of Canada*, the age applied in the definition of a child in the various child sexual abuse-related offences varies. For example, in S. 151 (sexual interference) and S. 152 (invitation to sexual touching), a child is defined as being under 16 years old, while in S. 163.1 (child pornography) and S. 172.1 (luring a child), a child is defined as being under 18 years. Also, the provisions concerning the use of testimonial aids (Sections 486.1 to 486.3) pertain to children under the age of 18 years. For the purposes of this study, the research team defined CSA as abuse that occurred when the participant was 15 years of age and younger, while adult sexual assault is defined as an assault that occurred when the participant was 16 years of age and older.

Thirty participants in this study reported they experienced childhood sexual abuse. Of those who said they experienced CSA, most (n=24) had experienced multiple incidents of abuse. The participants reported experiencing CSA between the ages of 2 and 14 years old, with the most common age being 8 years old. Many reported that they had been abused by a relative or an individual in a non-biological father role (e.g., step-father).

The participants reported different forms and severity of abuse, from fondling to penetration. Thirteen participants described being threatened verbally by the perpetrator and 11 stated that the perpetrator had made such threats to the safety of others (e.g., family members and friends). Many (n=17) stated that physical force had been used by the perpetrator, and in nine cases, this force resulted in injury to the survivor. Two participants reported that the perpetrator had used a weapon, including scissors, a knife and a gun. Three participants reported that drugs had been administered during the offence; in two cases, the survivor was given alcohol.

3.2.1 Reporting Child Sexual Abuse

Among those who described experiencing CSA, a large number of participants (n=20) did not report the abuse to police or have the abuse reported by another person. At the time of the interview, only one participant was considering reporting the abuse to the police. Some participants chose not to report because of feelings of shame and embarrassment, while others did not know they could report or thought they would not be believed. Table 1 below highlights other common reasons why participants chose not to report.

TABLE 1. COMMON REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE TO POLICE (N = 20)⁷

Reason for Not Reporting CSA	n
Shame/Embarrassment	7
Did not know they could report	5
Thought they would not be believed	4
For the sake of the family	4
Cultural intimidation ⁸	4
No family support	3
Fear of the offender	3

Source: Survey of Survivors of Sexual Violence, 2009

⁷ Note that participants could provide more than one reason for not reporting.

⁸ Cultural intimidation includes bad medicine and other types of intimidation.

Eight participants reported the abuse to the police or to another person who reported the abuse. Of those who reported, most (n=5) did so because they felt that they needed to take action. Other reasons for reporting included the need to address negative feelings (n=2) and recommendations to report made by counsellors (n=2), family (n=2) or friends (n=1). The time that participants took to report the abuse ranged from immediately after the incident(s) to 27 years after the incident(s).

3.3 Adult Sexual Assault

Twenty-four participants reported that they experienced adult sexual assault and 14 of these participants experienced multiple sexual assaults. The participants reported experiencing ASA between the ages of 16 and 48 years, with the most common age being 16 years. In the majority of cases (n=22), the offender was known to the participant. The offenders were described as intimate partners (n=7), acquaintances (n=4) and relatives (n=4). Seven participants stated that some family or community members thought or commented that the participant had a relationship with the offender.⁹

The participants stated that they experienced many types of sexual assault, including penetration. A number of participants (n=10) stated that they had been verbally threatened by the perpetrator and five participants reported that the offender had made such threats to the safety of others (e.g., family and friends). Many participants (n=20) stated that the offender had used force during the commission of the offence. The force used in the commission of the sexual assault resulted in injury for 11 participants and eight participants required medical attention. Two participants stated that a weapon was used during the commission of the offence; in both cases, a gun was used. One participant reported that a drug was used in the commission of the offence and included the placement of a drug in the participant's alcoholic beverage.

3.3.1 Reporting Adult Sexual Assault

As was the case with child sexual abuse, a large number (n=14) of participants who experienced ASA did not report the incident to the police or have another person report the assault. At the time of the interview, none of the participants were considering reporting the ASA to the police. The most common reasons for not reporting the sexual assault was shame and embarrassment, the thought that they would not be believed and fear of the offender. Table 2 below highlights the most common reasons for not reporting ASA.

TABLE 2. COMMON REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING ADULT SEXUAL ASSAULT TO POLICE (N = 13)¹⁰

Reason for Not Reporting ASA	n
Shame/Embarrassment	5
Thought they would not be believed	4
Fear of the offender	3
No family support	2
No confidence in the criminal justice system	2

⁹ This question was included to reflect the idea that if the residents of the community thought that the victim had a relationship with the accused, they may not perceive the incident as a crime.

