



“I WANT TO BE HEARD”

Centering BIPOC Women Survivors
of Sexual Violence in Ramsey County



MINNESOTA JUSTICE

RESEARCH CENTER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful for the participation of the BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault who shared their experiences with us — we hear you.

This report was authored by Sharin Park, MNJRC Research Manager; Kailee Schaberg, MNJRC Research Assistant; Paulina Buitrago, MNJRC Research Assistant; and Dr. Katie Remington Cunningham, MNJRC Research Director. This work was made possible by the financial support from the Ramsey County Attorney's Office and SOS Sexual Violence Services of Ramsey County.

Specifically, we're incredibly grateful to Emily Huemann and Jasmine Zavala from SOS, who dedicated time and energy to working with us and supporting survivors. From the Ramsey County Attorney's Office, we thank County Attorney John Choi, Jill Gerber, Karen Kugler, and Dennis Gerhardstein, whose partnership, regular communication, and genuine commitment to change helped shape this report. Thank you also to all of the incredible Victim Witness Advocates and Community Advocates who support the BIPOC women survivors in Ramsey County.

Finally, this work wouldn't be possible without the additional support from MNJRC Research Assistant Paulina Buitrago, who designed the final report; Kailee Schaberg, who was invaluable in participant outreach; and Joanne Turner, who copyedited the final report.

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence and want to connect with an advocate, reach out to **SOS Sexual Violence Services' 24 hour line: 651.266.1000**

Website: www.sosramsey.org



Message from our Executive Director

August 19, 2024



At the Minnesota Justice Research Center, we believe research must be collaborative and participatory. We believe our understanding of how the system currently operates must be guided by those closest to the problem. We ground our work in values, and engage in deeper thinking with our community about what justice means and looks like while putting data behind creative ideas for solutions. We convene and build consensus among direct stakeholders.

We are grateful to partner with and commend Ramsey County Attorney John Choi and his dedicated staff for taking a courageous look at themselves. The following report reflects the willingness of the Ramsey County Attorney's Office (RCAO) to reflect on their work with BIPOC sexual assault survivors and ask the question, "How are We Serving this Population and How Can We Do Better?"

This project has been a unique and intentional partnership with the MNJRC to build a transparent process to learn from SOS and community advocates and BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault and their experience with the criminal legal system. . We know that BIPOC women survivors struggle and face barriers to reporting their experience to and seeking justice through the criminal legal system -this was a reality the RCAO did not hesitate to interrogate. Their solution was to truly center these voices, understanding that BIPOC survivors rarely have their experiences elevated in this space.

We experienced the RCAO as genuine in their efforts to explore the reasons that marginalized and minority communities do not feel comfortable or safe in engaging the criminal legal system when it comes to sexual violence, a rare thing among prosecutors in Minnesota and across the nation. The necessary voices to advance the change came from the survivors who were brave enough to share their experiences with our team at the MNJRC and believed that by doing so, it might make a difference.

As a result, you are about to read an honest report. Out of context, this report could be used to point fingers at the RCAO and focus on everything they are doing wrong. Instead, we view this report as an example of a system reckoning with deep challenges and barriers and a launching point for change. Change is not a destination, it is a commitment, a commitment to learn and grow and to listen to the community. This report is another step on a journey to an actual just process. We invite you to commend the BIPOC women who shared their experiences and to respect the office who called upon the MNJRC to make sure these perspectives are part of the solution.

We look forward to the next steps in this process as each of the partners -- the RCAO, law enforcement and SOS -- work together to make the system response to sexual assault one that truly works for everyone.

Justin Terrell

Executive Director

The Minnesota Justice Research Center

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Message from the Ramsey County Attorney

August 19, 2024



RE: Continuous Improvement in System Response to Sexual Assault in Our Community

Dear All:

Our work to improve system responses to sexual assault began in 2016, when we launched the Ramsey County Sexual Assault Justice Initiative, a two-pronged approach to change how our system responds to sexual assault while committing to culture change in our community. At the outset, we announced the [Ramsey County Start by Believing](#) campaign, in collaboration with the Ramsey County Board, Saint Paul – Ramsey County Public Health and local law enforcement, to create a culture where victims feel more empowered to report their abuse and to develop an infrastructure of response, which improves outcomes for victims – one response at a time.

In 2016, we knew far too few incidents of sexual assault were being reported to law enforcement, with only a fraction of those resulting in accountability for the harm caused, so we undertook a painstaking, two-year study of hundreds of incidents that met a familiar fate in our justice system. The [2018 Ramsey County Sexual Assault Systems Review](#) helped us better understand how sexual assault incidents, investigations and cases were handled, and ultimately provided a blueprint for systems change in our community.

The Ramsey County Sexual Assault Justice Initiative generated important conversations, training and commitment to action throughout Ramsey County. Each member of the initiative pledged support for the ongoing work, which focused on identifying and securing critical resources for public health, law enforcement investigation and prosecution to increase dedicated staff capacity. The Ramsey County Attorney and Board of Commissioners allocated funds to hire two new advocates at Public Health's SOS Sexual Violence Services and two new sexual assault investigators in the Saint Paul Police Department Sex Crimes Unit. Additionally, the County Attorney's Office and the County Sheriff's Office were awarded a 2-year grant under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to fund a dedicated sexual assault investigator and prosecutor.

In November of 2018, law enforcement, prosecutors and advocates gathered with leadership from the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, to strategize about how best to create an ongoing trauma-informed, coordinated response to sexual violence. In the spring of 2019, we formed the [Sexual Assault Response Collaboration](#) to formalize our system response efforts using continued VAWA funding. The County Attorney's office also provided funding for a full-time sex crimes detective in the Roseville Police Department.

Yet, after all this effort, we knew we were missing a key piece of the puzzle. While women who identify as Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are overrepresented as survivors of sexual assault, their voices and stories of their experiences are underrepresented

in mainstream news and public systems. Thus, we partnered with the Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) to engage these victims/survivors to better understand their experiences with the justice system and what changes are necessary to better serve BIPOC women survivors.

I want to thank the team at MNJRC for leading this research project, in collaboration with our partners, and for their thoughtful and considerate approach to building trust with BIPOC women survivors in order to gather honest feedback to inform our efforts to improve system responses to better serve women like them. MNJRC put in countless hours to gain candid feedback and ensure the voices of BIPOC women survivors were front and center in this report.

To the women who invested time and energy in sharing their stories, reliving their trauma, and laying bare their truths: I want you to know that I am truly sorry for the detrimental experiences you had; we hear you and we will continue to take steps to improve. Your courage and your candor will make it possible for us to do better and know where we need to invest. We hear and appreciate the need for BIPOC women to be met with culturally-responsive care, trauma-informed practices, and increased communication. Your need for consistent, responsive, and compassionate communication throughout the process, and opportunities to share your stories in community to brainstorm improvements came shining through. We also recognize the need to strengthen our partnerships to expand access to community-based culturally-responsive organizations that you can confide in and receive ongoing support from outside the legal process, as well as do better connecting you with community-based resources and support. We are encouraged that, despite challenging experiences, discouragement, and lack of trust, 81% of you conveyed a desire to stay involved in improving the system and experiences of BIPOC women survivors in the future. We are looking forward to working together with you to find ways to engage in our collective efforts.

For the past 8 years, I have been heartened by the enthusiastic engagement and support of our partners: Saint Paul – Ramsey County Public Health SOS Sexual Violence Services and every one of our law enforcement agencies in Ramsey County. I also want to recognize our dedicated staff who have worked tirelessly to advance this effort. We know nothing will substantially change unless we, as a community, collectively invest in better outcomes. That means truly understanding the impacts we're having in people's lives and always focusing on continuous improvement. This report helps us do just that.

I learned long ago that public systems' response to sexual violence can always be better, and we must continually evolve with victim/survivors at the center, guiding our advancements. It's also critical to ensure all voices, especially those that may have been marginalized, are intentionally invited to the table to share their lived experiences and uncomfortable truths. With everyone at the table, all pulling together in the same direction, we will continue to improve the quality of justice for all.

Sincerely,



John J. Choi

Ramsey County Attorney

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To improve the legal system's response to reports of sexual violence, the Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC), the Ramsey County Attorney's Office (RCAO), and SOS Sexual Violence Services of Ramsey County (SOS) collaborated in 2023 to directly engage with and center the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (commonly referred to as "BIPOC") women survivors of sexual assault in Ramsey County. Sexual assault, although common, is underreported and disproportionately concentrated among Black and Indigenous women in the United States. The same is true for Minnesota. By better understanding the experiences of the BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault, we explored avenues for change to Ramsey County's legal system.

Over a year, the research team at MNJRC conducted strategic outreach to community-based organizations and individuals in Ramsey County to connect with possible participants. We conducted two focus groups and 16 individual interviews with a total of 26 BIPOC women survivors to answer the following research questions: (1) How do BIPOC women survivors describe their experiences with the legal system? (2) What about this process needs to be improved? And, finally, (3) How (if at all) do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence want to be involved in the continued improvement of the criminal legal process for survivors in Ramsey County?

Although participants experienced the system in dramatically different ways, there were many common barriers and burdens. While most of our participants reported their sexual assaults to the legal system, insights from participants who chose not to report also helped us understand some of the obstacles that may keep women from reporting sexual assaults. We identify seven broad themes that characterized participants' experiences with the legal system, explore the power of community supports, and offer five main recommendations for improvement.

To begin with, participants described the importance of their various **identities** — their race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, educational level — as factors powerfully distinguishing their experiences. In particular, participants described how their identity determined how much they trusted the legal system. As such, **trust** emerged from our data as a critical value underlying participants' experiences, both connected to identity and independent of it. For a few participants, their identities as immigrants added a layer of complexity and distrust in legal systems globally, actually resulting in more positive experiences with the legal system in Ramsey County. Most commonly, participants across the board did not trust the early stages of reporting the crime to the police. Connected to this sense of distrust, we learned that when participants had to decide whether to report or not to report the assault, many often **feared the ramifications** of reporting. For a small number of our participants, this fear prevented them from reporting.

For participants who chose to report, many were immediately and unexpectedly met with both **burden and blame**. They were burdened by having to recount their assault numerous times, by having to remember small details that felt unimportant during the assault, by having to appear in court, and by bearing, quite literally, the burden of proof that our legal system is structured to require of them. Closely connected to these burdens were feelings of blame. Many participants felt they were being blamed for being assaulted in the first place, for not reporting the assault correctly or quickly enough, and for not understanding what to do next. These feelings around burden and blame were closely linked to participants' beliefs that they were **neither heard nor valued** by system actors. This was a common theme across participants throughout the legal proceedings, from their initial interactions with police all the way through sentencing.

Deeply connected to participants' identities, their fear, the burden and blame they felt, and their belief in being heard were **power dynamics**, both implicit and explicit, at play in the legal system. These power dynamics unfolded in different ways but were often described as a power imbalance between the defendant

and the victim survivor. More specifically, participants viewed the defendant as having more power within and over the legal system, whether with respect to the scheduling and pace of the legal proceedings or with respect to the conduct of the trial itself.

With the delays resulting from COVID and the slow-moving process of the legal system, the salience and importance of time, broadly, weighed heavily on participants. As a result, many participants continued to carry the burden of communication: they had to call their advocate for any updates, to check the court database system to see whether a hearing had been scheduled, and even to dig up their own evidence and submit it to the investigator. Participants often felt their case had no forward movement. This left participants feeling discouraged or defeated: feelings we found at the end of the legal proceedings were common among many participants. Unfortunately, the ramifications of these experiences were cyclical: feelings of defeat often caused participants to lose even more trust in the legal system, which made them feel even more defeated.

