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‘Then I Met This Lovely Police Woman’ Young People’s Experiences of Engagement with the Criminal Justice System

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Abstract

Young people’s voices detailing how they experienced engagement with the criminal justice system following child sexual abuse, what was helpful or unhelpful and how services can be improved to minimise secondary victimisation and maximise the potential for healing are largely absent from the research literature. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with a culturally diverse sample ($n = 47$) of young people aged 14 to 25 across Ireland and Canada about their experiences of disclosure and engagement with systems. Data were collected pertaining to experiences engaging with law enforcement personnel using thematic analysis with a trauma-informed lens. The research identified three key themes: the importance of feeling safe through kindness, transparency and being believed; the importance of having a say; and the importance of timely court processes. The study builds on the small body of qualitative research illustrating young people’s lived experiences of engaging with the criminal justice system and provides empirical support for promoting a trauma-informed approach in how police engage with young people. Guidance is offered for police professionals on how to engage with adolescents following sexual abuse.

KEYWORDS

adolescent, child law/legal processes, community, qualitative study, sexual abuse

Key Practitioner Messages

- Young people have a right to be responded to with respect, dignity and support when engaging with police personnel.
- Kindness shown by police and transparency about the criminal justice process helps young people engage with police and provide a detailed account of their experiences.
- We need to listen to young people’s views of their experiences of engaging with police in order to improve our responses.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been described as a public health problem (Assink et al., 2019), while child protection and law enforcement authorities have been tasked with addressing CSA in order to protect children from abuse, prevent further abuse and intervene with offenders. However, prosecutions of CSA offences are highly reliant on the child’s ability to disclose their abuse. Large-scale studies reveal high proportions of both adults (Central Statistics Office, 2023)

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and adolescents (Priebe & Svedin, 2008) disclosing experiences of CSA for the first time several years after the abuse has ended. Reporting rates to authorities remain concerningly low, typically ranging from 5 to 17 per cent (London et al., 2008; Stiller & Hellmann, 2017). Stoltenborgh et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 217 published studies of CSA prevalence found that studies relying on self-report elicited 30 times higher rates of CSA than those relying on reports to authorities. Conviction rates for child sexual abuse remain among the lowest of all charges (Lewis et al., 2014). One of the reasons cited for low reporting rates is negative perceptions of law enforcement and the criminal justice process, which may act as a deterrent to reporting (Winters et al., 2020). The present study sought to explore young people's experiences of engagement with law enforcement personnel to identify how best to support young people while engaging with the criminal justice system.

Experiences of police engagement

Previous research with adult victims of sexual abuse or sexual assault reveals that most adult survivors have negative perceptions of police interactions (Campbell, 2008). Those who do engage with the criminal justice system describe insensitive attitudes, victim-blaming and dismissive treatment by police (Campbell, 2008; Campbell et al., 2015; Feeney et al., 2018; Patterson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2009). Factors that have been identified as inhibiting young adults from reporting their experiences of abuse to police authorities include: being afraid of not being believed or supported, not being taken seriously, fear of revictimization, perceived distress of the reporting process, the length of the process, the lack of successful outcomes, and having to retell their experience many times (Winters et al., 2020). Winters et al. found that for those participants who did report, half were left feeling unsatisfied with law enforcement engagement, some noting they felt disrespected by the legal system.

Greeson et al. (2016) note how adult victims can generally choose whether to engage with the criminal justice system whereas adolescents may be pressured into engaging with the police. They interviewed 20 adolescents about their experiences of engagement with police. Negative interactions referred to 'uncaring, insensitive, and/or intimidating' (p. 640) police behaviour, ignoring the victim's emotions or wellbeing, launching into questioning them without any conversation beforehand, rushing the victim to tell their story, being angry or intimidating if they could not remember details, being more 'focused on the case rather than her' (p. 642), and using harsh tone and language. Others have reported police behaviours and attitudes such as not being believed, assuming that adolescents frequently lie to cover up for substance abuse, truancy or to avoid getting into trouble (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2018). Secondary victimisation experienced by young people following engagement with police have included an increase in post-traumatic symptomatology, hopelessness about the system's capacity to help, distrustfulness and reluctance to seek help (Greeson & Campbell, 2015; Patterson, 2011). Studies of adolescents have found that nonstereotypical assaults (where alcohol was involved, the perpetrator was known to the young person or where there were no weapons used in the assault) were least likely to be prosecuted (Campbell et al., 2001; Frazier & Haney, 1996; Spohn et al., 2014).