¹⁰ Note that participants could provide more than one reason for not reporting.

Felt there was not enough evidence	2
Previous bad experience	2

Source: Survey of Survivors of Sexual Violence, 2009

N Missing=1

Ten participants who experienced ASA reported the assault to police or had another person report the assault. Reasons for reporting included the need to take action, to address negative feelings and because a family member or friend recommended it. The time it took for participants to report the assault ranged from soon after the incident to one week.

3.4 Emotional and Psychological Effects

CSA and ASA can have very detrimental effects on its survivors. Child survivors of CSA have been found to portray a number of symptoms, such as “depression, PTSD, somatic complaints, aggression, behavior problems and sexualized behavior” (Kendall-Tackett et al. 1993 as cited in Wathen 2012, 13). CSA can also have long-term effects. Long-term impacts of CSA include “post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and behavior problems including withdrawal, sexualized behavior and ‘acting-out’. Issues in relation to depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, bipolar disorder, violence and substance abuse also follow CSA”(Mullers and Dowling 2008, 1428). Survivors of ASA also experience many negative effects, including anxious arousal, depression, dissociation and sexual concerns (Elliott et al. 2004).

Indeed, the emotional and psychological effects of the trauma were very strongly noted by the participants through an open-ended question. Almost all of the participants indicated that they experienced emotional and/or psychological harm as a result of the traumatic experience. The psychological harm experienced as a result of child sexual abuse was very similar to the harm experienced as a result of adult sexual assault.

Depression, Anxiety and Difficulties with Trust

The feelings associated with depression were the most common emotional and psychological effects of CSA and ASA described by the participants. These feelings included feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness and suicidal thoughts. In addition to these depressive symptoms, feelings of shame and guilt, low self-esteem, self-blame and isolation were also common. Indeed, many of the participants described multiple psychological after-effects. The multiple psychological effects were noted by one participant:

There was massive emotional psychological [...] impacts. Huge was depression, suicidal idealization, a real notion that I was not a valuable thing or that I couldn't do anything about anything. So it was really, I didn't have any real [...] core value system that I could identify...

Anxiety was also a very common feeling described by the participants. Some of the participants described experiencing flashbacks and a few participants who had suffered childhood sexual abuse stated that they suffered from symptoms related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Similarly, feelings of fear were described by some of the participants. While some described being fearful of the offender, a general fear was felt by some of the participants. Many participants also described difficulties with trust and personal relationships. For some of the participants, this lack of trust was combined with other psychological difficulties. One participant described the impacts this way:

I can't have any relationships lasting more than three months with any men or [...] I have no trust [...], really low self esteem ... I'm even ... tried to commit suicide and ... I don't know I just have a really hard time with personal relationships...

Lasting Emotional and Psychological Effects

For some of the participants, the psychological effects of the abuse and/or assault were ongoing. The long-lasting effects of the abuse and/or assault were clearly noted by one participant, who described the ongoing struggles she was having as a result of her assault:

Well, I just been [...], I just been bugging me for how [many] years. I can't barely sleep, I just... [thinking] about all the past that I been through. And for that guy for causing my life a misery [...] I'm tired of my mind. I'm just so depressed ... don't get enough sleep, just always stress, stressed out all the time. I try not to think about my past but it just keep on ... coming back and bugging me over and over for past how many years.

3.5 Coping Mechanisms

Previous research has found that victims of crime can adopt a number of different strategies to cope with their traumatic experiences, which can be positive or negative (Hill 2009). In this study, the participants described, through an open-ended question, positive and negative mechanisms that they used to cope with the effects of their trauma, many of which are common coping mechanisms used by victims of crime (e.g., seeking support, self-harm). In addition, the majority of participants described using multiple approaches to coping, both positive and negative. Many of the coping strategies used by those who had experienced child sexual abuse were also used among those who experienced adult sexual assault.

3.5.1 Positive Coping Strategies

The participants described adopting several positive coping strategies, including turning to religion, natural and professional supports, volunteering and helping others, emotion-focused coping and cognitive reframing.

Religion/Spirituality

... on Sundays there was always church.

One of the most common forms of coping that survivors turned to was religion and spirituality. Turning to religion as a coping strategy was described by survivors of both CSA and ASA. Many of these participants described attending church and prayer as helping.

