Summer URECA Proposal by (Student Name)

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Rachel Davis

Project Title: Law Enforcement Perceptions on Sexual Assault and Sex Trafficking

Introduction

In 2020, there were 5,284 identified victims of sexual assault in Tennessee (Yi & Stach, 2022). In 2023, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) reported 698 cases of sex trafficking; some cases included multiple victims. 518 of the 698 cases were minor sex trafficking. Since 2016, the TBI has trained 40,162 officers, religious organizations, colleges, victim services, and many other groups on the signs of human trafficking (Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, 2023). Understanding law enforcement attitudes regarding the victims of sexual assault and sex trafficking is pivotal for victim advocacy.

The paper, The Relationship Between Rape Myths, Revictimization by Law Enforcement, and Well-Being for Victims of Sexual Assault, highlights the myths regarding sex crime victims: "While there is no complete list of what characteristics constitute a "real rape," in many Western contexts, the idea of 'real rape' is related to the belief that rapes occur in an outdoor setting and at night, whereby the perpetrator is unknown to the victim and uses a weapon and whereby the victim resists and is thus left with physical and emotional indicators of the struggle that ensued" (Maiorano, Travers, & Vallières, 2023). These beliefs are harmful to victims who do not experience a "stereotypical" assault. The literature shows that victim blaming and lack of training can cause post-traumatic stress disorder in victims. This also causes a lack of arrests and convictions when cases are not considered "real rape." The myths and misconceptions around rape and sex trafficking ultimately hurt the victims (Garza & Franklin, 2020). The purpose of this project is to gather information on how different areas of law

enforcement perceive victims and different scenarios of sexual assault and trafficking. This work is critical for understanding how law enforcement interacts with victims and handles cases regarding sex crimes. I aim to explore and address the societal misconceptions and biases surrounding sexual assault and sex trafficking, which significantly hinder effective advocacy and support for victims.

Literature Review

Based on the current literature, there is a critical need for comprehensive education and training among law enforcement personnel to address the prevailing myths and biases surrounding sexual assault and trafficking (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2008). These myths not only hinder the investigative and judicial processes but also exacerbate the trauma experienced by victims, contributing to a cycle of revictimization and psychological distress (Maiorano, Travers, & Vallières, 2023). The literature underscores the importance of adopting a victim-centered approach that acknowledges the diverse realities of sexual assault and trafficking incidents. This includes recognizing that assaults can occur in familiar settings by known individuals, challenging stereotypes related to victims' demographics (Maiorano, Travers, & Vallières, 2023). Researching how Tennessee law enforcement officers fit into the scope of current literature is crucial to improving training, policy, and advocacy for victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Based on prior literature I aim to research the following questions: How likely are law enforcement officer to assign blame to victims/perpetrators of sexual assault and trafficking? What rationale do law enforcement members use to assign blame and/or punishment in cases of sexual assault? Does demographic of the law enforcement member, victim, or perpetrator have

any impact on how the case is handled? Do the survey answers concur with current literature on rape myth acceptance and trafficking misconceptions? I hypothesize that female law enforcement members will have a lower rate of myth acceptance. I also hypothesize that minorities and low-income victims will receive different treatment in survey responses than white and upper-class victims.

Methods

To understand the current mindset and procedure of Tennessee law enforcement officers' handling of sexual assault and trafficking cases and victims, I will utilize qualitative and quantitative data collected through a Qualtrics experimental survey distributed through email to various law enforcement agencies in Tennessee. The goal is to receive responses from at least one law enforcement agency from each Tennessee county in order to get a well-rounded range of participants. The survey will include different case scenarios of sexual assault and trafficking. Each account will vary randomly according to the following factors: incapacitation, time taken to report, witnesses, perpetrator's account, gender, type of forced sex, type of nonconsent, and demographic of victim and perpetrator. We will also implement the use of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale to help determine the attitudes of the officers. Law enforcement officers will also be asked if they have received training regarding sexual assault and trafficking with the option of "Yes" or "No" with a write-in option to include the date of training if selected "Yes".