Police have also been experienced as 'caring, compassionate and personable' (Greeson et al., 2016, p. 643). Their behaviours included helping young people to feel calm, listening carefully, comforting them when they were distressed, caring behaviours (e.g., checking up on their safety outside of the interview), engaging them in conversations about topics other than the assault, easing into talking about the abuse and using a conversational, approachable interview style, and disclosing personal information about themselves. Greeson et al. did highlight some unique findings: letting the young person know that they could tell them anything and would not be judged, and that they 'knew what it was like to be a teenager' (p. 646).

Technology assisted child sexual abuse (TA-CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE)

The increasing prevalence of TA-CSA and CSE has revealed further negative experiences of young people with police personnel. Bejinariu and colleagues (2021) interviewed 34 young people in Nevada who had experienced CSE. Positive interactions with the police included being treated with respect, police calling their parents to assist them or bringing them to rape crisis facilities for help. However, most described being 'treated like juvenile delinquents rather than victims of crime' (p. 241). Prioritising arrest and prosecution was seen by young people as taking precedence over their safety and wellbeing. Factors identified as influencing negative responses from police include age (over 15), gender (male or LGBTQ), race (ethnic minorities such as African-American), appearance (unkempt) and whether they have a prior record of criminal activity (Mitchell et al., 2010), or when the young people are seen as compliant and co-operative (Smith et al., 2009). Young people in Bejinariu et al.'s study reported being threatened, physically abused, police pinning them down and shouting verbal abuse at them. The authors suggest that this treatment of girls may be

influenced by the stigma associated with prostitution, a culture of victim blaming as a result of poor training and stereotypes about perceptions of the 'perfect victim'.

Sapiro et al. (2016) highlighted the struggle between protecting young people, recognising their history of trauma, while respecting their need for autonomy. Lack of confidence among professionals, the absence of policy to guide responses, prejudice, victim blaming and online abuse not being perceived as harmful as offline abuse have been reported (Bejinariu et al., 2021; Palmer, 2014). Professionals themselves (social workers and law enforcement) have acknowledged their limited understanding of what constituted TA-CSA or abuse dynamics, and the tendency to blame victims. Four in five professionals agreed with the statement 'victims are sometimes blamed' for the abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020, p. 10). Online sexual abuse appears to be seen as less concerning and less likely to be acted upon than offline abuse, perhaps due to confusion among child protection and law enforcement professionals in distinguishing between normal and problematic youth sexual behaviour in a digital context and what the appropriate legal or support responses should be (Slane et al., 2021).

Implications of perceptions of police

Fears of intrusive investigations by social workers or police have been identified as barriers to young people disclosing their experiences of abuse (Ungar et al., 2009), as well as lack of faith in the effectiveness of the response young people might receive and lack of sensitivity to their need to have some control over the process. How police behave during their interactions with young people impacts on the extent to which young people will provide information that may be helpful for the prosecution of offences. In Greeson et al.'s (2016) study of adolescents 'when the police were sensitive and personable, they were more comfortable and able to talk to them during the interview; when they were insensitive and intimidating, it was more difficult to talk to them' (p. 645). Thus, young people are more likely to engage with the criminal justice system and elaborate on their experiences when they are believed and do not feel blamed for the abuse (Feeney et al., 2018), feel supported and treated with respect (Campbell, 2008; Fehler-Cabral et al., 2011).

In Winters et al.'s (2020) study, most of the participants said they would not report to law enforcement in the future (66 per cent); only 10 per cent said they would. These authors suggest that while barriers to disclosure appear to be related more to psychological factors such as shame, guilt and self-blame, facilitators are related to the child's interaction with their environment (opportunity to tell, being believed). This is consistent with the findings of recent reviews of studies exploring CSA disclosure experiences and what helps children tell (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; McElvaney, 2016; Morrison et al., 2018).

The current study

The current study aimed to build on previous studies in order to highlight guidance for best practice, using the lens of trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed practice refers to an awareness of how an individual may be affected by trauma and adapting one's approach to avoid retraumatisation through offering choice and empowerment to help them feel safer, supporting recovery and the individual's resilience through recognising the importance of relationships when interacting with individuals who have experienced trauma. We hoped to highlight how young people wish to be treated by police professionals when engaging with the criminal justice system.