Natural and Professional Supports

Supports, both natural and professional, play an important role in helping to mitigate the impacts of violent victimization, particularly in cases of sexual violence (Hill 2009). Whether the support was through natural supports, such as family or friends, or professional supports, such as counsellors and medical professionals, many participants stated that they had supportive people in their lives during the time of the abuse or assault and many stated that they turned to these supports to help cope with the trauma. The use of professional supports was more commonly used among those who experienced adult sexual assault.

Volunteering and Helping Others

Some participants began to volunteer their time by helping other survivors of sexual abuse and assault. Both CSA and ASA survivors described this positive strategy.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Several participants described engaging in many types of emotion-focused coping, which is coping that “involves activities that try to directly change how the victim feels” (Hill 2009, 47). Some examples of the types of emotion-focused coping used by the participants included activities to keep busy, such as playing sports, as well as reading, drawing and cleaning. Others described using positive self-talk and positive thinking, such as choosing to think of positive memories, rather than focusing on the negative.

One participant described how she would focus on her goals rather than focusing on the assault:

I try not to think about it. I'll try and find other ways to think about other things in my life that I need to get ahead of instead of having to look back and just be depressed about it and say you know, this happened to me before so I should be doing this like going out and drinking cause I can't keep that anger inside me cause if I do it starts to affect people around me.

Cognitive Reframing

Some participants also used cognitive reframing techniques¹¹ to help cope with their experience. These techniques included self-comparison and emphasizing the positive aspects of their

¹¹ In this context, cognitive reframing involves changing the way in which one thinks about their traumatic experiences. For example, an individual may initially adopt the term “victim” to describe oneself as this term emphasizes that they are not to blame, but then adopt the term “survivor” “because it reflects strength, recovery, and being a fighter” (Hill 2009, 45). Another cognitive reframing technique is emphasizing the positive aspects of having survived their traumatic experience.

experience. For example, one participant described how her experience made her a stronger individual:

...accepting what happened to me and helping it to help me be stronger cause it is part of who I am.

3.5.2 Negative Coping Strategies

Although many participants used positive approaches to help cope with the abuse and/or assault, negative approaches were also used. Among survivors of CSA, many (n = 13) turned to both positive and negative coping strategies, while nine participants described using positive coping strategies only, and three described only using negative coping strategies. The majority of ASA survivors (n = 15) described using both positive and negative coping strategies, while only three participants described using only positive strategies or negative strategies.

The negative coping strategies adopted by the participants included addictive behaviours, self-harm, suicide attempts, avoidance and aggression.

Addictive Behaviours

The most common negative coping strategy described by survivors of both child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault was addictive behaviour, including alcohol, drugs, smoking, abusing over-the-counter drugs¹² and gambling. Alcohol abuse was particularly prominent as a coping mechanism, especially among those who experienced adult sexual assault. Many participants described turning to drugs and alcohol because they did not know how to cope with their experience. All but one of the participants who turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with child sexual abuse continued to use these same outlets to cope with adult sexual assault.

Self-Harm

In addition to substance misuse, participants also described other forms of non-suicidal self-harm. Examples of self-harm included overeating, promiscuity, inappropriate sexual behaviour at an early age and harming oneself through burning. The use of self-harm as a coping mechanism was more common among survivors of childhood sexual abuse, especially inappropriate sexual behaviour. One participant described her behaviour as such:

Okay [...] well I use to burn, [...] burn myself...and like on my face [...] ...so [...] what else did I do [...] growing up like [...] I don't know [...] I really like craved attention from guys, like growing up...So I was like promiscuous and... I felt like really [...] unemotional like it's just like I was just [...] overly sexual and it [...] made me feel good about myself but then afterwards like I'd want it but then afterwards I'd feel sad about it.

¹² Note that not all participants who used prescription medication abused these drugs.

Suicide Attempts

Many participants also described attempting suicide to cope with their experience. One participant described how she coped with CSA:

I attempted suicide many, many, many times to get away from him and to get away from everybody.

Avoidance/Blocking Out the Experience

Another form of escaping the pain associated with abuse and/or assault is through avoiding thinking about one's victimization and blocking out the memories of victimization. This approach to coping was more commonly described as a coping mechanism for survivors of CSA than ASA. One participant described how she would:

...just go somewhere else in your head. Like walking out, like just going somewhere.

Aggression

Some participants described acting aggressively towards others as a form of coping. This approach was described by both survivors of CSA and ASA. In one case in which the survivor of ASA still knew her offender, this aggressive behaviour was directed at the offender.