I will then collect demographic information, including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic identity, education level, income, and religious affiliation. For all demographic variables, the option "prefer not to answer" will be presented along with all other options. Age will be measured with options including "18 to 24," "25 to 29," "30 to 39," "40 to

39," "40 to 49," "50 to 59," and "60 or older". Gender identity will be measured with options including "woman," "man," "trans woman," "trans man," "nonbinary," and "other (please specify)." Racial/ethnic identity will be measured with participants being given the option to select any of the following that they feel apply to them: "Asian," "Black or African American," "Latina," "Native American," "Pacific Islander," "White or Caucasian," and "Other (please specify)." Education will be measured using a multiple-choice question regarding respondents' highest level of education completed, with choices including "some high school," "high school diploma or GED," "some technical training," "technical certification," "some college," "associate degree," "bachelor's degree," "some graduate school," or "graduate degree." Income will be measured ordinally, with options including "Less than $20,000," "$20,000 to $34,999," $35,000 to $49,999," "$50,000 to $74,999," "$75,000 to $99,999," and "Over $100,000." Religious affiliation will be gathered, with participants being given the option to select any of the following that they feel apply to them: "Christianity," "Islam," "Hinduism," "Atheism," and "Other (please specify)."

The qualitative data, encompassing aspects like perceptions of sexual assault, attitudes towards victims and perpetrators, and procedural insights, will be processed through NVIVO. This analysis will aid in developing a codebook and establishing a theoretical framework for my research paper. Quotes from the survey answers will be used as examples of myth acceptance or lack thereof. The demographic data will be analyzed in either R or Stata to analyze perceptions of victims based on the demographics of the law enforcement member, victim, and perpetrator.

Mentor Collaboration

During the survey creation, data collection and analysis, and final paper/presentation writing, I will consult my mentor to ensure accuracy as well as learn from their expertise on

qualitative data analysis, survey process, and research. Meetings with my mentor will be bi-weekly if not more frequent. Meetings will include lessons through each research step, survey creation, survey analysis, progress reports, and general collaboration between mentor and mentee. My mentor's specialization in mixed-methods research, feminist studies, gendered violence, and sexual labor will provide great insight for this project and will provide valuable mentorship to improve my research skills.

Conclusion

My study will provide an important contribution to the current literature regarding the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of law enforcement in handling sexual assault and trafficking victims. My study will also be pivotal in recognizing gaps in Tennessee law enforcement's knowledge or training. This work is critical for understanding how law enforcement interacts with victims and handles cases regarding sex crimes. The conclusion of this study can also be used to shape future training for law enforcement. Addressing the myths and biases surrounding sexual assault and trafficking in law enforcement requires a multifaceted approach that includes survey analysis, finding rate of myth acceptance, education, policy reform, and collaborative efforts. The first step to improvement is identifying any biases and myth acceptance among law enforcement. From there, we can find out what can be done for improvement to ensure that law enforcement is efficiently handling sexual assault and trafficking cases while ensuring that victims are cared for. By shifting towards a more informed and empathetic understanding of these issues, law enforcement agencies can play a crucial role in preventing revictimization, ensuring justice for victims, and ultimately contributing to the broader efforts to combat sexual assault and trafficking.

References

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Project Timeline

April 29th - May 10th

Read and analyze prior literature to help develop survey questions and scenarios. During this time, we will collaborate with law enforcement agencies to ensure we Also, work on IRB approval (in process)

May 13th

Send survey questions to law enforcement agencies with the deadline of May 27th. While waiting for responses, I will research prior frameworks for qualitative codebook and develop the beginning database and code for statistical analysis

May 28th

Begin sorting data received from law enforcement agencies. Separating the quantitative and qualitative data.

May 29th - June 12th

Analyze free responses in NVIVO for the codebook regarding victim perceptions. Also, do a statistical analysis of the quantitative data.

June 13th

Once I have finished the data analysis, I will display the findings to my mentor for criticism and make changes if needed. After any changes are made, we will begin creating the final paper and project. This will include meetings and lessons on research paper drafting and research presentation. The goal is to finish the paper and research presentation by the end of July.