METHOD

Young people aged 14–25 who were sexually abused in childhood/adolescence were recruited in Canada (Quebec and Ontario) and Ireland (Dublin, Galway and Limerick) through community-based sexual abuse/assault agencies, hospital-based specialised clinics and child advocacy centres for a study on disclosure experiences ($n = 47$). Recruitment was primarily facilitated by professional staff working in these agencies who approached potential participants and shared information leaflets prepared by the research team. Separate information leaflets were prepared for professionals, parents/carers and for young people. Three inclusion criteria were used: being a youth currently aged between 14 and 25, having experienced sexual abuse prior to age 18 and currently receiving services related to their sexual victimisation experience. The latter criteria ensured that support was available to participants, where needed, following the research interview. The study was designed using a consensual qualitative research approach (CQR; Hill et al., 1997). Youth were interviewed between November 2015 and June 2018 using a semi-structured interview protocol exploring their experiences of CSA disclosure. A distress protocol was implemented in the event that a participant became upset during or at the end of the interview. This included pausing the interview, offering the participant a choice as to whether

to continue, reschedule or withdraw and alerting service managers to the need for follow-up support, where indicated. Ethics approval was obtained from the research ethics boards of the three universities (Trinity College Dublin, McGill University, and University of Toronto), and agencies that had their own internal ethics board. Written consent/assent was gained from parents/young people prior to conducting the interviews.

Of the 47 participants, 29 young people spoke of their engagement with police personnel. Demographic information is not included here to respect these young people's privacy. Transcripts of interviews were reviewed and an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by the first author to identify key themes that reflected young people's experiences. These themes were reviewed by all authors with a view to identifying how the core pillars of trauma-informed care might inform practice in this field (safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment and choice; and cultural, historical and gender issues [SAMHSA, 2014]). Consensus was reached among all authors on the final themes and illustrative quotes.

FINDINGS

Three key themes were identified: the importance of feeling safe, illustrated by the kindness and transparency evident in police interactions, as well as believing the young person; the importance of having a say; and the importance of timely court proceedings.

The importance of feeling safe: Kindness, transparency and believing the young person

Participants spoke of how scared they were when they knew the police were involved. DP02 '(I) panicked straight away ... I thought I might be arrested' (DP02). Many participants spoke of feeling safe, kindness shown to them, being informed of the process and being believed. Language used tended to refer to police being 'nice', 'maternal', 'gentle', 'calm', 'warm'.

Kindness

Kindness shown was illustrated through feeling helped – 'he helped me through it' (T07), 'Make me feel comfortable' (M03) – or acts of kindness such as taking the young person to hospital or home. Taking time and not putting pressure on young people while taking them seriously was another way kindness was shown: 'Uh she took the time to listen to me when I had something to say' (M03). An appreciation of how difficult it was for young people to engage with the police helped them feel understood:

every time I had to talk to the guards (police) it did not work for me, I just could not talk to them ... I just got upset like ... I think it was 3 or 4 times that I talked to them ... they were both lovely like ... and they both completely understood why I could not talk but like I was just yeah I just got really upset like every time. Like every time I thought I was fine going in and just. I just no, the minute I seen them I was just like no ... they have helped me and if it wasn't for them I dunno where I'd be. (D09)

The assertiveness of police for one young person helped her feel safe,

They, like, typically police are often they try to keep like a, they try to be very assertive and ask you questions, so like I felt like I was safe. (O09)

Similarly, one young person spoke of how the power of the police helped her feel supported,

knowing that the garda (police) were involved made me happy, I felt more supported and they had told me that I do not need to worry anymore and that everything was going to be ok and that really helped me, to know that someone was behind me and supporting me, who actually has a lot of power, it just made me feel really happy. (D01)

While some participants were interviewed in their own home, several young people commented on the environment of the police station or advocacy centre where they were interviewed. One adolescent spoke of being brought to the police station when she was 12 years old every day for a full week of interviews:

the room was so nice that we went into, there were a few rooms ... so there was one room for, where I was going to be giving the statement and another room for if I needed a break or whatever. so, it was actually really nice. (D02)

An example of where a victim did not feel safe is illustrated in the following description provided by a young woman who had experienced mental health issues and suicide attempts that were known to the police. She received a call to inform her that the case would not proceed to prosecution.