3.6 The Criminal Justice System

Participants were also asked about the criminal justice system. First, they were asked how they learned about the criminal justice system and their confidence in it. In addition, there were questions about their own experiences with the criminal justice system including, for those who reported their abuse, how they were kept informed throughout the criminal justice process and, for those whose cases went to trial, the specifics of their trial.

3.6.1 Learning about the Criminal Justice System

As can be seen in the table below, the participants learned about the criminal justice system through a number of different sources and formats. Among those who responded, the most common sources of information about the criminal justice system included the media and the police.

TABLE 3. SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Source of Information about CJS	Number of Participants
Media	7
Other ¹³	6
Police	5
Counsellor from victims' services	4
Family	4

¹³ "Other" includes court, word of mouth and colleagues at work.

Friend	4
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Source: Survey of Survivors of Sexual Violence, 2009
Ns range from 18 to 19

3.6.2 Confidence in the Criminal Justice System

The participants were asked to rate their confidence in the police, the court process and the criminal justice system in general. As can be seen from Table 4 below, the majority of participants were not confident about these factors.

TABLE 4. PARTICIPANTS' LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM¹⁴

	Very Confident	Fairly Confident	Not Very Confident	Not Confident At All	Don't Know
Police	2 (7%)	5 (16%)	15 (48%)	6 (19%)	3 (10%)
Court Process	3 (9%)	3 (9%)	12 (36%)	10 (30%)	5 (15%)
Criminal Justice System in General	1 (3%)	5 (17%)	6 (20%)	13 (43%)	5 (17%)

Source: Survey of Survivors of Sexual Violence, 2009
Ns range from 30 to 34

3.6.3 Staying Informed throughout the Criminal Justice Process

Overall, 15 participants reported either their child sexual abuse or adult sexual assault to police either themselves or through another individual. Of these 15 individuals, most (n = 11) were kept informed throughout the criminal justice process. Some participants reported receiving information from multiple sources. The most common mechanism through which participants were kept informed was through the police (n = 9), either through face-to-face contact, telephone or multiple avenues. Other sources of information included Crown Prosecutors, Victim Services, counsellors, court workers and doctors and nurses.

3.6.4 Trial Information and Disclosure of Third Party Records

Nine of the cases went to criminal trial. The accused was convicted in four of these trials, the accused was found not guilty or the case was dismissed in four of the cases, and in the remaining cases, the participant did not know the outcome of the trial. In four cases, the defence sought third party records for disclosure. In all of these cases, the records sought were doctor's records. In one case, the proceedings finished before the records were released. In the remaining three cases, it is unknown if the records were released as the participants did not know, or the participant did not complete the question.

3.7 Suggestions

The participants were asked to provide suggestions for survivors of CSA and ASA, as well as for the criminal justice system, through three open-ended questions. They were asked what those

¹⁴ Note that percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

who have experienced sexual assault need to know about the criminal justice system, what they believe is the best way to share this information and how the criminal justice system can better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence.

3.7.1 What Survivors Need to Know about the Criminal Justice System

The advice provided by participants in regard to what survivors of sexual assault need to know about the criminal justice system reflect the inherent challenges for victims/witnesses in the justice system. The participants indicated that survivors should be aware of the following aspects of the criminal justice system:

- It is a lengthy process;
- It is a difficult process for a number of reasons: the survivor must face the accused and the defence may try to turn the blame on the survivor;
- It is an open court; and
- There is no statute of limitations in reporting sexual abuse/assault.

In addition, some participants stressed that survivors should know that the criminal justice system is there to help, to stay strong, and to report their abuse. One participant noted:

Report it. As soon as it happens report it and if nobody listens just keep on reporting. Stand your ground and don't be afraid.

3.7.2 Informing Survivors

The participants were also asked what they think is the best way to share the above information with survivors of sexual assault. The most commonly suggested mechanism for sharing information with survivors of sexual assault was through school programs and school counsellors. The participants recommended a number of other mechanisms, including:

- Sexual assault centres;
- Support groups;
- Pamphlets and posters;
- One-on-one discussions;
- Information sessions;
- Community establishments (e.g., drop-in centres, libraries, and recreation centres);
- The Internet; and
- Professionals who work with victims.

3.7.3 How the Criminal Justice System can Better Meet the Needs of Survivors

Finally, participants were asked to provide suggestions on how the criminal justice system can better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence. The participants' suggestions can be organized into three main themes: support; help navigating the criminal justice system; and balancing the treatment of survivors and accused.