Amidst these challenges, participants consistently highlighted the pivotal role played by entities such as **SOS and other community organizations in providing invaluable support and guidance**. Community-based organizations directly addressed several of the barriers and challenges participants described in their experience with the legal system: in particular, the burden participants carried, the fear they felt, and the importance of their identities. These positive interactions underscored the importance of establishing a continuum of care within the legal system, ensuring that BIPOC women survivors receive the critical support they need to navigate the complexities and trauma of sexual assault while seeking justice through a complicated and adversarial process.

Our recommendations, therefore, focus on five main areas for improvement to the legal process in Ramsey County. **First**, we recommend more investment in SOS and other community-based organizations so they are readily accessible and available to all BIPOC

women survivors. **Second**, we recommend embedding culturally responsive and trauma-informed training into practice for all law enforcement agencies and hiring more diverse police officers who can continue to shift toward a culture where BIPOC women survivors are believed and valued. **Third**, we recommend improved dissemination of both realistic expectations around communication and of resources that serve to educate survivors about the legal process during the prosecution and sentencing stages in particular. Connected to this, and **fourth**, we recommend more communication, consistency, and compassion across all aspects of the legal system to establish a continuum of care for BIPOC women survivors. **Finally**, we recommend continuing to involve and center BIPOC women survivors, creating space for them to contribute to change and, in particular, to share their stories.

The Ramsey County Attorney's Office embarked on this journey with a commitment to prioritizing the voices and needs of BIPOC women survivors. This research demonstrates the need for the entire legal system in Ramsey County as a whole to continue to center the perspectives of BIPOC women survivors. By incorporating culturally responsive, trauma-informed practices, we can cultivate a more equitable and inclusive legal system, a legal landscape in which BIPOC women survivors feel valued, heard, and empowered as they seek both justice and healing from their sexual assault.



INTRODUCTION

Researchers and policy-makers rarely center the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (commonly and collectively referred to as “BIPOC”) women when discussing improvements to the legal system. A groundbreaking two-year study in Ramsey County, Minnesota, of 646 reported sexual assaults revealed that far too few incidents of sexual violence are ever reported and, of those that are, only a tiny fraction result in their perpetrators even being charged, much less being brought to justice. The study culminated in a report, Ramsey County Sexual Assault Systems Review (SASR), which made multiple recommendations to improve the response of the justice system and to ensure that victims feel supported in reporting their assaults to law enforcement.

In response to the study’s findings, Ramsey County, the City of Saint Paul, and the City of Roseville pooled and reallocated resources to hire additional sexual assault investigators. Ramsey County also created two key grant-funded positions to systemically improve the way that law enforcement, prosecutors, and justice system partners respond to sexual violence. To enhance collaboration between their respective agencies, the RCO, Ramsey County Sheriff’s Office (RCSO), and SOS developed an inter-agency coalition to facilitate victim-centered investigations, prosecutions, and support.

The purpose/goal of the larger Ramsey County project is to continue to build and further develop a long-term, sustainable infrastructure to provide and institutionalize victim-centered, trauma-informed best practices for the County’s response to sexual assaults. To accomplish this, the inter-agency coalition proposed five core efforts: (1) Enhance training standards; (2) Develop collaborative investigative practices; (3) Directly engage with survivors; (4) Share what has worked in changing the system; and (5) Expand data collection and analysis. The RCO partnered with the Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) to support the third goal of the coalition: **Directly engage with survivors of sexual violence.**

The MNJRC is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to driving meaningful change in Minnesota’s criminal legal system through rigorous and community-centered research, education, and policy development. The MNJRC centers its work around a set of fundamental values — humane and fair treatment for all, safety, well-being, and trust — and provides the community and policy-makers with information and tools needed to create a criminal legal system that truly delivers justice.

Through a series of focus groups and individual interviews, the MNJRC worked to engage survivors, focusing on adult (over 18 years old) BIPOC women located in Ramsey County, to support the effort to transform the way Ramsey County responds to sexual violence. The MNJRC team sought to better understand BIPOC women survivors’ perceptions of and experiences with the criminal legal system in Ramsey County at all points of the process, what procedural changes would better serve BIPOC women survivors, and how BIPOC women survivors might engage meaningfully and continuously, in the improvement process.

We explored the following **key research questions**:

1. A. How do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence describe their experience going through the process of legal recourse (reporting, investigation, prosecution, outcomes) in Ramsey County?

B. How do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence who opted not to file a police report describe their experiences and decision not to report the crime?

2. What needs to be improved about this process? In particular, how can the process better meet the needs of BIPOC women survivors?
3. How (if at all) do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence want to be involved in the continued improvement of the criminal legal process for survivors in Ramsey County? What might this involvement look like?

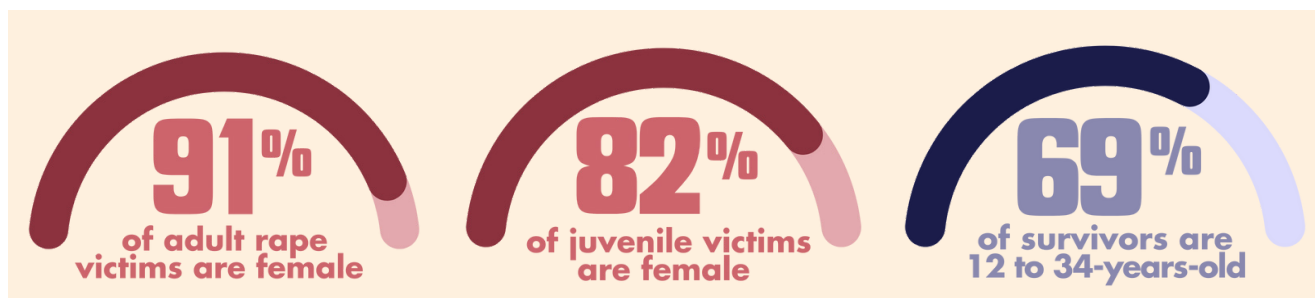
BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Sexual assault is more common and widespread than many people realize: Every 68 seconds, someone in the United States becomes a victim of sexual assault. On average, sexual assault affects nearly half a million people each year in the United States (RAINN, 2023). “Sexual assault” refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim. This can include penetration of the victim’s body (also known as rape), attempted rape, fondling or unwanted sexual touching, and forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex. Sexual assault happens in various ways and in different contexts and is never the victim’s fault. This notion is a critical narrative shift away from the victim-blaming mentality that was prominent early in the 20th century (Gravelin et al., 2017).

In this report, we use the term “sexual assault” rather than “sexual violence” or “sexual harassment” because “sexual assault” can encompass both terms. “Sexual violence” is defined as a sexual assault that is also a violent crime, like domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking (University of California, 2024). “Sexual harassment” is defined as any unwelcome sexual advance or demand for sexual favors. Although each is a “sexual assault,” it does not mean that every sexual assault is either sexual violence or sexual harassment. In the legal context, “sexual violence” is often referred to as “sexual abuse” (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2019), “criminal sexual conduct” of varying degrees (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2021b), and/or “sexual exploitation” (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes, n.d.).

In this report, we use the term **“sexual assault,”** rather than **“sexual violence”** or **“sexual harassment,”** because **“sexual assault”** can encompass both terms.

The impact of sexual assault disproportionately affects women more than men. One in five women in the United States will experience sexual assault during their lifetime, compared to 1 in 71 men (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2024). Statistics about survivors of sexual assault are difficult to find, as sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes (Olive, 2012). What statistics are available indicate that survivors of sexual assault are overwhelmingly female: 91% of adult rape victims and 82% of juvenile victims are female. Victims of sexual violence are generally younger: 69% of survivors are between the ages of 12 and 34 (RAINN, 2023). There are numerous terms for survivors of sexual assault, such as “victim survivor,” “survivor,” and “victim,” each carrying its own implications. In this report, we use the term “BIPOC women survivors” to capture



both the racial and gender identity of the participants, and while we value the critical distinctions and dialogue around the power of terms, our participants most readily identified with the term “survivor” (as opposed to “victim” or “victim survivor”) and therefore we describe them as such.

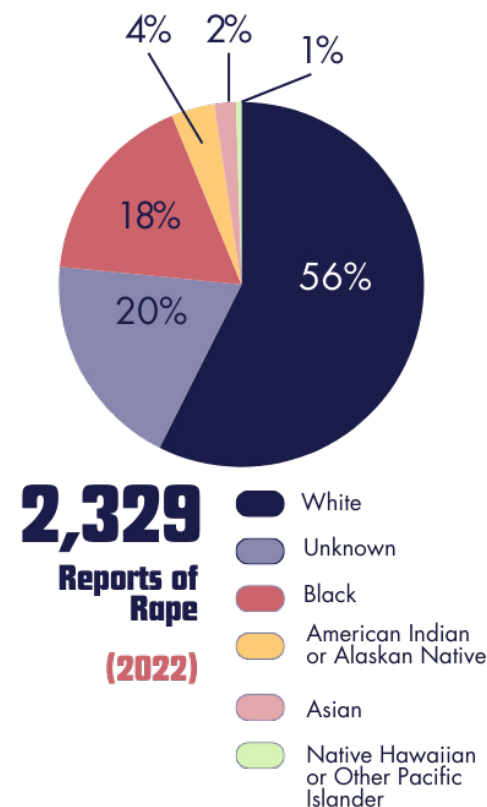
Sexual assault has long-lasting effects. Nearly all (94%) survivors report post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within two weeks of an assault, and 30% of survivors report PTSD even nine months after the assault. Many survivors also struggle with severe depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide following an assault. These long-standing effects leave survivors especially vulnerable.

From the data we have, we know that sexual assault is disproportionately concentrated among women of color. The nationwide statistics around the racial identities of survivors are difficult to find. However, limited statistics available show that women survivors of sexual assault are far more likely to be Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) than to be white ([Olive, 2012](#)). The prevalence of sexual violence among women in the United States varies widely by race. Specifically, American Indian/Native American/Indigenous women¹ are most likely to have been a victim of sexual violence, followed by Black women. American Indian/Native American/Indigenous women are 2.5 to 3.5 times more likely to experience sexual violence when compared to the known statistics of all other races ([National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2018](#)). This means that nearly 34 percent of American Indian/Native American/Indigenous women in the United States will be a victim of sexual violence in their lifetime. The statistics around Asian and Latina women are challenging to find, which aligns with the underreporting we see in these two racial groups ([Olive, 2012](#)).

On the state level, sexual assault statistics for Minnesota indicate that “we could fill Target Field [capacity 38,544] almost 18 times with the number of Minnesota women who have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking” ([The Center on Women, Gender, and Public Policy \(CWGPP\) at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs & Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, 2022](#)). Women in Minnesota face a high likelihood of experiencing sexual violence and rape in their lifetimes: over 42% of Minnesota women will report sexual violence in their lifetime (CWGPP & Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, 2022). In 2024, Minnesota’s estimated sexual assault report rate is expected to reach 43.40 individuals per 100,000, slightly surpassing the 2021 U.S. report rate of 41.77 individuals per 100,000 ([World Population Review, 2021](#)).

According to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA), there were 2,329 reports of rape in 2022 ([Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, 2023](#)). Of those 2,329 victims, approximately 56% were white, 20% were of unknown racial identity, 18% were Black, 4% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2% were Asian, and less than 1% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ([Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, 2023](#)). Comparing these rates to the population of Minnesota, we see that reports of rape are made disproportionately by victims of color (i.e., 86% of Minnesota’s population is white, but white victims reported only 56% of its rapes) ([United States Census Bureau, 2023a](#)).

Racial Breakdown of Minnesota Reports of Rape



1. Our report will use the term “Native American” to refer to the American Indian/Alaska Native participants involved in our project. We have chosen this terminology to align with the language and identity terms used by the participants themselves to describe their racial identities.