And I got a call ... um I was living on my own at this point ... I was like completely on my own, ... and it's like 'hi, detective-investigator blablabla, um so I'm just calling to let you know that um, I wanted to call you before I left' it's – this is a – like on a Friday afternoon 'I wanted to call you before I left to let you know that um, we're closing your case on Tuesday, we didn't find that there was, um, enough to prosecute' ... and she asked me like 'are you with people, are you like, are you somewhere safe?' (M01)

Transparency

Participants spoke of how helpful it was that the police kept them informed of how the system worked, progress on the case and the proceedings, 'he wanted to do everything for me and he did everything he could, and he would come over every week or every few weeks to give us an update on everything' (D02). According to one adolescent, 'they would explain to me like what's court gonna be like and like showed me examples, and like not to be nervous, "cause I was like terrified"' (T03). Even when the interview itself was extremely distressing, some young people were left with a positive experience of the police:

Now, I took it in a bad way. The minute they left I was vomiting, I stayed up all night ..., I was totally distraught, did not know what to do, yeah. Now that Guard (police) ... now I'm good with him, ... he's always there for me. He just said he had to ask that question but, you know, when you are younger. (D05)

Being believed

Being believed helped young people feel supported: 'they believed me, they were on my side, they were trying to help me' (O07). Another young person spoke of how she experienced being doubted by the police when she first reported an assault, which wasn't prosecuted and then when experiencing a later assault decided not to report it, 'Are the police officers ... when they look up my name ... that now it's happened again with another person ... And then like they'll doubt my, my word' (M03):

they were not the nicest people ... they were very amm tough ... on you like if you did not get a piece of information or you got something wrong the first time around ... they kind of would go well you got that wrong the first time. You cannot be doing that ... it is meant to be real. You cannot be lying, and I wasn't trying to lie. (D03)

For some, being believed was a double-edged sword. One young person spoke of how everyone believed her throughout the process, which made it all the more shocking for her when the decision was made not to prosecute: throughout the whole process, everyone told me 'I believe you, I believe you, I believe you' and ... 'since everyone believed me, in my head it was like 'well then, it's going to go to court ... he's going to pay for what he did' ... that also helped me a lot to get back on my feet again super quickly. (M03)

However, M03 also noted, 'but at the same time they didn't believe me because if they'd believed me it would have gone all the way'.

The importance of having a say

Young people spoke of the impact on them of when they either did or did not have a choice in how the investigation proceeded. D02 spoke of having a choice of being interviewed alone or with her parents, 'I wanted to be by myself in the room'. One young person noted how 'they (police) showed up at my grandparents, uh like out of nowhere [Um Hmm] when we had specifically asked them not to' (T04). Another spoke of having to go to the police station the evening she first disclosed, which felt unnecessary and insensitive to her psychological wellbeing.

I had just disclosed the information that morning and had spent my whole day crying and I was called down to the station at eight, which I did not necessarily want to do at that ... I feel like giving the victim maybe just a day to kind of process everything and give her time, her or him, to cry and to say like okay, this is what's going on, this is what's gonna happen, I can do this tomorrow like it was a long day.

Other young people spoke of being prohibited from engaging in counselling or in speaking about their experiences: they did not want me to go to counselling they said in case I said something in counselling and then did not say it to the garda (police) ... they wanted everything out before I went to counselling ... it was hard because ... I wanted someone else other than my parents to talk to after it and I did not have anyone. (D03)

D06 described how meeting a police officer who explained the process and gave her space to consider making a statement made all the difference.

[T]hey were like, either you go to the police station right now or they will come here and I just did not want them in the house because then my brother would know, my sisters would know and it would draw loads of attention because there would be a police car outside my house ... I was not in the mood to talk to anyone. I was getting so angry and cheeky. I was telling everyone to fuck off, that I did not want to talk. Then I met this lovely police woman called (name) and then, she explained like what was happening, that it wasn't my fault. and how my parents were not annoyed with me. ... so when she was explaining everything that happened ... she left after a few minutes and left me on my own for a while because I was denying everything.