3.7.3.1 Support

It was clear through the participants' suggestions that more supports are needed for survivors of sexual violence. Suggestions included:

- Provide courses on preventing sexual violence in school;
- Establish community supports, such as cultural support workers and elders;
- Allow survivors to discuss their experiences and emotions;
- Have prosecutors and police spend more time with survivors;
- Provide more aftercare to survivors when the trial has ended; and
- Provide female counsellors to female survivors of sexual violence rather than male counsellors.

3.7.3.2 Help Navigating the Criminal Justice System

The participants' suggestions also centered on ensuring that survivors have the help and information they need to navigate the criminal justice system. The suggestions included:

- Use basic language to explain legal terms;
- Provide translators for those who need it;
- Provide information through different mechanisms, such as posters or meetings;
- Tell survivors what to expect;
- Ensure confidentiality for the survivor and ensure the case is not open to the public; and
- Provide courses on the criminal justice system in school.

3.7.3.3 Balancing the Treatment of Survivors and Accused

Many participants expressed frustration with the perceived unfairness between how the survivor and the accused are treated by the criminal justice system. There was a perception among some that survivors are blamed, while the accused are not punished or when there is a punishment, it does not reflect the gravity of the crime.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of survivors of sexual violence in one of Canada's territories. The participants shared their abuse and/or assault experiences and many experienced both CSA and ASA. The participants also described the difficult emotional after-effects of their experiences. The participants also described a number of mechanisms that they use to cope, both positive and negative. Many of the effects of the sexual violence and the coping mechanisms described by the survivors are consistent with the findings of previous research. This study found that, consistent with other research on exploring reporting of sexual violence, the majority of survivors of CSA and ASA did not report their abuse to the police. The participants offered a number of reasons for this, the most common being shame and embarrassment, a fear of not being believed, a fear of the offender, and the fact that they did not know they could report it. One example of how these concerns could be addressed is by providing more education on sexual violence to individuals of all ages with the message that they are not to blame and that the criminal justice system is there to help. It is also important to focus

on the reasons why the participants chose to report their abuse and/or assault. For example, many participants indicated that they reported to address negative feelings and to take action. First responders could tell survivors about the positive effects of reporting, which may lead survivors to feel more comfortable about reporting the incident.

The participants also shared their experiences with, and views of, the criminal justice system. The results indicated that the participants learned about the criminal justice system through a number of mechanisms, most commonly through the media and the police. Through the interviews with the participants, however, it was clear that many did not understand the criminal justice system, how it functions and who is involved. This highlights the importance of providing culturally relevant legal education in order to improve understanding of the mechanics of the justice system, which may in turn increase survivors' likelihood of reporting.

While understanding the criminal justice system is very important for victims and witnesses, research has shown that trauma, such as sexual assault, impacts learning (see McDonald 2000, 2002; Horsman 1999). Trauma can result in many negative cognitive outcomes, including memory problems, decision-making deficits, increased susceptibility to social influence, disorientation, concentration problems, all of which impact learning (Horsman 1999; Rundle and Ysabet- Scott 1995). Because of the impact of trauma on learning, there will be individuals who will not understand or retain information that is given to them by victim services providers. Training on the impacts of trauma on learning should be provided to victim services and other criminal justice professionals so that they are better equipped to deliver information in a way that ensures that survivors are able to understand, retain and apply the information they need to make informed choices about their role in the criminal justice system.

Very few participants reported their abuse and/or assault to police and even fewer became involved with the justice system as a result. Those who became involved with the justice system experienced a range of outcomes and most of those who were involved were kept informed throughout the process, mainly through the police. Overall, however, the majority of participants were not confident in the justice system, including the police or the court process.

The participants also provided suggestions on what they believe survivors of sexual violence should know about the criminal justice system. The advice given to survivors reflected the inherent challenges for victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. For example, some participants stated that it is a long process, while others stressed the fact that the justice system exists to help victims. A number of suggestions were also provided in terms of how to best share this information with survivors. The importance of providing education on sexual abuse through school programs was stressed by a number of participants. Participants also stressed that all individuals should be provided education about sexual violence.

Finally, the participants were asked how the criminal justice system could better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence. A number of suggestions were provided which reflected three themes: increased support, increased assistance with navigating the criminal justice system, and balancing the treatment of survivors and accused. The latter point highlights the fact that some victims need to be provided with information on how charging and sentencing decisions are made and why a particular sentence was imposed. With additional information on how the

criminal justice system operates, the factors that prosecutors consider when determining whether to press charges, and the factors that judges consider when determining whether to convict an offender and which sentence to impose, the survivor may be less inclined to perceive the system as unfair. Because of the role that Crown Witness Coordinators and victim services workers play in helping victims in the North, they can initiate more fulsome discussions around how these decisions are made.