Sexual assault is overwhelmingly underreported. Of every 1,000 sexual assaults, only 310 are reported to police ([RAINN, 2020](#)). Moreover, fewer than one-third of all incidents of sexual violence are ever reported to law enforcement ([The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services \(COPS Office\) of the U.S. Department of Justice, 2023](#)). Despite the low reporting of sexual violence overall, significant differences exist in the reported cases across various racial identities. While BIPOC women are more likely to be a victim of sexual violence than are white women, nearly 80% of sexual violence cases were opened after a report by a white woman, showing the disproportionality exists not only in reporting cases but also in investigating sexual violence cases ([End Rape on Campus, 2023](#)).

When we revisit the Minnesota data, we see that the Minnesota BCA's breakdown of rape victims' racial identities is limited to those who actually filed a police report - thus, the disproportionalities are likely even more extensive. As is reflected in our conversations with participants, factors unique to each racial identity deter victims from reporting, making it difficult to obtain accurate data on the race of sexual assault survivors.

Supporting BIPOC Women Survivors in Ramsey County

This project centers BIPOC women survivors, a population for whom Ramsey County officials have worked to improve services over the last several years. In 2016, Assistant County Attorney Kaarin Long thoroughly reviewed responses to cases in which teen or adult victims reported a sexual offense by a non-family member. She found considerable room for improvement in the responses. Since then, Ramsey County officials have continued to dedicate improvement efforts to the responses by its legal system.

BIPOC women survivors in Ramsey County can also access SOS Sexual Violence Services (SOS), which provides free crisis assistance 24/7 to victims of sexual violence. SOS employs a small team of advocates who work directly with BIPOC women survivors as a support system, a guide, and a familiar face. A SOS advocate keeps all conversations with BIPOC women survivors confidential and works with the survivor for as long as the survivor needs support. SOS offers support regardless of whether the victim engages with the legal system. SOS provided support to over 850 victims in 2023. As an organization, SOS works with both the Ramsey County Sexual Assault Protocol Team and Safe Harbors Youth Intervention Project to improve the community's response to sexual violence.

The final key partners in this project were the numerous community-based organizations that support BIPOC women survivors in Ramsey County. These community-based organizations all work closely with BIPOC women survivors but have different focuses. These organizations were critical in supporting BIPOC women survivors in ways that Ramsey County officials could not.

This research project was a continuation of the projects in which Ramsey County officials have invested, with a focus on improving the experiences of BIPOC women survivors and their experiences with the legal system to better support a population that has been underserved both in Minnesota and across the country.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

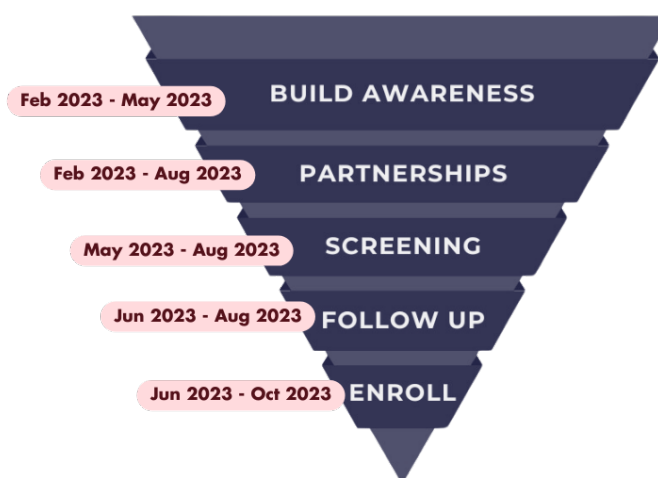
The MNJRC team embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions and experiences of BIPOC women survivors with Ramsey County's legal system. This research project aimed to identify procedural adjustments that could enhance support for these survivors and establish frameworks for sustained and inclusive participation of BIPOC women survivors in ongoing improvement initiatives. The research questions that guided this research project are outlined below.

- 1 How do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence describe their experience going through the process of legal recourse (reporting, investigation, prosecution, outcomes) in Ramsey County? 
- How do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence who opted to not to go through the process of legal recourse describe their experience and decision not to enter the process?
- 2 What needs to be improved about this process? In particular, how could the process have better met the needs of BIPOC women survivors? 
- 3 How (if at all) do BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence want to be involved in the continued improvement of the criminal legal process for survivors in Ramsey County? What might this involvement look like? 

METHODOLOGY

The Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) is committed to going beyond traditional research methods, which methods often involve a quick survey or extraction of information. Instead, the MNJRC pours its efforts into building relationships and working toward building a base of participants connected to its work. The research team spent countless hours ensuring that participants trusted them before moving forward with the data collection process.

The Center's outreach methods followed five stages: (1) building awareness of the project through community organizations; (2) partnering with community organizations to identify potential participants; (3) screening potential participants for eligibility; (4) following up with potential participants; and (5) enrolling participants. Each stage allowed the Center to narrow the field and find the final 26 individuals who actually participated in this research project. Overall, this process took longer than expected, beginning in February 2023 and ending in October 2023, but it was well worth the time.



For the first several months, we focused on building project- and organizational-awareness. At its core, this stage focused on getting the word out about the research project and establishing a presence in sexual assault survivor spaces in the Ramsey County area. During this stage, we also used social media platforms to distribute an outreach survey. We knew that a social media strategy would give us visibility in online spaces, which can, at times, be more accessible to survivors of sexual assault but which might not produce actual participants because of eligibility requirements (e.g., receiving services in Ramsey County). We also connected with trusted contacts and other community organizations through email, phone, and text messages to set up individual meetings to discuss and promote the research project. Finally, to be physically present in the community, the research team distributed flyers at community organizations and in strategic locations all around Ramsey County.

From there, we focused on building partnerships with trusted organizations and collaborators with RCAO and SOS. As explained above, during the building-awareness stage, we reached out to trusted contacts to alert them that our research project was starting. During this stage, we focused on building partnerships with these organizations. We initially reached out to 33 community organizations (see Appendix A). We sent numerous emails, phone calls, and text messages to this list of 33 organizations to arrange meetings. This outreach resulted in virtual meetings with 25 organizations.

Overall, the vast majority of the organizations we contacted were willing to support us with passive outreach methods to potential participants (e.g., mentioning the project in their newsletter). In the end, five organizations connected us directly with participants and created a space for us to converse with those participants. These organizations were [SOS](#), [Phumulani](#), [Ain Dah Yung Center](#), [Esperanza United](#), and [the Jeremiah Program](#).

Overall, 447 individuals completed the survey with an interest in participating. This was a mix of individuals who responded to our various outreach efforts, including social media, distributing flyers, and organizational partnerships. During the screening stage, we applied our eligibility criteria to identify participants eligible for the research study. This screening process occurred between May and August 2023 and overlapped with the other stages of our outreach methods. The eligibility criteria used were: (1) identified as any identity other than solely White/European BIPOC; (2) identified as any identity other than solely Male (women, non-gender-conforming); and (3) were sexually assaulted in the last five years in Ramsey County (a requirement on which all team members agreed). Eventually, a little more than half (277) of the interested participants were deemed eligible during this stage.

We then followed up directly with each of the 277 eligible participants. We contacted them via phone to verify their eligibility and to explain the purpose and process of the research project. This allowed us to identify 69 ‘bots’² who had responded to the survey, which we anticipated would happen when the eligibility survey was distributed online. In addition, we were unable to connect with about 174 individuals who either never answered the phone or did not respond to our emails. Eliminating these individuals left us with a total of 34 eligible participants who both responded to our outreach efforts and were interested in participating in the research study.

During this stage, we had critical conversations with many participants and began to build trust among eligible participants. This required multiple outreaches over time, as eligible participants needed to be more open to joining an in-person focus group (our original planned data collection method). As a research team, we therefore decided to shift our data collection method from only focus groups to conducting several individual interviews. This required more time and more funding but allowed us to get the data we needed.

After the outreach process, we enrolled 26 participants in the research study through two focus groups (one in-person and one virtual) and 16 individual interviews.

Participant Demographics

In total, 26 participants engaged in the research project, 23 of whom were recruited through community partnerships and three individuals who came to us through other means. Thus, the majority of our participants were identified and recruited through the community organizations with which we had built relationships over the course of many months and therefore were able to establish trust in the research project. Of these 26 BIPOC women survivors, 21 had reported their sexual assault to the police, and five had not made a report.

2. Bots are defined as a program that can interact with links, sites, and anything else on the internet. They are not real humans.

Demographically, most participants identified as Black/African American, ranging in age from 20 to 70, although the majority were between the ages of 21 and 41. Half of the participants identified as an immigrant and were interviewed in their native language. The majority (86%) of the 26 participants interviewed chose to report being sexually assaulted.

Table 1: Demographics of SSVEP Participants, n = 26

Characteristic	no. (%)	Language Proficiency	
Race		English-speaking	13 (50)
Black/African-American	9 (35)	Non-English-speaking	13 (50)
African	3 (11)	Engagement with Legal System	
Asian/Asian American	3 (11)	Reported to the police	21 (81)
American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous	2 (8)	Did not report to police	5 (19)
Hispanic/Latinx/Chicanx	8 (31)	Connection to MNJRC Research	
Multiracial	1 (4)	Ramsey County SOS	10 (38)
Age		Community Organization	13 (50)
18-20	1 (4)	ADY Center	2 (8)
21-41	17* (65)	Esperanza United	7 (27)
42-62	7 (27)	Jeremiah Program	1 (4)
63-83	1 (4)	Phumulani	3 (12)
Immigration Status		Other	3 (12)
Non-Immigrant	13 (50)	Referral from police	1 (4)
Documented Immigrant	6 (23)	Online	1 (4)
Undocumented Immigrant	7 (27)	Friend	1 (4)

Interview Protocol and Analysis

We originally planned to collect data primarily through in-person focus groups of about five participants. However, we discovered during the outreach stage that participants were both hesitant to meet in person and had several scheduling conflicts with work commitments, travel, and childcare. To meet participants' needs, the research team added several individual interviews and virtual, rather than in-person, focus groups, in addition to in-person focus groups. Through these three methods (individual interviews, in-person focus groups, and virtual focus groups), we were able to schedule more effectively and reduce the hesitancy to participate.

Each data collection approach followed the same protocol. The research team introduced themselves and established norms. The norm-setting protocol was more heavily emphasized during the focus group spaces because they were designed to establish group trust. Next, the research team explained how the data (participant stories and perspectives) would be used and created space for participants' questions. Finally, the research team showed an image depicting the legal system process (see the Figure below) to anchor all participants in a shared frame of reference and began with questions about participants' experiences and ideas for improvements. See Appendix B for more details on the data collection protocol.

Legal System Process



The MNJRC team conducted one focus group in-person at a community library in Saint Paul and a second focus group through Zoom. The team conducted 16 individual interviews through Zoom, over the phone, and in person. We recorded where possible and, when participants asked not to be recorded, took detailed notes. These notes and interviews were then transcribed by a transcription service.

To begin the thematic analysis, the research team used a mix of inductive and deductive coding, meaning some predetermined categories were used to process the data (more “operational” codes were used to tag data with specific phases of the legal system) while also creating some categories based on what was common across participant experiences. For example, participants used the term “burden” frequently, describing how they felt as they experienced the legal system. We thus created a category or code called “burden/blame” to tag all experiences that referenced this feeling. From there, the team used a focused coding approach to further define categories. Each interview was then coded using both sets of codes (thematic and operational) by three different individuals, and the resulting codes were reliably and consistently tracked throughout the analysis process. All participants quoted in this report were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

FINDINGS

In this section, we analyze the experiences of BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence with the Ramsey County legal system. Although study participants experienced the system in dramatically different ways, every participant shared their hope for change in the operation of the legal system.

Although the majority of participants reported their sexual assault to the legal system, insights from participants who chose not to report helped us understand some of the obstacles that may keep victims from reporting. We identify seven main themes that characterized participant experiences with the legal system: (1) identity, (2) trust, (3) fear of ramifications, (4) burden/blame, (5) belief and experience in being heard and valued, (6) power dynamics, and (7) feeling discouraged/defeated. These broader themes all focused on improving the overall legal system in Ramsey County and were deeply interconnected and mapped onto participant journeys to and through the legal proceedings. Our eighth main finding describes the power and importance of community-based support.