The importance of timely court processes

For some young people the court process was expedient. However, most detailed lengthy delays and the impact of these on their wellbeing. T07 first went to court when she was 13. The accused was found guilty when she was 18 and the case was being appealed at the time of interview. T10 described successive adjournments and cancellations despite a guilty plea by the accused. For T03, it happened quickly and the accused pleaded guilty so there was no trial, 'I wanted there to be a trial. There was no trial.' Several young people spoke of their perception of the court process as a lengthy process, which deterred them from making a formal complaint, 'But overall, I did not see why I would put all that energy into it. The process is super long ... I thought I'd come out of it more messed up y'know' (M05). M06 had been told it was likely the case would take three years; she also referred to media coverage of cases 'it took six years before they sent him to prison'.

For many young people, these delays had unintended consequences that led to further difficulties. One young person spoke of how the delay contributed to her peers doubting her account.

[B]efore the trial, I remember telling some friends and at first they were really supportive and after about a year or 2 they started getting suspicious that it wasn't real because of the fact that it was going on so long. (D10)

Some participants spoke of how police involvement may have or did interfere with them being able to seek help. Because you see the way in Ireland it works is if this case gets police hands on it, like let us say for instance this went to trial right now, I would not actually be able to talk to (therapist). You cannot be in therapy at the same time as making a statement to the police in court, because anything I say with (therapist) could skew what I say in court. And if I say something so much as a date that it happened and I'm wrong, the whole case could get thrown out. Oh yeah, it's absolutely brutal. (D14)

One young person described being in court eight years after they had first participated in an interview with police. She had not been given the opportunity to review her video-taped interview prior to attending court. She had been getting on with her life and felt she would have been better off left alone.

I was out of counselling and getting on with my life ... I never got to see that video before I went to the court it was a shock just sort of seeing it because I'm small ... I remember when I left I got told oh you are not to talk about what happened or what was said in that court room. So still to this day they expect me to sit and not talk to anyone about what was said to me or what happened in that court room when I was questioned. And that's, that probably affected me for month[s] because we all thought that we were going straight back to court ... If everyone had just left it at that, and just not bring it to court or anything it would've been alright. I would've been fine. (M06)

She believed the criminal process was

a waste of time, but at the same time, the fact that the judicial proceedings are getting longer, it means that (accused) he just cannot approach me throughout the time of the judicial proceedings ... If it lasts ten years, for ten years, I'm going to be at peace, but after those ten years, I'm going to be more afraid that (accused) is going to do something to me. (M06)

DISCUSSION

Approaching the data in this study with a trauma-informed lens, three key themes were identified: the importance of safety, the importance of supporting autonomy and the importance of timely court processes. Safety was illustrated through young people's experiences of police as kind and caring. They felt they could trust the police as they explained the processes and appeared transparent and authentic. They felt that the police believed them. Autonomy was highlighted in how young people were given choices, within the limits of formal procedures. Finally, the implications of delays in criminal proceedings were evident in how young people continued to suffer the impact of the abuse for, in some cases, many years, unable to move on with their lives until criminal proceedings were brought to a conclusion.

Safety is a basic human need, fundamental to survival, along with physiological needs such as food and sleep (Maslow, 1943). When children are abused, their sense of safety in the world is challenged. Safety is a core pillar of trauma-informed care; system responses that induce a sense of safety are essential if victims are not to be retraumatised. Young people in this study described how an appreciation of their vulnerability and attention to the relationship in the interactions with police officers helped them feel they could trust the police and ameliorated to some extent the anxiety and fear they felt at having to engage with police. The findings echo those of Greeson et al.'s (2016) where police were experienced as caring and compassionate in having informal conversations before proceeding to talking about the complaint, which helped young people feel more comfortable. Similarly, in Winters et al.'s (2020) study, participants who reported positive experiences used language such as the police officer being 'nice' and 'supportive' (p. 599), being friendly and open, making them feel 'comfortable' and giving the young person time to speak at their own pace, calling them afterwards to check they were doing ok. Ahern et al. (2017) explored what professionals (police and social workers) found to be helpful in establishing rapport with young people where CSA was suspected. Key recommendations were spending a substantial amount of time with suspected victims, minimising their role as authority figures by dressing casually, chatting about events other than the concern under investigation and giving the young person some choice, for example, where and when to meet, personal characteristics such as being non-judgemental, interest in young people, dependable and patient, being confident in one's role, as well as being empathic. The findings from this study support these recommendations.