This study also underscored the importance of cultural considerations. For example, some participants described cultural beliefs and norms when considering whether to report their abuse. Also, there was evidence of language barriers in the interviews. These language barriers may also be related to the lack of understanding of the justice system that was clear in the interviews, both because of the fact that for some, English is not their first language, but also because of the “legalese” used in the justice system. Cultural and language factors are important to consider when providing help to survivors and they highlight the importance of providing culturally appropriate help and information in a language that individuals understand.

It is important to note that because this study involved a small sample, the results cannot be generalized to all survivors of sexual violence in Canada’s northern territories. The experiences described in this survey do not necessarily reflect those of all survivors of sexual violence in the North, or of survivors of sexual violence in general. In order to gain a more fulsome insight into the experiences of survivors of sexual violence in Canada’s north, future research should include survivors from across all three territories.

The findings of this study provide some important insights into the experiences and needs of survivors of sexual violence in Canada’s North. As we better understand the needs of survivors of sexual violence, all stakeholders can work to better respond to those needs.

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Appendix A

Sexual Abuse and Assault Interview Guide

Try to make the participant feel at ease try to build a rapport with the participant. How are you doing today, what is the weather like, and so on. Next offer a sincere thank you for taking the time to participate in this study, especially given the sensitivity of the crime the survivor has experienced.

Please remind the participant about the information that has been provided to date. Do you recall the information provided by the counselors and outlined in the information sheet? To briefly recap, the main purpose of this study is to understand your experience as a survivor of sexual abuse and assault, to understand its impact, reporting practices and your overall confidence in the criminal justice system. Also, the information you provide will remain confidential and anonymous to the extent outlined in the consent form. Also, should you feel distressed or uncomfortable during the interview, please rest assured that you can skip a question or to stop the interview at any point in time. In this case, an agreed upon word that indicates the participant needs to stop will be discussed prior to conducting the interview.

I would like to remind you that you can seek counseling from your centre after the interview should you need to do so. Do you have any questions prior to commencing the interview? Are you comfortable beginning the interview? It would be great if we could start by asking you some basic information, such as age, marital status, etc.

Demographic Information

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your relationship status?
 1. Single
 2. Dating
 3. Common-law spouse
 4. Legally married
 5. Separated but still legally married
 6. Divorced
 7. Widow
3. Were you born outside of Canada?
 0. No (*Skip to Q 5.*)
 1. Yes
4. Where were you born? _____
5. What is your ethnicity?
 1. Aboriginal
 2. White/Caucasian
 3. Chinese

- 4. South Asian (East India, Pakistani, Sri Lanka, etc.)
- 5. Black
- 6. Filipino
- 7. Latin American
- 8. South East Asian (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.)
- 9. Arab
- 10. West Asian (Iranian, Afghanistan, etc.)
- 11. Korean
- 12. Japanese
- 98. Other _____

6. How long have you lived in Canada? _____

7. What is your sexual orientation?

- 1. Heterosexual
- 2. Gay/lesbian
- 3. Bisexual
- 98. Other _____

8. Do you have a physical disability?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

9. Please tell me the highest level of education you have completed:

- 0. None
- 1. Elementary/Primary
- 2. High School
- 3. Some university/college
- 4. Completed diploma/certificate/apprentice
- 5. Completed university degree
- 6. Completed Masters
- 7. Completed Ph.D.

10. Last week, how many hours did you spend doing unpaid housework? Such as caring for children or elderly family.

- 0. None
- 1. Less than 5 hours
- 2. Five to 9 hours
- 3. Ten to 19 hours
- 4. 20 hours or more

11. Last week, how many hours did you spend working for pay?

- 0. None (*Skip to Q. 13*)
- 1. Less than 5 hours
- 2. Five to 9 hours
- 3. Ten to 19 hours

Survey of Survivors in the Northwest Territories

4. 20 hours or more

12. During the past year, during most weeks, did you work

1. Part-time

2. Full-time

97. N/A

13. Last year, what was your total personal annual income last year?

Less than \$15,000

\$15,000 to \$25,000

\$25,000 to \$35,000

\$35,000 to \$45,000

\$45,000 to \$55,000

More than \$55,000

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The next set of questions is about childhood sexual abuse. I understand this involves recalling difficult memories associated with abuse. Please pause or stop at any point in time if you need to.