In the sections that follow, we dive into each theme to explore how participants described their experiences and how each theme helped us understand how we might shift the legal process to better support BIPOC women survivors of sexual violence.



IDENTITY: “They won’t help me as much as if it were their own people.”

An individual’s identity shapes how they view the world and experience it. Our findings reflect this. Recall that the rates of sexual violence against women vary significantly across identity characteristics, with American Indian and Black women at a greater risk of experiencing sexual violence than white women. Despite women of color being more likely to be assaulted than white

women, white women account for 80% of reported sexual violence cases. For this project, we define “identity” as an individual’s more stagnant demographic and cultural characteristics (e.g., race) and as the more fluid ways in which participants described themselves (e.g., mentally unwell) and that influenced a participant’s outlook and/or experience with the legal system. The demographic data reveals the diversity among participant identities. Missing from those tables are the more fluid characteristics and self-descriptions participants gave us: they identified variously as mothers, as illiterate, as advocates, as healing, as struggling with mental health, and as traumatized. Thus, the role of identity appeared distinct for participants. Despite this vast diversity, we consistently heard from all participants that they wished to be understood and valued for who they are. We heard loud and clear that for BIPOC women going through the legal system, their identity mattered and should not be ignored.

We begin with this theme because participants’ identities also underscored everything else that participants shared about their experiences. Their identity directly influenced whether they trusted or feared the ramifications of the legal system, whether they felt they were being heard or being ignored by system actors, whether they felt burdened or buoyed by the process, the power dynamics they observed, and whether they felt defeated or victorious after going through the legal proceedings. It would be difficult to share our findings without sharing as well the lens of the participants’ identities.

They identified variously as mothers, as illiterate, as advocates, as healing, as struggling with mental health, and as traumatized

Racial and ethnic identity were determining factors in whether the participants trusted the legal system. In describing her experience, Tiffany, a 70-year-old woman who immigrated to the United States from Asia, shared through a translator:

“I think because I’m Hmong, I’m not getting the help that I need. I don’t know how to speak in English... they don’t really want to help me. They won’t help me as much as if it were their own people. For speaking, they say it’s too hard and they delay.”

In this quote, Tiffany describes several aspects of her racial and ethnic identity. She felt her ethnic identity as Hmong impacted the help she received, whether based on cultural assumptions, challenges with language, or both. For Tiffany, this affected her ability to trust the system and her belief in being heard.



An immigrant identity was a key influence on a participant’s belief that they could trust the system to investigate their crime properly, not deport them, and successfully prosecute their case. Of our immigrant participants, 15% hesitated to report the crime to the police or to pursue legal action in the first place, often connected to fears around immigration law or deportation. However, Elena, a Latina participant in one of the focus groups, considered the experience positive because it differed so from her expectations of the legal system. She explained that instead of “corrupt police officers who always sided with the husband” (or the male) due to the prevalent “machismo” culture in Latino communities, the law enforcement officers in Ramsey County were more kind and more supportive of her as an individual.

She explained that if her assault had happened in her home country, she would not have involved the police. Even though being an undocumented immigrant made Elena initially afraid to make a report to the police, as it might raise questions about her legal status and make her vulnerable to deportation, she ended up with a positive experience that shifted her trust in the legal system. Tiffany and Elena show us how important and varied one's racial and cultural identity can be in determining one's experience with the legal system.

We also learned from participants that fluid identity characteristics, such as level of education, beyond their fixed racial and cultural identities influenced their trust in and experiences with the system. Elizabeth, an Asian woman whose fear of being shunned by her own community kept her from reporting, shared another area of her identity that played a role in her hesitancy to lean on the legal system:

"People in my community can't read or write... so people in my community are scared to let [police officers] know they can't read or write... they're like 'grab your number and fill out the forms...' Why would I share with them that I can't read or write? That's embarrassing."

In this quote, we see Elizabeth's level of education preventing her and those in her community from reporting crimes. We also see her observations on the power dynamics at play. For Elizabeth, police officers are the ones with power, and she believed that appearing less educated to them could be detrimental to her case or paint her entire community in a more negative light.

Finally, the participant's identity was an important factor, both alone and when combined with the identities of system actors. When the participants encountered a system actor with a different identity, they often believed that they wouldn't get help. However, when the participants encountered someone who looked like them, they frequently described having greater trust in the system. For example, Felicia interacted with an advocate who was a Black woman. Because the identity of the system actor mirrored her own, she shared: "My victim witness advocate was another Black woman. So, I don't know, it didn't feel they were bogus to me because I was Black." This perception of feeling like system actors were "bogus" to her was based on her own view of the legal system and the experience Felicia had with others she worked with throughout the system.

Revisiting Tiffany's experience, she believed the police wouldn't help her "as much as [they would] if they were their own people." Tiffany explained how she believed if she was white and spoke English (like the police officers), they would give her greater assistance. Like Felicia and Tiffany, many participants explained that if and when the identity of the system actor mirrored their own, it affected how they experienced the legal system in a positive way. Increased diversity among system actors can result in more instances in which the participants feel understood and heard. It can also ease their worries that their identities will determine how they are treated by the legal system.

Racial and cultural identities of BIPOC women were critical factors in how they engaged with the world and the legal system. More fluid aspects of their identity also deeply mattered and often determined how or even if they entered the legal system. System actors need to understand BIPOC women's identities deeply to improve those women's overall experience with the legal system.

FEAR OF RAMIFICATIONS: "I'm afraid and scared"

Understanding the complexity of BIPOC women's identities is crucial to addressing the fears and uncertainties they have about engaging with the legal system. Surveys show that 20% of sexual assault survivors did not report the assault because they were afraid of retaliation, and 7% of survivors feared getting the offender in legal trouble ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2013](#)). This finding

is supported by other research that reveals “fear of reprisal or retaliation by the offender...fear of exposure to family or friends...fear of disbelief from police...and fear of being blamed” are the most common reasons why survivors abstain from reporting ([Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022](#)). Our findings support these studies. We interviewed many participants who had profound experiences with the legal process. They expressed a fear of the ramifications of invoking the legal system. This appeared as fear of the unknown: not knowing how the victim impact statement³ would unfold or how the trial would proceed. For the small handful of participants who chose never to report, this theme was extremely salient. From these interviews, we learned about the barriers to entry into the legal system. Most frequently, participants described fearing the ramifications that would flow from reporting the assault to the police. These included fears of interactions with the police, being ostracized by family and friends for going to the police, and fears that the defendant⁴ would go to jail.

For many participants, the legal system was an unfamiliar and new experience. Without knowing what to expect, many participants explained they preferred to resolve the assault through familiar means, such as their communities and families. Elizabeth, an Asian immigrant woman in her 40s, discussed how she spent much of her life interpreting and advocating for her community. She shared with us that her community hesitated to call 911 because: “In my head if you go to 911, he’s going straight to jail.” For Elizabeth, her fear of involving the legal system stemmed from concern that the defendant, often a violent partner or spouse, would end up in jail if she did. Elizabeth would rather risk further victimization than subject her partner to unknown jail time and the risk of incarceration.

Other participants shared the cultural and racial norms that caused them to fear engaging with the legal system. More commonly, many participants who identified as immigrants feared their stories would not be believed by system actors. Additionally, they were concerned about the aftermath of involving the legal system, such as potential deportation and ostracism from their communities. As we have explained, 15% of Latina participants were reluctant to report the assault to police or pursue legal action. This was primarily due to concerns that involvement with the legal system could jeopardize their own immigration status. Several participants indicated that if the legal system explicitly communicated to them that their immigration status would not be affected if they sought support, they would find it easier and more appealing from the outset to report the crime. The cultural barriers and stigmas surrounding how one should respond to sexual abuse and assault were another source of fear. For example, Elizabeth explained: “Asian people have big families. If people know you’re a snitch, everyone hears about it. You’ll lose, and there’s no winning if you’re labeled as a snitch.” Here, Elizabeth demonstrates a fear that reporting would result in social ostracism and embarrassment within their community.

Participants’ feelings of fear and decision to not report are both aligned with the fact that sexual assault ranks as the most underreported crime, with over 60% of sexual assaults never reported to the police ([National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015](#)). (NSVRC). These fears alone often led participants to believe it would be easier to leave the assault unaddressed and not involve the police altogether. This further disenfranchises BIPOC women survivors.

TRUST IN THE SYSTEM: “...Imagine Doing that to Somebody”

To combat the fear of ramifications that dissuaded many participants from reporting to the police, we explored how the participants’ trust in the system impacted their overall experience. Public confidence in the legal system has declined notably in recent decades across all demographic

3. A victim impact statement is the BIPOC women survivor’s recounting to court officials of what happened during her assault. Participants shared that the impact statement was especially difficult because they were once again reliving the assault, but doing it in front of strangers acting in official capacities (and in positions of power).

4. In this report, we use the word “defendant” to align with the terms used in the court system. In recounting their stories, the participants used “defendant” and “perpetrator” interchangeably.

groups ([Wu et al., 2022](#)). While there are apparent disparities in trust levels within racial and ethnic minority communities, perceptions of justice and confidence in the legal system are each heavily influenced by gender, racial, and socioeconomic biases ([National Institute of Justice, 2013](#)). The percentage of women who “say they can trust the police to do what is right for them and their community almost all or most of the time” (64%) differs significantly from that of men (71%) ([Gonzalez-Barrera et al., 2024](#)).

There is also notable variance across racial groups, with lower levels of trust reported among BIPOC women compared to white women. While 71% of white women state that they trust the police, only 59% of Hispanic and Asian women and only 44% of Black women share that same level of trust ([Gonzalez-Barrera et al., 2024](#)). Research consistently demonstrates that minority populations tend to hold more negative perceptions of law enforcement than their white counterparts ([National Institute of Justice, 2013](#)). These perceptions are predominantly shaped by previous personal and community interactions with law enforcement ([Wu et al., 2022](#)). Survivors of sexual violence often express deep apprehension about reporting due to a pervasive lack of trust in the legal system, fueled by concerns about police disbelief. Survivors don’t trust that their narratives will be taken seriously or believe that they may be judged for disclosing their experiences to authorities ([Lorenz et al., 2019](#)). Many survivors are aware of ingrained rape myths, instances of police violence, and the absence of empathy and trauma-informed responses within the system ([Lorenz et al., 2019](#)). This awareness further erodes their trust in the legal system’s capacity to support them. As a result, survivors lack confidence in the legal system’s ability to believe and assist them, often fearing being re-victimized and traumatized by the legal process ([The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services \(COPS Office\) of the U.S. Department of Justice, 2023](#)).

Participants’ trust in the legal system stems from doubts about the system’s ability to support them during each stage of the legal proceedings. This includes ideas about the reliability of the legal system, including whether it follows their own expectations of what the law says and what the defendant should receive as punishment. Overall, trust in the system was shown to be deeply ingrained and simultaneously easily shifted based on interactions with system actors. The experiences of the participants during their interactions with system actors determined their future trust, showcasing the cyclical nature of this theme.

Trust varied among participants based on their identities and whether and how they initially interacted with the legal system. **Dana**, a Native American woman who chose not to report her sexual assault, recounted to us:

“I didn’t report what happened to me. I don’t know. I just also wasn’t comfortable like speaking with law enforcement...just experiences I had in the past....and just feeling like, you know, I didn’t, I wouldn’t have that support like from law enforcement.”

Dana shared how her past experiences prevented her from reporting to police officers. Dana discussed later in her interview the generational trauma that Native Americans have endured at the hands of the United States government and the legal system. She explained how shameful it can feel for a Native American to ask for help from the legal system.