Adolescence is a time when young people are discovering their own voice, taking charge of their lives and discovering their sense of agency. The criminal justice process, by its nature, removes autonomy from the complainant, who is 'only a witness' (Brown et al., n.d.) in subsequent investigations and prosecution processes. Supporting young people's need for autonomy is crucial in encouraging young people to make formal complaints about their abuse experiences. Campbell et al. (2015) in their study of 20 adolescents found that, when their assaults were disclosed against their wishes, young people were less comfortable in pursuing prosecution. Ungar and colleagues (2007) in their study of resilience in young people in 11 countries across the globe highlighted the role of power and control in promoting young people's resilience, which relies on all services, including law enforcement, in the child's ecology to be safe, supportive and trauma-informed to set the stage for good outcomes. Resilience mediates the impact of risk factors for young people's outcomes and is impacted by engagement with good-quality psychosocial services, including child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Ungar et al., 2011). Trauma-informed responses by police professionals can potentially contribute to promoting young people's resilience through offering them choice and helping them have a sense of control over their lives, as well as contributing to more successful prosecutions.

A concerning finding is that, while most young people in this study had positive experiences of police, young people continue to experience victim blaming, prejudice, lack of empathy and dismissive behaviours when they report a traumatic experience such as sexual assault. This raises the question why police professionals behave in this manner. One possible explanation is the impact of being exposed to CSA material. Police personnel described initial reactions of distress, shock and disgust and over time experienced secondary traumatic stress symptoms such as intrusive images and thoughts in the form of flashbacks and nightmares to watching digital CSA content (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Denk-Florea et al., 2020; Fortune et al., 2018; Krause, 2009). They also spoke of feeling desensitised over time, which some have cited as contributing to a dismissive and unempathic attitude (Powell et al., 2015). Strategies used to manage the emotional impact of such exposure include shutting off emotions, denial of seriousness (Burns et al., 2008). Emotional support for police officers engaged in this work is essential if they are to be able to respond to young people in an authentic, empathic manner that facilitates a positive experience for the young person.

The PROMISE Barnahus network in Europe provides the foundation for interagency collaboration to improve outcomes for children engaging with the criminal justice system. A set of quality standards for best practice (see <https://www.barnahus.eu/en/the-barnahus-quality-standards/>) provides guidance for supporting such children. According to O'Donnell (2020), 'European obligations require each state to support and avoid further traumatisation of child victims in criminal justice proceedings' (O'Donnell, 2020, pp. 6–7). She points out that the child's right to be heard, enshrined in the UNCRC, extends beyond providing evidence; it also encapsulates being supported in making their disclosure and subsequent complaints to authorities and listening to their views in relation to the criminal justice process. Young

people's perceptions of how the environment will respond to their disclosures, particularly the criminal justice system, will inevitably influence their willingness to engage with such a system. More research is needed to explore how young people need to be met in the context of criminal investigations so that their need for care and compassion is balanced with the needs of the criminal justice system.

Key messages for practitioners

A trauma-informed response from police personnel when engaging with young people where there are concerns about sexual abuse can be operationalised through instilling safety, supporting autonomy and appreciating the impact of prolonged legal procedures. Safety can be instilled through a kind and caring attitude. Autonomy can be supported through allowing young people choice, where possible, proceeding at the young person's pace in taking statements. The impact of delays in legal proceedings can be mediated through keeping young people informed of decisions made and reasons for these decision, as well as advocating for escalating sexual abuse cases through the criminal justice system. Police personnel also need to pay attention to their own wellbeing in dealing with sexual abuse cases. Support for police personnel that helps them name the impact on them of hearing distressing details of abuse and seek additional support where necessary would facilitate them in maintaining trauma-informed responses.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent participants in Winters et al.'s (2020) study were asked how to encourage others to report to police. The most commonly cited way of improving motivation to report was providing external supports (42 per cent) such as emotional support for the victim, showing the victim that they are believed and telling them they are not responsible for the abuse. The findings of this study provide further support for a trauma-informed approach by police professionals to engaging with young people as part of the criminal investigation process: instilling a sense of safety and providing emotional support through kindness and believing the young person; respecting the young person's autonomy and providing choice where possible; and appreciating the impact of delays in court proceedings on the young person's wellbeing. When young people are believed and feel supported, they are more likely to retell their story, provide further details, that will assist with successful investigations and may contribute to more successful prosecution outcomes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that none of us have any conflict of interest to declare in relation to this study or manuscript.

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