Child Sexual Abuse History

14. Did you experience sexual abuse as a child?

0. No (*skip to Q. 38*)
 1. Yes

15. Was the child sexual abuse:

0. One single incident
 1. Multiple incidents

Description of the Sexual Abuse Incident

If multiple incidents, please ask the participants to discuss one incident they would like to discuss in order to answer the next set of questions.

16. How old were you when the sexual abuse began? _____

17. Was the offender known to you?

0. No
 1. Yes, (*if yes, please describe the nature of the relationship to the offender? i.e.: family, friend, acquaintance, etc.*)
 2. Did some family/community members thought or commented that you had a relationship with the accused?

18. If you are comfortable, could you please describe the sexual abuse you experienced as a child?

19. Do you recall if there were any explicit verbal threats to your safety during this time(s)?

0. No
 1. Yes

20. Do you recall if there were any explicit verbal threats to the safety of others during this time(s)?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

21. Was there any physical force used when the sexual abuse was happening?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

22. Did you suffer any physical injuries as a result of the sexual abuse?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 25*)
- 1. Yes, Type _____

23. If you are comfortable, could please describe the nature of the physical injury?

24. Did you receive medical attention for issues related to the sexual abuse?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes, Type _____

25. Was any type of weapon used during the sexual abuse, such as a knife or gun?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes (type) _____

26. Do you suspect that you were given a drug, without your knowledge prior to the sexual abuse?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 30*)
- 1. Yes

27. What made you suspect that you were drugged?

28. Could you please tell us how do you think you were drugged? (location, whether it was through a drink, etc)

29. Did you undergo medical tests to determine what kind of drug was employed? Please explain.

Psychological/Emotional Harm and Coping Mechanisms

The next set of questions involves asking you about the impact the sexual assault had upon you.

30. Did you experience any emotional and/or psychological harm because of the child sexual abuse, such as depression and/ or anxiety?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q.34*)
- 1. Yes

31. Could you please describe the emotional/psychological trauma you experienced?

32. Please describe the ways you used to cope with the trauma? Please probe for both negative and positive coping strategies, such as volunteering or religious activities.

33. Did you have supportive people, such as friends, family in your life during that time? If so, could you please explain?

Reporting Practices

It appears that a large number of victims of child sexual abuse do not report the crime to the police. As such, it is important to ask you questions about your own reporting practices.

Factors Influencing Reporting Practices

34. Did you report the child sexual abuse to the police?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes (*Skip to Q. 36*)
- 2. In the process of considering this option

35. What factors influenced your decision to NOT report the child sexual abuse to the police?
Please probe for cultural intimidation, such as bad medicine and other types of intimidation.

Skip to Q. 38

36. What factors influenced your decision to report it to the police?

37. How much time elapsed between the incident and when you reported it?

ADULT SEXUAL ASSAULT

Thank you again, for discussing this very personal issue with me. The following questions are about your experiences as an adult – Do you have any questions before we continue with the interview?

Sexual Assault History as an Adult (Reported, if not reported, discuss the most serious incident or event for which your attending the centre)

38. Did you experience a sexual assault as an adult?

0. No (*Skip to Q.62*)

1. Yes

39. Was the child sexual assault:

0. One single incident

1. Multiple incidents

If multiple incidents, please ask the participants to discuss one incident they would like to discuss in order to answer the next set of questions

40. How old were you when the sexual assault happened? _____

41. Was the offender known to you?

0. No

1. Yes, (*if yes, please describe the nature of the relationship to the offender? i.e.: spouse, boyfriend, friend, acquaintance, family member, etc.*)

2. Did some family/community members thought or commented you had a relationship with the accused?

42. If you are comfortable, could you please describe the sexual assault you experienced as an adult?

43. Do you recall if there were any explicit verbal threats to your safety during this time(s)?

0. No

1. Yes

44. Do you recall if there were any explicit verbal threats to the safety of others during this time(s)?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

45. Was there any physical force used when the sexual assault was happening?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

46. Did you suffer any physical injuries as a result of the sexual assault?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 49*)
- 1. Yes, Type _____

47. If you are comfortable, could please describe the nature of the physical injury?

48. Did you receive medical attention for issues related to the sexual assault?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes, Type _____

49. Was any type of weapon used during the sexual assault, such as a knife or gun?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes (type) _____

50. Do you suspect that you were given a drug, without your knowledge prior to the sexual assault?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 54*)
- 1. Yes

51. What made you suspect that you were drugged?

52. Could you please tell us how do you think you were drugged? (location, whether it was through a drink, etc)

53. Did you undergo medical tests to determine what kind of drug was employed? Please explain.

Psychological / Emotional Harm and Coping Mechanisms

The next set of questions involves asking you about the impact the sexual assault had upon you.