“You know what we experienced as a culture and as a people, it’s really like a shame for us to just go and like talk to the law enforcement, you know, it’s just all of the things we dealt with.”

Dana’s past experiences and her identity as a Native American influenced her lack of trust and decision not to report. Her experience demonstrates an example of systemic issues, such as the United States government’s cruel treatment of American Indians over generations, that can influence an individual’s trust in the current legal system. Dana’s story shows just a few of the many barriers that many BIPOC women must overcome to even report crimes in the first place.

Another factor that influenced whether participants trusted the legal system was how system actors engaged with participants' private data. Several participants shared with us that the mishandling of their private data, in their eyes, decreased their trust in the system. For example, Felicia, a young African woman whose defendant ultimately was found not guilty, recounts an experience she had during the evidence collection of the pretrial phase. Felicia's prosecutor asked for her therapy records, even from when she was young, to build a case that she experienced PTSD as a result of the assault. Once she submitted her therapy records, the prosecutor showed her that all of her records had been placed in a folder, which struck Felicia as not secure. Her distrust in the system stemmed from this encounter, as she doubted her privacy would be protected and feared her information might be disclosed to the defendant's legal team after it became part of her case's record.

"...but, I asked her, is this okay to do? Cause you're showing [these documents] to me and this is technically, against the rules...So that really bothers me just that that's not a hundred percent rule that you cannot show your client this [sensitive] information. Imagine doing that to somebody and being given access to 6 years' worth of their therapy records where they deal with the aftermath of [the assault]. That still really, really bothers me."

Felicia believed the legal system would have stricter privacy standards. However, her original expectations about how the trial phase would proceed were not met in this interaction with her prosecutor.

Dana entered the legal system with a deeply ingrained lack of trust that was difficult to change. Felicia, on the other hand, lost what trust she had due to unexpected interactions with the prosecutors, which showed the fragility of that trust. However, for both Dana and Felicia, their interactions influenced their trust moving forward, highlighting the cyclical and downward-spiraling nature of trust in the legal system.

The interconnectedness of identity, fear, and trust within the legal system is evident, particularly among BIPOC women whose unique identities shape their perceptions and experiences. Cultural and racial identities can instigate fears of deportation, cultural stigma, and incarceration, influencing their trust in the legal system and its actors.

BURDEN/BLAME: "they want you to do their job for them"

Building on the discussion of identity, fear, and trust of the legal system for BIPOC women, BIPOC women survivors feel the burden of "winning their case." Societal and systemic blame presents additional obstacles in seeking justice. In our legal system, the burden of proof lies with the state (the prosecution) by design.⁵ However, participants voiced that they often felt that as the victim of the crime, the burden of proof was heavier than they expected. Additionally, they often felt blamed during the investigation and court proceedings for the crime that happened to them.

The term "secondary victimization" refers to the attitudes, behavior, and practices of system actors that blame, shame, and retraumatize victims of sexual assault ([Hunter, 2019](#)). "Secondary victimization" by legal system actors can be attributed to their belief in rape myths, such as the belief that drinking alcohol or wearing revealing clothing is "asking for it" ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2022](#)). It can also be attributed to the belief that false reports happen more often than they do, when in reality, only between two percent and eight percent of sexual assault reports are ultimately found to be false ([Dewald & Lorenz, 2021](#)). Studies have found that it is common for sexual assault

5. Our legal system exists such that the burden of proof lies with the prosecution to honor and protect a critical tenet of our justice system: all are innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. This means that all court proceedings for BIPOC women survivors must heavily rely on the testimony of BIPOC women survivors in order to find a guilty verdict against the defendant.

victims to feel “blamed, depressed, anxious, and reluctant to pursue further action” as a result of their interactions with the legal system ([Campbell, 2012](#)). Our findings are aligned with the findings of these earlier studies.

Natalia, a young Black participant, expressed significant hesitation about choosing to report the assault to the police. During her interview, she expressed concerns about being hurt by the defendant’s family (i.e., fear of ramifications) and didn’t know if she could mentally withstand what she expected to be a lengthy court process. When she decided to move forward with the report, Natalia shared that she continued to feel frightened and fearful about the unknowns around the legal system and her interactions with cold-hearted police officers. Most consistently, she felt as if everyone was blaming her for the crime. While she was still debating whether to move forward with her case, Natalia shared: “The prosecutors are asking me to testify; I was scared. They said if you don’t testify, I could arrest you for falsifying a report.” Natalia’s interaction with the prosecutor deepened her feelings of blame. This was felt by BIPOC women survivors as the need not just to prove their case but to participate despite their feelings of uncertainty. This burden exacerbates the PTSD that participants are already feeling as they decide whether to pursue justice for their assault or to protect their own mental health.

In other cases, participants were shocked at how many times they had to relive the assault, a burden that resulted in deep feelings of blame. Imani, a multiracial participant who suffered severe PTSD after her assault, recounted her harrowing experience with police officers. She tells that she didn’t understand why the police officers kept asking **her** to come up with evidence when she felt that it was **their** job to collect it. Again, she did not expect to be so burdened with the process. Imani said: “Why did you ask me [for more evidence] if you had enough to pursue the case [in the first place]?”

Similarly, Felicia, a young Black participant, couldn’t comprehend why the defendant in her case had different (and seemingly more) rights than she did and why she was required to repeatedly recount the assault while the defendant was permitted to remain silent. She too felt burdened by the process and described:

“Whereas for him he can fully be guilty have completely, damning evidence against him and choose not to testify because he doesn’t want to and there’s no accountability. I’m forced to sit here and explain the worst thing that’s ever happened to me and he gets to sit there in silence.”

Both Imani and Felicia did not regret moving forward with their cases, but both struggled with having to relive their sexual assaults in different settings throughout the entire process. Toward the end of each of their interviews, they both recognized that they learned over the course of their experience that, legally, the prosecution had to prove the case of sexual assault against the defendant. However, both shared they would have struggled less during this stage if they had known from the outset how many times they would have to recount their assault and if they’d had more support while doing so.

Participants also felt the burdens of both proving their cases and advocating for themselves. Ava, a Black woman who had a very negative experience with police officers, noted that she provided more than 33 pieces of evidence to the police only to have them be ignored. Imani explained that she began investigating the defendant for the police and giving them evidence when she realized there was a public records database she could utilize. She explained,

“They want you to do their job for them, so I started doing more investigative work. I started looking things up, I didn’t know that there were records, public records.”

Felicia shared that the responsibility of record and document collection was surprising to her. As shared above, she had to search for her childhood therapy records and provide them to the prosecutor so that her case would be stronger. Felicia said: “And also that the burden is placed on you to have to find the records and have to submit them to the prosecutor and all that stuff.” Both Felicia and Ava shared that they, like the system actors, wanted to “win the case” but didn’t know at what cost they were willing to win.

Participants felt blamed if they didn’t move forward with their case and get justice for themselves, even when they may have rather avoided the burden. Additionally, the structure of the legal system and the jobs of the investigator, prosecutor, and other system actors required them to relive the sexual assault and continuously relive the trauma. Many participants struggled to keep moving forward and felt blamed for their trauma. Finally, participants naturally wanted to win and get justice for themselves, but the sheer burden of winning and obtaining justice was intimidating. The amount of work that they had to do to see that result was both disheartening and surprising to them.

BIPOC women’s sense of identity, intertwined with fear and trust, influences their perceptions and interactions with the legal system. Despite the historical distrust that BIPOC women have in system actors, many participants chose to engage in the legal system, only to be burdened by the weight of proof and societal blame. The structure of the legal system and the expectations placed upon them, specifically during the investigation and prosecution stages, served as a constant reminder of the trauma they have endured and will continue to endure.

POWER DYNAMICS: “You guys shouldn’t be able to do that when you’re dealing with people’s, like, actual lives.”

As we delve deeper into understanding dynamics, it is increasingly clear that the power dynamics inherent within the legal system (where system actors hold power and BIPOC women survivors do not) further aggravate the challenges faced by BIPOC women when seeking justice. BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault felt that the whole process, internal actors, and the perpetrators of the sexual assault were all working against them in a system that was stacked against them. Participants noticed distinct power imbalances in the interactions the defendants had with system actors and the legal system when compared to their own experiences. They also felt that racial disparities, socioeconomic status, and the privileged status of defendants all influenced the outcomes of their cases. Finally, many of the participants were frustrated by what they perceived as the defendant’s ability to manipulate the legal system’s timeline and proceedings, often to the detriment of their case or mental health. An overwhelming 8 out of 10 sexual assaults are perpetrated by individuals known to the victim ([RAINN, 2020](#)). This creates a dynamic that empowers the defendant, often leaving victims fearful of escalated abuse or retaliation ([RAINN, 2020](#)). Nationwide, many victims of crime, including sexual violence, lack rights equal to the constitutional rights of those accused or convicted of crimes. This imbalance can be seen in our data. Marsy’s Law aims to address this disparity by enshrining victims’ rights in the states’ constitutions (Marsy’s Law for All, 2024). However, Minnesota lacks a victim’s rights provision in its constitution, leaving a gap in the protection of victims’ rights as compared to the defendants’. To be sure, under current Minnesota law, sexual assault victims are afforded certain rights, including the right to: “make a confidential request for HIV testing of a convicted offender,” to “not have to pay the cost of a sexual assault examination,” and not to “be required to undergo a polygraph examination in order for an investigation or prosecution to proceed.” ([Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2022](#)). These rights are limited, however,

Participants often felt that, although the victim of the crime, they alone carried the burden of proof and that the burden was **heavier than they expected.**

leaving loopholes in protection and potentially enabling defendants to exploit the system, such as by requesting numerous and unlimited continuances,⁶ which participants noted throughout their conversations with us.

Ava, the Black woman mentioned above, perceived distinct power imbalances in her interactions with the defendant in her case, particularly concerning race, socioeconomic status, and community influence. She believed that, due to her race and the privileged status of her defendant, “a white man of high social standing,” the police would not diligently pursue the case. In expressing her frustration, she highlighted the racial disparity by suggesting that if the roles were reversed and she was a white woman accusing a Black man, the response would be swift and harsh:

“Now, if we were white and we ran in there and it was, oh, my God, this Black man raped me, he would have been locked up and thrown away with the keys. And that’s what I told them and a lot of the law officers. And, you know, people from there agreed with the same thing. Like, ‘you’re absolutely right.’”

She also expressed feelings of being gaslit when the police officers did not listen to her story or believe her. Ava shared: “They [police] didn’t want to solve this crime for me...they defined rape for me.” Through these two interactions, we can see how Ava perceived the racial and power dynamics that were at play at the police station.

Imani, the multiracial woman who shared her story above, noted the power imbalance that arises when defendants can leverage their connections within the system. She recounted an instance during the prosecution phase when she was confiding in her SOS advocate. She was informed that her defendant had boasted to the police, “I worked for Reverend Al Sharpton; I will get off from this. No further question.” In fact, the defendant was eventually found not guilty.

The prevalence of power dynamics was particularly evident in the frustration expressed by many participants over their defendants’ influence over the timeline and progress of the court system. Multiple participants highlighted how their defendants were able to repeatedly delay the trial with the approval of the court system. For instance, Imani recounted,

“Basically, I was told in the year 2022, I was told we were going to court or to trial [and] to get ready in January [2023]. We didn’t go to court this April [of 2023]. So, for a whole year, it was trial management. He was pushing and pushing and pushing it up. And the judge was letting him.”

Felicia’s hearing was rescheduled more than four times because of what she perceived as the defendant “working the system.” Felicia described the allowances granted by the court system as *“...that’s ridiculous. I’m not able to do that at my job. You guys shouldn’t be able to do that when you’re dealing with people’s actual lives.”* Many participants echoed Felicia’s frustration over the extensive and supported leeway defendants have in postponing court proceedings. They felt that they were on their defendants’ timeline rather than their own. This dynamic exacerbated the already burdensome nature of the situation and left many BIPOC women survivors feeling disempowered and overlooked.

Participants not only highlighted the influence defendants had over the timeline of the legal proceedings but also the discrepancies in how they participated in the process itself. Although some defendants could choose not to attend court, could refuse to testify, or could join hearings remotely, these options were not made available to BIPOC women survivors. The women felt that if they were to make similar choices as the defendant, they would face repercussions and not be believed by the courts and jury. Imani recounted an instance in which the defendant was allowed

⁶. A continuance is what a court may grant to delay proceedings until a later date.

to participate in a court session via Zoom while she was required to attend in person. Imani had to rearrange her work schedule and take time off from work to attend the court sessions in person. Imani felt defeated by this experience, stating, *“I just felt defeated.”* Many participants felt they had to disrupt their lives, whether by taking time off from work or arranging for childcare, to ensure they were heard and believed by the courts and system actors.

Overall, the majority of BIPOC women survivors felt the court was more accommodating of the defendant than of them. Imani shared that,

“They started the opening arguments without me. They ended the closing arguments without me. Like, [the prosecutor] spoke on my side, so when I got into the courtroom. They waited for him, like, for the, like, for certain moments. They waited for him when he wasn’t there, but when it was time for me to be there when I could be there, there was a time for, like, closing arguments. I didn’t hear how [the prosecutor] closed for me, but I heard how [defense counsel] closed for him.”

Many participants echoed this sentiment and felt that the criminal legal system is structured to grant more rights to defendants than to survivors. Felicia stated:

“And the fact that I just kinda, to the point I was making earlier, the amount of rights that the victim and other witnesses do not...I can’t not testify. I sure, I could refuse to, but it would severely hurt my case and probably make the jury think that I’m lying.”

Additionally, another aspect in which power dynamics became apparent to BIPOC women survivors was in seeking accountability from the system itself. Ava advocated to hold the system accountable following experiences of racial discrimination and incomplete and inaccurate reporting practices by the police. She reported her experience with the legal system to the police department’s Office of Internal Affairs. Ava highlighted the underlying dynamic, stating, *“They [internal affairs and police] probably barbecue together for all we know We can’t trust internal affairs because they are all on the same floor.”* Ava felt there were limited options available to hold the system accountable. She felt defeated in navigating a system seemingly designed to protect its own interests rather than to ensure justice and accountability in her case. Since then, Ava has faced police retaliation, prompting her to leave Minnesota due to safety concerns. Despite the repeated defeats, Ava continues to advocate for justice and accountability.

Participants face systemic challenges in which they perceive the legal system, system actors, and defendants as all working against them. This perception is fueled by the power dynamics at play, including power imbalances, racial disparities, defendants’ manipulation of legal proceedings, and the system’s lack of accountability, which collectively resulted in the participants feeling disempowered.

BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE IN BEING HEARD AND VALUED:

“I want to be heard”

While the participants were navigating these power dynamics, many of them felt that they were not being heard or valued by the system. Participants often felt that, despite their intentions and actions while engaging in the system, they were not being heard or valued by the system. This caused them to question their own engagement in the legal system. Participants felt they were either important or unimportant to system actors based on their interactions.

Women survivors of sexual violence often encounter a credibility deficit when seeking recourse within the legal system. This credibility deficit is further compounded by the intersectionality of their various identities, including race, class, migration status, disability, and sexuality (Reeves et al., 2023). These intersecting identities place certain groups, such as women of color, immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals, at a heightened risk of not being believed when disclosing their experiences of sexual violence. Survivors, regardless of identity, frequently face victim-blaming attitudes from law enforcement, with their experiences often downplayed or dismissed (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020). This victim-blaming dynamic, coupled with a lack of action by (and disbelief of) police authorities, creates significant barriers for survivors who report their experiences, knowing they may encounter such responses (Gezinski, 2020).

“I just felt defeated.”

Several participants felt that the evidence they provided was not taken seriously by police investigators and was sometimes even discarded during the legal process. Interactions with the police specifically were often described as procedural, lacking empathy, and dismissive, as officers questioned the validity of survivors’ experiences. However, the feeling that the participants were not being valued existed at every stage of the process. For example, Felicia, discussed above, shares her experience with the entire system.

“Everybody in the legal system, from the advocates to the police, the prosecutors, the lawyers, they’re all very cold and calculated, and I get it because you have to be when you’re in this line of work, but it was very jarring for me.”

In this quote, Felicia recounts her interactions with system actors and how their cold and calculated nature was unexpected to her. She even credits the line of work system actors are in and how boundary setting must be necessary, but she still struggled to feel safe enough to discuss her assault with them.

When participants interacted with a system actor who was kind to them, their evaluation of the legal system was more positive overall. Andrea recounts the initial stages of reporting and the difference one police officer made in her larger experience.

“I was, like, I need to report this. And then I randomly just saw a cop parking over there. So I went to talk to him. He was very nice. He gave me the number for the St. Paul investigator. So he told me that I should get an order for protection. And he helped me with that. And I sent everything to him, like the evidence. And then, I guess then after that, he made a report, and then, like, another investigator contacted me and talked to me. But they are all were very nice.”

In this quote, Andrea mentions multiple times how nice the police officer was and credits much of the success and progression of her case to this one police officer. The ability of this system actor to hear Andrea’s story at a critical time, as she was about to file a report, allowed her to believe that the police officer both valued her and heard her story.

The experiences shared by BIPOC women reveal how important interpersonal interactions are in shaping their perception of the legal system. Although feelings of being undervalued or unheard persist, examples of genuine empathy from system actors allowed BIPOC women to place more trust in the system. However, if feelings of being unheard or undervalued continue and there is no forward movement in their cases, BIPOC women are discouraged and left defeated in their pursuit of justice.

DISCOURAGEMENT/DEFEAT: “It’s easier to leave it alone”

Throughout the themes, participants articulated different facets of discouragement and defeat in their pursuit of justice. This overarching theme of discouragement emerged as participants expressed a lack of motivation to continue engaging with a system that failed to meet their expectations through their interactions with system actors, delays due to COVID-19, and the compounding burden they felt throughout the entire process. As BIPOC women navigate the obstacles of the legal justice system, they also grapple with the emotional toll of encountering barriers and setbacks along their path to justice.

Literature on “sexual assault case attrition,” which is the term used for the withdrawal of a case from the criminal justice system, shows that “stress with the process, psychological distress from the reporting process and the assault, hospitalization for unrelated ailments, incarceration of the suspect for another crime, desire for police to only warn the suspect, and fear and self-blame” are some of the reasons behind it ([Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022](#)). Studies have also determined that positive initial interactions with the legal system increase the victims’ levels of engagement and disclosure, reducing case attrition ([Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022](#)).

Certain interactions with system actors led to feelings of defeat. Chantelle described how interactions with system actors were discouraging, and she found that leaving her case alone was easier than pursuing it because the cold and distant attitudes of the system actors made her feel like there was no real hope in moving forward. During her interview, she shared: “They want you to investigate I’m afraid. It is discouraging. It’s easier to leave it alone.” Tiffany shared that her case was “irrelevant for them,” and Ava shared that “they didn’t want to solve this crime for me.”

Another source of discouragement for victims was the timing of the process and how delayed everything was due to COVID-19. Many participants expressed collective frustration with the delay in receiving lab results from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) due to the backlog of cases. These feelings were further exacerbated by the lack of communication about this delay from system actors. In one example, Imani described how she felt that the system actors were discouraging them from actually pursuing the case rather than motivating victims to interact with the system or reassuring them about the system’s ability to support them. She stated:

“I was told it [BCA labs] was backed up because of COVID. One thing that I feel that Ramsey County drops the ball on when women do report is the fact that they tell people, ‘Oh, we still have cases from 2017 and 2016, and, oh, we’re getting to you.’ And that gives women no hope at all, like, none. I felt very much like they were trying to, like, fear tactic me like out of doing it because it was an inconvenience for them.”

Communication around the process timeline should be sensitively undertaken so that participants can understand what to expect from the legal system and feel motivated to pursue their cases.

Finally, the last source of discouragement was feeling overwhelmed and burdened by the legal system as a whole. The sensitive nature of sexual violence crimes means that the decision to report or actively engage in the legal process can take a large toll on the participants’ mental health. When this high emotional cost is met with disappointing results or practices, the participants begin to wonder if it is worth continuing or even starting the process. As Tariah recounts, “So mentally, I don’t know if I was prepared to go through the whole questioning with the police and everything that comes along with getting the police involved.”

Whether the participants felt discouraged by their interactions with system actors, delays due to COVID-19, or the bureaucratic nature of the legal process, all of these events eventually led to them feeling defeated in their pursuit of justice. When participants felt defeated, they lost trust in the legal system and further distanced themselves from engaging with it.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY ADVOCATES: “[SOS] were there during the hurt and also there during the empowerment.”

BIPOC women survivors who connected with SOS and other community-based organizations that support survivors emphasized the effectiveness of their advocates. Many suggested making SOS (and other community organizations) the first point of contact in the legal process for survivors. Ava, who we met above, explained: “[SOS] was there during the hurt and also there during the empowerment.” Community advocates, unlike victim witness advocates⁷ provided by the county, can keep what participants share confidential and are with them throughout the entire process, making them an invaluable resource.

These community-based organizations go well beyond offering direct support to BIPOC women survivors. They are also deeply involved in preventing gender-based and sexual violence altogether. They serve as the cornerstone of both prevention of and response to sexual violence in Ramsey County. A prevalent sentiment among participants was the urgency to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place and to protect “the next little girl.” BIPOC women survivors’ desire to stay involved with community-based organizations and the legal system is rooted in their desire to see their communities free from sexual violence. The work of these organizations not only improves the legal response to sexual violence but also plays a critical role in actively preventing violence, especially among communities that are disproportionately affected by violence.

Community-based organizations directly address several of the barriers and challenges participants described in their experience with the legal system, in particular, the burden participants carried, the fear they felt, and the importance of their identities. Participants described how community organizations relieved the burden that they felt by being someone they could call for updates on their cases. Participants also shared that community organizations helped relieve their fear of going through the legal system. One Hmong participant expressed that she was very fearful of reporting to the police, but because of her SOS advocate, she was able to feel less stressed and knew she always had a point of contact. Those who worked with advocates felt more empowered and better equipped during the legal process. For example, one Latina participant shared that because of her experience at SOS, she felt less scared talking to the police. Additionally, most of the community advocates shared identities with the BIPOC women survivors they supported, allowing participants to feel both seen and understood.

Community-based organizations and SOS advocates should be more accessible. Participants stressed the importance of this relationship and making their existence more widely known. For example, Andrea’s point of contact during the entire legal system process was an advocate from SOS. She shared that, without her SOS advocate, she would have harmed herself after the assault and described her SOS advocate as an “angel sent from above.” Her SOS advocate helped her navigate the fear of going through the legal system, especially during the sentencing phase. Andrea’s advocate and family were there when she delivered her victim impact statement. Advocates were able to reduce her anxiety around this particular stage of the legal proceedings. Moreover, participants explained that their relationships with their community advocates were unique and lasting, unlike their relationship with system actors.

However, there was a split among our participants: some deeply benefitted from community support, and others did not know that community organizations and SOS even existed. As Nicole shared, “Women aren’t going to research for organizations ‘cause they’re scared, and there is a language barrier. Resources should be readily available for women so that they are not having to seek it out.”

7. ([Ramsey County Attorney’s Office, 2015](#))

Making information about community and SOS advocates more widely available would allow BIPOC women survivors to connect with them at the outset. Participants shared that advocates are best poised to help BIPOC women survivors navigate the legal system and that the availability of more advocates is critical to improving the experience of BIPOC women survivors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the complex experiences and in-depth feedback from participants, we turn to recommendations to improve the experiences of BIPOC women. Overall, 81% of participants want to stay involved in improving the experience of BIPOC women survivors in the future, a number that surprised our team, given the deep challenges of engaging with the system. As a result, we present our recommendations as simply a starting point for the work ahead, guided by what the participants shared with us. We believe these five recommendations will recognize participant identities, reduce their fear, and improve their trust in the legal system. The recommendations are further rooted in reducing the burden for BIPOC women survivors and addressing the discouragement that many feel.