54. Did you experience any emotional and/or psychological harm because of the sexual assault, such as depression and/ or anxiety?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 58*)
- 1. Yes

55. Could you please describe the emotional/psychological trauma you experienced?

56. Please describe the ways you used to cope with the trauma? Please probe for both negative and positive coping strategies, such as volunteering or religious activities.

57. Do you have supportive people, such as friends, family in your life? If so, could you please explain?

Reporting Practices

It appears that a large number of victims of sexual assault, do not report the crime to the police. As such, it is important to ask you questions about your own reporting practices.

Factors Influencing Reporting Practices

58. Did you report the adult sexual assault to the police?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes (*Skip to Q. 60*)
- 2. In the process of considering this option

59. What factors influenced your decision to NOT report it to the police? **Please probe for cultural intimidation, such as bad medicine and other types of intimidation.**

Skip to Q. 62

60. What factors influenced your decision to report it to the police?

61. How much time elapsed between the incident and when you reported it?

Staying Informed Throughout CJS Proceedings

The criminal justice process can be confusing, and the next set of questions is about your perception as to whether you were kept informed throughout the entire process (In general, which is the average view that applies for either child sexual abuse or assault or both).

62. Who kept you informed and how were you kept informed? (check all that apply)

0. Nobody				
1. Police	<input type="checkbox"/> Face-to-face	<input type="checkbox"/> Telephone	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Letter
2. Crown	<input type="checkbox"/> Face-to-face	<input type="checkbox"/> Telephone	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Letter
3. Victim Services	<input type="checkbox"/> Face-to-face	<input type="checkbox"/> Telephone	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Letter
98. Other, type _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Face-to-face	<input type="checkbox"/> Telephone	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Letter

63. Can you tell me the outcome of the court case?

- 0. No
- 1. Conviction secured
- 2. Accused found not guilty
- 3. Case dismissed
- 98. Other _____

64. Do you know whether there were/are any plea bargain negotiations?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes
- 99. Unknown

Disclosure

Access to personal records appears to be a main issue of concern affecting reporting practices. We would like to know what factors encouraged or discouraged you from reporting the crime.

Access to personal records

65. During the court case discussed, did the accused person try to have access to get any of your personal records, like your counseling, medical, employment or education records?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q.70*)
- 1. Yes
- 99. Unknown

66. What kinds of records were requested? (Please check all that apply)

- 1. Doctor's records
- 2. Mental health records
- 3. Counseling records
- 4. Social services records
- 5. Victim services records
- 6. Employment records
- 7. Education records
- 98. Other _____

67. Were the records (or parts of it) released to the accused/defence?

- 0. No (*Skip to Q. 70*)
- 1. Yes, partial record disclosure
- 2. Yes, complete record disclosure
- 99. Unknown

68. How were the records used?

69. How did you feel about the disclosure of records?

CONFIDENCE IN CJS

We are almost finished with the interview. The last few questions are about your level of confidence and knowledge about the criminal justice system.

Confidence & Knowledge about the CJS

70. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is the highest score, how confident do you feel about the police?

- 1. Very confident
- 2. Fairly confident
- 3 Not very confident
- 4. Not confident at all
- 99. Don't know

71. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is the highest score, how confident do you feel about the court process?

- 1. Very confident
- 2. Fairly confident
- 3 Not very confident
- 4. Not confident at all
- 99. Don't know

72. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is the highest score, how confident do you feel about the criminal justice system in general?

- 1. Very confident
- 2. Fairly confident
- 3 Not very confident
- 4. Not confident at all
- 99. Don't know

73. How do you learn / hear about the criminal justice system? (Please check all that apply)

- 1. Counsellor from sexual assault centre
- 2. Counsellor from victims' services
- 3. Police
- 4. Crown
- 5. Psychologist
- 6. Psychiatrist
- 8. Therapist
- 9. Family
- 10. Friend
- 11. Doctor
- 12. Internet
- 13. Media
- 14. Pamphlets

98. Other _____

Suggestions

Lastly, it would be great if you could provide us with key suggestions that would help the development of suitable programs and policies for survivors of sexual abuse, assault.

74. Based on your experience, what do persons who have been sexually assaulted need to know about the criminal justice system?

75. Based on your experience, what would be the best way to get this information to survivors of sexual assault?

76. Based on your own experience, do you have any suggestions as to how the criminal justice system can better meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence?

Thank you for your participation in this study.