81%
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Overall, the participants in our study called for:

1. More investment in SOS and other community-based organizations so these organizations are readily accessible and available to all BIPOC women survivors.
2. Embedding culturally responsive and trauma-informed training into practice for all law enforcement agencies.
3. Improved communication, especially during the prosecution and sentencing stages of legal proceedings.
4. Establishing a continuum of care for BIPOC women survivors that spans the entire legal system.
5. Creating more opportunities and spaces for BIPOC women to share their stories.

Invest in Community-Based Organizations

We next suggest how Ramsey County and other partners might improve the legal process for BIPOC women survivors from the start. The participants in this study emphasized the power and importance of community-based support for victim survivors. SOS and community-based organizations came in at every stage of the process, but most often, they connected with the participants while they weighed their options to report their assault, a critical point for the participants.

When considering how to invest in community support, we recommend that Ramsey County increase financial support, access, and awareness. One specific way to do this would be to increase financial support for SOS to enable it to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Several participants described how different their experience would have been had SOS been available to them 24/7. SOS empowered many of the participants, which eliminated the participant's fear of ramifications. Increased availability of SOS would also alleviate some of the burden survivors bear if survivors could call someone at any hour of the day or night. Increasing the capacity of SOS to be with participants at each stage of the legal process is critical to give participants a familiar face: one with whom they have a rapport and to whom they can entrust their story.

We therefore recommend that Ramsey County both strengthen its existing partnerships with community organizations and foster new partnerships with a diverse range of community advocates who can provide support specifically to BIPOC women survivors. Recently, SOS and Ramsey County law enforcement updated their release of information process to allow SOS advocates to step in earlier and more often (See Appendix E). Building on this update, we recommend scaling this new process so that it includes community organizations outside of SOS (i.e., Phulumani and Ain Dah Yung Center) to better support BIPOC women survivors at the onset of the legal process. Community organizations are able to be completely focused on providing culturally relevant support for BIPOC women survivors (e.g., Phulumani works with African women, and the Ain Dah Yung Center works with American Indian or Native women).

If these stronger partnerships exist from the outset, then law enforcement can focus on investigating the crime through a trauma-informed and culturally competent lens. A partnership between advocates and law enforcement could provide a seamless experience that also offers a culturally responsive and trauma-informed investigation while advocates provide more individualized support to each BIPOC woman survivor. This flexibility to be an identity-focused organization reinforces trust. Participants will feel that they are being heard and believed, especially when community advocates speak their language and look like them.

In strengthening partnerships, we also recommend that Ramsey County invest in increasing awareness of existing community supports. Currently, the [resources](#) page for the Family Sexual Violence Unit does not link to any community organizations. The Colorado Department of Public Safety provides an example of a more collaborative [website](#). Similar to an updated ROI process, we recommend especially that police stations, first responders, and sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE) who first encounter BIPOC women survivors all distribute brochures about different organizations and that this information is readily available throughout the legal proceedings.

More than 90% of the participants in this study expressed the desire for more communal spaces for storytelling, viewing it as part of the responsibility of the legal system to establish and help facilitate such spaces. With additional investments in community-based organizations, these organizations could create and facilitate spaces in which survivors can process their ongoing grief after their engagement with the legal system has ended. Additionally, with investment from RCAO, BIPOC women survivors could be trained as peer specialists in facilitating spaces for other BIPOC women survivors to share their stories. These peer specialists could also walk alongside them throughout the entire legal system as either a staff member of SOS and/or RCAO. Post-recourse healing also sounded like an opportunity to assist other BIPOC women survivors in navigating the legal process, whether through direct advocacy or collaboration with community organizations addressing sexual violence. Given the trust that community-based organizations have built with BIPOC women survivors, they are best positioned to host these spaces.

The experiences shared by the participants in this study underscore the pivotal role of SOS and other community-based organizations. Increased accessibility and awareness of these resources would give BIPOC women survivors the support they so badly need at the very outset of their engagement with the legal system. Investing in additional funding and resources for these crucial organizations and fostering collaborative relationships between them and the legal system can lead to a more equitable environment for BIPOC women survivors seeking justice.

Embedding Training into Law Enforcement Practice

We next consider how Ramsey County agencies might improve the legal process for BIPOC women survivors when and after they report to law enforcement. These recommendations stem from findings related to participant experiences when reporting to law enforcement, experiencing the ensuing investigation, and the arrest and criminal charging of the defendant. Taken together

at these stages of the process, BIPOC women need to be met with culturally responsive care, trauma-informed practices, and increased communication. As one participant said, *“There should be ongoing culturally specific, trauma-informed training for law enforcement. They need to learn more about the women in communities and the unique intersecting traumas and identities they hold.”* The 2019 Implementation Plan for Systems Change established a strong training curriculum for law enforcement; we recommend building on this framework by embedding this training into practice.

Considering what this might specifically mean for law enforcement, we recognize the work since the Implementation Plan for Systems Change and the cultivation of a victim-centered culture. We recommend continuing to invest and expand specifically trained units in law enforcement. This might mean continued investment in the Sexual Violence Unit within the Saint Paul Police Department and expansion to other police departments. Specifically, these units should hire law enforcement investigators who are diverse across gender, race, and socioeconomic background, prioritizing investigators who are also survivors of sexual assault with lived experiences similar to those of the participants. It could also mean implementing a BIPOC academy for law enforcement recruits, such as the first Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) police academy at Lincoln University. Additionally, partnering with specific degree programs focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy, like the Culturally Responsive Professional Peace Officer degree and certificate program at Inver Hills Community College, could broaden the law enforcement workforce.

The RCAO’s investment in trauma-informed and culturally responsive training is a strong step in the right direction. To build on this momentum, we encourage a stronger integration of the training into current practices. A few examples of implementing the training include utilizing impact measurement tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and piloting Intergroup Dialogue models within law enforcement.

The IDI is a “theory-based, developmental psychometric instrument grounded in a comprehensive, cross-culturally validated theory of intercultural competence”. It serves as one example of an assessment tool that could measure an individual’s or group’s progression along a developmental path of understanding and responding to cultural differences. It can measure both mindset and skill set to understand the success and challenges that one individual might have with intercultural interactions and provide practice-based recommendations for building capacity for holding complexity around difference and increasing intercultural competence. Another recommendation for law enforcement agencies to hear the BIPOC women survivors is to engage in a group-based framework for communicating across differences through Intergroup Dialogue (IGD). IGD is a facilitated group process wherein participants learn and use dialogic skills to explore their own identities and socialization practices, as well as examine differences and commonalities. IGD has been used across settings to build interpersonal bridges and explore issues related to race and power. These dialogues would allow the BIPOC women survivors to be in the same space as law enforcement and have a structured dialogue that allows both the BIPOC women survivors to feel heard and valued. As we shared above, participants often felt that law enforcement officers did not hear or value them while they were reporting the assault. Additionally, participants were hesitant to provide details of their assaults because of the power dynamics that they observed. An instrument such as the IDI would allow officers to apply their trauma-informed and culturally responsive training so they could support BIPOC women survivors feeling heard while reporting their assaults.

We also recommend that law enforcement agencies improve their communication of expectations about the legal system. Currently, the Saint Paul Police Department website explains how reporting a crime could affect one’s immigration status (see Appendix D). This disclaimer is a great first step toward educating immigrants in Ramsey County; however, it should be made more accessible by utilizing language that is easier to understand and does more than simply parrot the statute. Law enforcement departments across Ramsey County need to clearly communicate policies around immigration so that participants’ fear of ramifications might be reduced. Similarly, the

Ramsey County Attorney's Office website provides an explanation and sample timeline for [court proceedings](#) that is clear to an English speaker. However, it is difficult for a Spanish speaker to get the same information: the current website redirects the reader to a series of [different pages](#). Through extensive Google searching, we were able to find comparable [Spanish resources](#). However, the information provided by the Ramsey County Attorney's Office should be as intuitive and accessible as the resources in English.

In sum, to better serve BIPOC women survivors, law enforcement departments should focus on providing ongoing culturally specific, trauma-informed training for law enforcement and on hiring diverse investigators who can better relate to and understand BIPOC women survivors. At the same time, departments should foster realistic expectations about the legal system through better communication. These recommendations aim to create a law enforcement department that is more empathetic toward and supportive of BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault.

Improve Communication during the Prosecution/Sentencing Stage

We recommend that prosecutors' offices communicate clearly how the legal system process will unfold and what the legal system permits in terms of contact with survivors of sexual assault.⁸ Specifically, we recommend increased communication channels between the prosecution team (where legally possible) and victim survivors or the use of creative alternatives and, in either instance, clarity on what communication is permitted. During the prosecution and sentencing stage, participants felt the burden of having to support the prosecutor "to win their case" but without being able to communicate directly with the prosecutor. As shared by Imani, "For you not to give your phone number or email to contact you shows how much you care. Like, to this day, I don't know how to contact [my prosecutor] unless I call down to the place, and I got to talk to two or three people to get [her]."

Through our conversations with Ramsey County officials, we know that the participants should not have the direct telephone number of the assistant county attorney prosecuting the alleged perpetrator of the assault because any communication between the prosecutor and the victim survivor could be used against the survivor in the case or cause the prosecutor to become a witness. However, this was seemingly not communicated to any of the participants in our study, which left study participants frustrated. We recommend conveying the communication protocol from the beginning and, importantly, explaining **why** the protocol exists to support participants in feeling heard and valued despite the lack of direct communication with the prosecuting team.

As shared above, participants shared their anxiety around the impact statement. We recommend that prosecutors work closely with advocates to support BIPOC women survivors by explaining what the impact statement is and how to best prepare for it. This is an opportunity to tap into community organizations, friends, and family to help alleviate the fear and uncertainty of the impact statement. These extra support systems could educate a participant about what the impact statement is and even role-play delivering it in court so that participants feel ready when it is time for them to make the statement.

Additionally, we recommend improved educational resources about the legal system. In general, we heard how inaccessible many of the existing resources were and how difficult they were to understand. Streamlining the resources that are available and making them much more friendly to the target population (i.e., reading level, visual appeal, placement of resources) would be helpful in allowing the resources to accomplish what they are intended to do. For example, the restitution brochure that is provided to all BIPOC women survivors once they complete a report is visually una-

8. Our legal system exists such that the burden of proof lies with the prosecution to honor and protect a critical tenet of our justice system: all are innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. This means that all court proceedings for BIPOC women survivors must heavily rely on the testimony of BIPOC women survivors in order to find a guilty verdict against the defendant.

appealing, difficult to read, and not helpful in providing the information that BIPOC women survivors need. We recommend updating this brochure so that it is simple, engaging, and easy to read.

To summarize, the prosecution and sentencing stages of the legal system present challenges for BIPOC women survivors regarding communication with prosecutors, completing the impact statement, and accessing information about the legal system. Our recommendations include improving communication about protocols and expectations, providing education and support through community advocates, and enhancing educational resources to be more accessible. These recommendations aim to empower BIPOC women survivors and alleviate the burden they may feel during the prosecution and sentencing stage.

Increase Communication, Consistency, and Compassion

The miscommunication, misunderstanding, and communication between stages of the investigation and court proceedings were things that participants continually emphasized. Participants' concerns about communication centered around two main needs: consistency and compassion. We heard that participants felt supported during the beginning stages of the investigation with constant support from system actors, but once the defendant was charged, all communication simply and inexplicably stopped. Many participants reported receiving minimal to no explanation of the legal process or its timeline, delays in case updates, and confusion about the best points of contact. Therefore, we recommend that Ramsey County establish a communication approach that includes consistent touchpoints with participants at all stages of the legal proceedings.

Additionally, we recommend that Ramsey County increase the compassion of its communications to improve the experience of BIPOC women survivors. As shared above, participants did not feel valued, and this often reflected how system actors were speaking to them: as robots, clients, or burdens rather than as traumatized people in need of compassion and care. Communication mattered deeply to participants because they felt it reflected their value and self-worth. Communication was also closely tied to their belief in being heard or valued. Moreover, the power of community advocates was closely linked to the level of their skills in communicating with study participants. Community advocates were responsive, timely, and compassionate in their interactions with the participants, greatly improving their overall experience.

Therefore, an overarching recommendation is to establish a continuum of care for all BIPOC women survivors. Between the various stages of the legal process, there must be stronger communication so that survivors' evidence, stories, and relationships do not fall through the cracks. For example, once investigators have passed over the case to the prosecutors, the prosecutor needs to close the communication loop and share that they will be the participant's primary contact moving forward. If not, a participant might continue to go back to the investigator she worked with, even after he "closed" out her case. We strongly recommend communicating how the system works and when and how the participant will hear from the justice system at each stage of the legal proceedings. This was revealed to be a strong way to relieve fear and anxiety about the unknown. As Imani shares,

"To get more updates, like, I shouldn't have to be the one to call you to get any information. They should have been calling me on a weekly basis. Are you okay? You're working for me. I'm not working for you."

In conclusion, consistent, responsive, and compassionate communication emerged as a central theme for the participants. Participants stressed the need for this level of communication across the legal system. To address this, we recommend Ramsey County establish a continuum of care that ensures transparent and empathetic communication with survivors from reporting through sentencing.

Create Space for BIPOC Women to Tell Their Stories

Finally, the BIPOC women survivors who participated in our study described the importance of both feeling advocated for and advocating on behalf of others who have a shared experience. As we explored our final research question, participants were eager to continue to engage with system improvement despite discouragement, defeat, and lack of trust. As we noted above, 81% of participants shared that they want to stay involved in improving the experience of BIPOC women survivors in the future.

When we explored what this might look like, participants shared many ideas about how they individually might like to stay involved. Taken together, we heard most often that all participants wanted the opportunity to speak up about their experiences, about their challenges, about their survival, to help other women. In particular, many described the hope that no one else would ever go through what they went through. This willingness to prioritize turning trauma and pain into support for others was widespread and inspiring. There was a deep sense of the importance of a collective and the creation of space for others to listen, hear, be educated, and be equipped with tools. The community in this context was other women, at times close friends and family members, who have survived (or might later survive) sexual assault. In some instances, our participants expanded this community to more traditional advocates, including those at SOS or other community-serving organizations (e.g., Phulumani, Esperanza United, etc).

Therefore, we recommend the creation of that space for sharing. Ramsey County should begin to offer opportunities for BIPOC women both to share their stories and to gather as a collective and share in community for continued brainstorming about how to improve the system. This recommendation is a seed. We hope this is the first of many efforts to create space for stories. We include at the end of the report “an empirical poem.” This is a poem compiled and structured by our research team, but all the language — the words, the voices — come directly from our participants. This is a unique way to combine qualitative social science analysis with art to share and process similar data from many different participants powerfully. The poem is called “Telling Their Stories.”

CONCLUSION

This research project sought to understand the experiences of BIPOC women survivors of sexual assault to improve the legal system in Ramsey County in Minnesota, a county in which 42% of community members are BIPOC individuals ([United States Census Bureau, 2023b](#)).

Through our conversations with 26 BIPOC women survivors who identified across racial groups, as mothers, as daughters, and as survivors, we learned that their experiences could not be separated from their identities. Their identity often dictated whether they trusted the system enough to report their assault or if they were so fearful of the system that they chose not to report. Additionally, we learned of the numerous obstacles and burdens they navigated as they felt the weight of the state’s burden of proof and felt discouraged by interactions with system actors along the way. We also learned about powerfully positive interactions with certain system actors, most notably SOS, and community organization advocates.

Our recommendations support a continuum of care in which every stage of the process pairs BIPOC women survivors with culturally responsive, trauma-informed system actors who hear and believe them. This continuum of care would be supported by organizations such as SOS and other community-based organizations that specialize in supporting BIPOC women survivors through assault and trauma. We hope that through these recommendations, the legal system will be better poised to support BIPOC women survivors in their pursuit of justice.

Telling their stories

(an empirical poem)

I don't want anyone else to go through what I went through

I can share my story

Yeah, I will

I will lecture them

I will let them know what I went through

You don't supposed to go through this

You have to just keep talking to people

The role you can play is talking about your story

Got the family

and involved

Living and talking to friends

Telling their stories and spreading the word

Telling their stories, speaking up

Create awareness

Should at least give us a choice to

Should be praised more for telling our story

And we should be praised more for actually speaking up about it

But I knew I had people

To support me

So I feel like talking about it

It's going to help other women

To understand what's happening and

I guess not to make them feel alone

But you're never alone
At least she can sleep at night knowing
That he's not out there
My friends sat in there
Longer than she did
Any way that I can change the law for the next little girl
I will tell
To talk her through it
And get her prepared
Girls are
Girls are gonna call each other
Telling their stories
You need to have someone always speak for you
I don't want to see anyone else shut down
What do I say
My reputation, my values, my morals
Their respect
How do I start



APPENDIX A: LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS

Community-Based Organizations

[Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault \(MNCASA\)](#)

SoS Sexual Violence Services

[Transforming Generations](#)

[Breaking Free](#)

[Violence Free Minnesota \(VFMN\)](#)

[St. Paul & Ramsey County Domestic Abuse Intervention Project](#)

[Domestic Abuse Project \(DAP\)](#)

[Ramsey County Sexual Assault Protocol Team \(RC-SAPT\)](#)

[Family Home Visiting | Ramsey County](#)

[Partnership with Native Americans \(PWNA\) | ICWA](#)

[Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio \(CLUES\)](#)

[Tubman](#)

[Asian Women United of Minnesota \(AWUM\)](#)

[Penumbra Theatre](#)

[Minnesota Prison Doula Project](#)

[Sex Workers Outreach Project \(SWOP\)](#)

[The Arc Minnesota](#)

[Decriminalizing Communities Coalition \(DCC\)](#)

[Mending the Sacred Hoop](#)

[Canopy Roots](#)

[We Resolve](#)

[Seeds Worth Sowing](#)

[Street Works Outreach Collaborative](#)

[Kissy Stay Put Services](#)

[Revolutionary Emergency Partners \(REP\)](#)

Esperanza United

[Minneosta Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition \(MIWSAC\)](#)

[Women of Nations](#)

Ain Dah Yung Center (ADY Center)

[Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center \(MIWRC\)](#)

[Brian Coyle Center](#)

Phumulani

Jeremiah Program

APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOL

SSVEP Focus Group Norm Setting Protocol

The purpose of this working protocol is to establish a respectful, safe, supportive focus group environment.

1. **Respecting Each Other's Stories:** Anonymity is a cornerstone of our focus group. All information shared during our time together will be treated with the highest level of respect and privacy. Let's create a safe space where everyone feels comfortable sharing without fear of their words being disclosed outside of our session. We will discuss how your perspectives will be incorporated in our research in the next section.
2. **Together We Know A Lot:** We recognize that each of you brings lived experiences that are uniquely yours alongside embodied expertise to the conversation. We firmly believe that everyone in this room has invaluable insights to contribute. By acknowledging that together we possess a wealth of knowledge and understanding, we foster a collaborative environment that encourages mutual learning and shaping the conversation collectively. It is important to acknowledge that we may likely have different perspectives on how to solve issues that impact women, particularly our Black, Brown and Indigenous Communities. We invite you to : a) simply receive and believe one another and our experiences, b) let go of the urge to persuade one another, we can get this work done, and c) let us, the MNJRC team hold the space, we got you.
3. **One Mic & Shared Space:** To ensure clear and focused communication, we kindly request that only one person speaks at a time. This approach allows for everyone's voice to be heard and valued. We invite those who typically speak less to consider speaking up more, if that's available to you, and those who tend to speak more to embrace active listening. We also invite and encourage nonverbal participation. We understand that not everyone may feel comfortable expressing their thoughts or ideas through spoken words, and value the diverse and natural ways in which individuals can contribute to the conversation (gestures, body language, etc).
4. **No Pressure:** We value participation in all its forms and respect individual boundaries and preferences. You are encouraged to share your thoughts and experiences at a pace and comfort level that feels right for you. There is no pressure to disclose more than you are comfortable with. We also welcome opportunities to engage outside of this space and opportunities to engage here more privately (utilizing post-it notes, engaging in one-on-one conversations with our team, etc). Please feel free to take advantage of these options to engage and contribute in ways that align with your personal comfort and preferences.
5. **Be Gentle With Yourself:** We recognize that the topics we will be discussing may be difficult and potentially triggering. Your emotional well-being is important to us and we want to encourage you to prioritize self-care throughout the session. If you find yourself needing a moment to step outside, take a deep breath, or gather yourself, please feel free to do so. We support and welcome breaks as needed. If anyone needs support during or after the session, please connect with Sharin and/or SOS advocate.

Are there any other norms you want to propose?

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE WEBSITE LANGUAGE

1.9.1 Decouple federal immigration enforcement from routine local policing for civil enforcement and non-serious crime.

SPPD supports our immigrant communities

The Saint Paul Police Department does not ask about immigration status and department policy prohibits bias profiling. The city does not operate its programs for the purpose of enforcing federal immigration laws as stated in Chapter 44 of the city administrative code.

St. Paul mayor and police chief to Muslims: 'We will stand with you'

Star Tribune | Feb. 8, 2017

Saint Paul Police Chief Axtell Against Police Immigration Checks

Saint Paul Pioneer Press / March 2, 2017

Reference Data

City Ordinance Sec.44.03

Task Status: Established Practice

APPENDIX D: RELEASE OF INFORMATION

(ROI PROCESS)

SOS Sexual Violence Services	
A program of Ramsey County	
1	Police Department requesting consent to release: Saint Paul Police Department
2	Case Number: 24000000
3	Investigator assigned to case (if applicable): TEST
4	SOS Advocate name (if applicable): TEST
5	I CONSENT to release my name and identifying information to SOS. I understand that my identity may be considered private information under the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (Minnesota Statutes section 13.82), and that the police department has an obligation to keep private data about me private and only release information as required by law. I also understand that I can choose to allow private data about me to be shared with certain individuals or agencies. Required to answer. Single choice. Please click yes or no to AUTHORIZE the police department to share the identified specific information with SOS Sexual Violence Services so they may follow up and offer FREE & CONFIDENTIAL advocacy services. YES ☒ NO, I decline to have my information provided to SOS.
Contact Information	
6	How may SOS contact you? Check all that apply: Phone ☒ Text ☒ Email ☐

7
What is a safe phone number to reach you (if applicable)?
6510000000
8
What is a safe email to reach you (if applicable)?
9
May SOS identify we are calling from "SOS" in a voicemail or email?
Yes ☒ X
No
10
By signing below, I confirm that I understand:
1. That I do not have to sign a release form. I do not have to allow the police department to share my information with SOS Sexual Violence Services. Signing a release is completely voluntary.
2. That releasing information about me could give another agency or person information about my location and would confirm that I am connected to an incident being investigated, or that will be or has been investigated by the police and that I may be receiving services from SOS Sexual Violence Services.
3. That the police department will not be able to control what happens to my information once it has been released to the above person or agency, and that the agency or person getting my information may be required by law to share it with others.
PLEASE TYPE NAME BELOW AS A DIGITAL SIGNATURE:
Jane Doe
11
Date:
4/23/2024
12
Please type your name below if you are a parent or guardian signing on behalf of a minor or vulnerable adult.

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